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Dame Meg Hillier MP
Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts
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[By email]

12 December 2022

Dear Chair,

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE ACCOUNTING OFFICER ASSESSMENTS

Thank you for your letter of 24 November in which you asked for clarification of specific points on the assessment summaries relating to the rapid deployment cells project and the Probation Workforce Programme. At the time, the prison expansion portfolio fell within the remit of Jo Farrar, as AO/HMPPS, hence Jo completed the assessments. However, as you requested, I am now responding to each of your further questions, below.

I can confirm that both the published Accounting Officer Assessment summary for the Probation Workforce Programme and the Prison Capacity and Rapid Deployment Cell Project received my endorsement as Permanent Secretary.

Probation Workforce Programme (PWP)

Progress resolving issues about pay

We have delivered a multi-year pay deal for the Probation Service effective from 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2025. This deal was accepted by a majority of each of the recognised probation Trade Union' memberships by ballot in September 2022.

We have delivered reforms to the pay structure, including the removal of pay band overlaps, shortening pay band ranges, introducing more consistently spaced pay points and increasing both base and top of pay band salaries. This will deliver a more sustainable (year-on-year) pay structure and position the service on a much stronger financial footing beyond the life of the deal.

We know from People Survey results and staff engagement that pay is a central factor in attrition in the service. We have improved salaries, particularly in operational grades, making them more comparable with the salaries of their labour market competitors. We are confident that this pay deal will incentivise recruitment and retention.

The Government committed to end automatic salary progression in the Civil Service in 2015/2016. From 1 April 2022, we will formally replace automatic pay progression with the competency-based pay progression framework (CBF).

Progress against recruitment and training targets

We have improved the staffing level across Probation Services Regions and Approved Premises. In 30 September 2022 there were 18,366 FTE. This represents an uplift of 656 FTE from 30 June 2022. In order to provide a quality service, the Probation Service has implemented a unified model of operational resourcing to achieve consistency and quality delivery as well as new ways of measuring and managing workload.

We will streamline recruitment into the Probation Service in 2022/23 to improve recruitment services and speed up the time it takes to onboard new staff.

Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) recruitment 21/22 update

Probation Officers are required to undertake the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP) as identified in the ‘Statutory Guidance: Core Probation roles and Qualification requirements (March 2022)’ which is set by the Secretary of State.

We have committed to recruiting a further 1,500 trainee Probation Officers in the financial year 2022/2023. We recruited 1,007 Trainee Probation Officers in 2020/21. This exceeded the MoJ commitment to recruit 1,000 Trainee Probation Officers. We exceeded our target of onboarding 1,500 Trainee Probation Officers, hiring a total of 1,518 learners, in the same year.

We have comprehensively reviewed the probation officer qualification and the training that supports it in July 2022. We successfully procured four academic contract providers to deliver the new provision. These contracts were awarded 3rd October 2022 and providers will commence delivery for PQIP learners in March 2023.

We recognise that the labour market in some areas, such as London, is challenging. We have introduced a Prioritisation Framework to enable staff to manage demand and to make effective decisions which ensure a priority focus on public protection. Further support has been provided to London through the deployment of additional staff from other probation regions.

Rapid Deployment Cells Project (RCDP)

Reasons for increased costs and a subsequent reduction in places the project will deliver

As with other construction programmes, the project’s plans have been impacted by unexpectedly high levels of inflation in the construction sector, which has had an impact on the cost of materials and services associated with the project.

Surveys conducted during the feasibility stage uncovered issues with ground conditions at some sites, which increased costs due to the mitigations required and the increased delivery timescales. Further costs were added due to required specification changes to meet Building Regulations and optimise the number of places we can install.

MoJ decided, in light of additional costs, to maximise the number of places delivered within the original budget envelope of c£82m. As a result, a first tranche of 480 places have been commissioned.

Impact of the reduced places on capacity

We are experiencing pressures in the prison estate, partly as a result of the impact of the pandemic and the barrister strike action over the summer. We recognise that Rapid Deployment Cells will play a major part in meeting demand. The temporary expansions option that Rapid Deployment Cells offer is important in meeting short term demand pressures.

Following a new Full Business Case to deliver an additional 525 places, there is no reduction in places being delivered.

Progress with delivering the 480 rapid deployment cells

We have made good progress with installation near completion at the first site and have started installation at other sites, applying lessons learned as we continue delivery.

We have achieved a significant improvement in the IPA's most recent review of the Rapid Deployment Cells Project. The IPA's assessment of the project as 'amber' against the revised delivery plan that aims to deliver c1,000 RDCP places throughout 2023 with the majority of the places completed by the end of 2023.

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