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Privatisation of probation service has left public at greater risk. Chief inspector of probation says some offenders not seen for months and some lost in the system entirely

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The public have been left more at risk by the privatisation of the probation service with some offenders not seen for weeks or months and others lost in the system altogether, according to an official watchdog.

In her most critical report yet, Dame Glenys Stacey, the chief inspector of probation, said that a recent inspection of probation work in the north of London found a simple, unacceptable lack of management attention to whether offenders turned up to appointments and whether their offending behaviour was being challenged.

Her inspection report published on Thursday said probation services in north London have deteriorated since a community rehabilitation company took over the supervision of medium- to low-risk offenders in 2014 and was now poorer than any other area that had been inspected this year.

“A combination of unmanageable caseloads, inexperienced officers, extremely poor oversight and a lack of senior management focus and control meant some offenders were not seen for weeks or months, and some were lost in the system altogether,” concluded the report.

Stacey said: “Delivering probation services in London is never an easy task, but services have deteriorated of late, largely due to the poor performance of the London Community Rehabilitation Company. Services are now well below what people rightly expect, and the city is more at risk as a result.”

Her highly critical report came after the justice secretary, Elizabeth Truss, acknowledged criticism of the privatised probation companies across England and Wales by demanding the rapid completion of an official review into the performance.

The London CRC, which is owned by MTCnovo, supervises 28,750 offenders, a 12% reduction in the past 12 months. The National Probation Service is responsible for a further 10,071 higher-risk offenders.

But the inspection found that caseloads for individual probation officers ranged from 50 to 100 cases each and some senior probation officers were overseeing more than 900 cases. Despite the 12% fall in the number of offenders it supervised, the London CRC still had a 20% vacancy rate and was heavily reliant on agency staff. Officers were doing little more than “firefighting” rather than prioritising those offenders who posed the most risk of harm to the public.

Many individual probation officers had themselves received no formal supervision for many months and the sickness rate trebled between May and August this year from 23 to 70 off for more than three weeks.

“The lack of a credible system to monitor the cases when responsible officers were off sick had meant that too many service users had not been seen for weeks or months and, in some cases, had been lost in the system entirely,” said the official inspection report.

The watchdog's report judges the overall effectiveness of the London CRC as "poor" and in particular criticises a lack of awareness of domestic abuse and child safeguarding issues.

Stacey said the publicly-run National Probation Service was delivering services better in London, but with plenty of room for improvement. The quality of work was mixed, but inspectors were pleased to find that, overall, public protection work was satisfactory. The delivery of court services was not entirely without problems.

"We expect the company to make every effort now to deliver the inviolable requirements – the basics of probation – consistently well, and as quickly as possible. We welcome work begun during our inspection to begin to bring about much-needed improvements, and will be back in 2017 to check on progress," said Stacey.

Justice minister, Sam Gyimah, responded to the inspection findings, saying: "I met senior managers at London CRC and told them this is totally unacceptable. An urgent improvement plan is now in place and I will not hesitate to take more action if necessary. We are also working closely with the mayor's office for policing and crime.

"We are currently looking at all contracts and are carrying out a comprehensive review of the probation system in England and Wales. This will improve the quality of our probation service, putting the focus on reducing reoffending by getting offenders off drugs and into training or work. Findings from the review will be published in April."

Napo, the probation union, said the inspectorate had confirmed that privatisation would lead to greater public risk with its most damning report to date.

Ian Lawrence, Napo general secretary, said: "This report is a damning indictment of this government's reckless social experiment. We urgently need probation services to be reviewed and publicly scrutinised to ensure public safety, quality service delivery and value for money to the taxpayer."

Helda Swindenbank, London CRC's director of probation, responded to the report saying: "The number one priority for London CRC is public protection, which is at the core of all that we do. Since the Inspection, we have continued to make significant progress in reducing caseloads managed by our staff, prompt enforcement, and quality of offender supervision.

"This is all informed by the high priority we give to protecting the public. We have already taken steps to ensure that every single case is being actively managed to further protect the public. It's important to recognise that only 40 cases were inspected, just 0.13%, of London CRC's caseload."