



Sir Robert Neill MP
House of Commons
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Dear Bob,

15 June 2023

PRE-SENTENCE REPORTS PILOTS AND EVALUATION PUBLICATION

I am writing to you to update you on the Probation Service's work to improve the delivery of timely and high-quality Pre-Sentence Reports (PSRs).

As you will know, a PSR is an expert assessment by probation staff in court of the nature and causes of an offender's behaviour and the risks they pose, informing an independent recommendation of the sentencing options available. PSRs can be delivered on the day orally at court, or through detailed written reports which require an adjournment. PSRs play an important role in ensuring sentencers have the relevant information and expertise to make effective sentencing decisions, and therefore support our broader objective to reduce reoffending.

In September 2020, our White Paper, 'A Smarter Approach to Sentencing' (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-smarter-approach-to-sentencing>) committed to pilot new approaches to delivering PSRs in response to the decline in the number of PSRs requested by sentencers. The pilot trialled an Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) with three key elements: seeking to identify defendants earlier in the criminal justice system by encouraging the Before Plea PSR process; maximising the capability of probation staff through new training and development; and targeting priority cohorts for the delivery of short format written reports.

The pilot, which launched in March 2021 in 15 magistrates' courts, has recently concluded. My Department has been working to evaluate the pilot to determine how it should inform future national delivery. I am pleased to summarise the key findings from our process evaluation below:

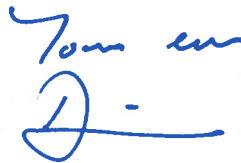
- Monitoring data revealed that pilot courts delivered a higher proportion of PSRs per in-court disposal than non-pilot courts, including for each of the priority cohorts.
- Participants generally supported the targeting of priority cohorts with views that this led to appropriate support for vulnerable groups, but there were some concerns about the prescriptive blanket approach restricting professional judgement.
- Probation staff largely supported the virtual training offered to them, with over a third of survey respondents believing that the quality of their PSRs had improved since receiving the training.
- The level of implementation and buy-in for the pilot varied across court sites, which appeared to be related to pre-existing ways of working between stakeholders and workload pressures.

We remain committed to increasing the proportion of probation managed cases which benefit from a PSR and ensuring probation staff are delivering timely reports to a high standard. Building on the findings of the PSR pilots, the Probation Service will be rolling out key successful elements from the Alternative Delivery Model to enable continued service improvement. These include a continued evidence based approach to targeting pre-sentence advice on priority cohorts where appropriate, pro-active steps to earlier identify appropriate cases for PSR preparation, and ensuring national availability of court-specific training materials alongside existing learning modules.

However, we want to go further in ensuring that our delivery model in court is effective at driving these outcomes. Though we have been able to illustrate positive outcomes from the pilot, it also highlighted that there are potential improvements to be gained from better targeting probation's resource in court.

This is why the Probation Service is developing a 'Pathfinder' project due to be launched in 9 magistrates' courts and 7 Crown Courts in the South-Central region in Autumn 2023. The Pathfinder seeks to reduce the overall time defendants spend in the system by testing a new way of working to produce better quality PSRs for the judiciary in a specified time frame and balancing probation resource in court with sufficient resource to progress the early identification of cases that may benefit from a PSR and those that require an adjournment. By identifying cases early and allocating probation resource in a way that enables high quality reports and highly visible presence in court, we hope to demonstrate that the Pathfinder model can facilitate more effective case progression.

We will be monitoring the Pathfinder's progress and considering options for national roll out of key elements of the model, if they prove workable and impactful. I am happy to keep you updated on the Pathfinder's progress, and our broader work to improve outcomes at court.



Damian Hinds

Minister for Prisons and Probation