



HM Inspectorate of Probation

National Probation Service IT:  
Interim review by  
HM Inspectorate of Probation

September 2003

## FOREWORD

This interim review describes developments on probation information technology (IT) since our thematic report *Using Information and Technology to Improve Probation Service Performance* in 2000 and the associated report by the National Audit Office.

Good IT is vital to operational effectiveness and efficiency both within the National Probation Service (NPS) and between the NPS and its partner agencies. Probation IT has had a troubled history, reflected in the considerable criticisms made in our previous report. This interim review indicates that significant progress has been made since that report. Many of the problems we identified have been addressed and a good foundation for future developments established. But the review also indicates the need for continued and further progress. This will be important if the NPS is to realise its full potential as a national agency and a key partner within the criminal justice system.

We plan to carry out a full follow-up of our thematic report in due course.

**Professor ROD MORGAN**  
**HM Chief Inspector**

## INTRODUCTION

1. HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) and the National Audit Office (NAO) published reports, in 2000 and 2001 respectively, on the National Probation Service Information Systems Strategy (NPSISS) which contained considerable criticisms of probation IT. HMIP carried out a limited interim review in the latter part of 2002/2003 of developments on probation IT, focusing on recommendations in our thematic report, *Using Information and Technology to Improve Probation Service Performance*. The review concentrated on certain key issues and did not aim to be comprehensive; among other things it did not cover cost issues. We intend to conduct a full follow-up of the thematic report in due course.
2. This report mainly refers to action by the National Probation Directorate (NPD), and particularly its Information and Technology Group (ITG – now renamed the Information Management and Technology Unit). However, we recognise that they have only been responsible for probation IT since April 2001 and that it has necessarily required time for the NPD to set in place the organisational arrangements to take forward probation IT, particularly in the context of the substantial changes to the service.
3. The review included discussion with:
  - the heads of ITG and of its Corporate Applications Unit
  - the Head of the Public Protection Unit in the NPD
  - other NPD staff in the Policy and Interventions Groups.

## FINDINGS

### *Strengths*

Since the establishment of the NPD in April 2001, substantial progress has been made in establishing the foundations for a coherent and properly resourced probation IT programme for the future. Key specific developments have included:

- building up a staff base with the necessary technical expertise. There have been difficulties in recruiting some specialists. In the meantime, consultants and temporary contractors have been engaged to fill gaps in ITG's knowledge and skills base and enable work to progress
- significant work on the contractual side – in the form of the Standard Technical Environment for the Probation Service (STEPS) programme – aimed at producing a more solid base for future developments
- the technology upgrade to ensure a reliable IT environment for the future
- a much stronger focus on business needs as the driver for information and IT strategies
- after some delays, good progress in IT support for the offender assessment system (OASys)
- a wide-ranging review of information needs carried out in the NPS Information Management Strategy (NPSIMS) that takes account of business information needs
- good progress on communications with probation areas, on health and safety issues, and on assistive technology.

### **Areas for improvement**

- Progress on our recommendations relating to a national risk of harm register, and to national standards and an effective case management system, has so far been at best limited and the timescale for meeting these recommendations in full is not yet clear.
- There has been only limited progress by the NPD on a national case record and substantive developments – which are now being pursued jointly with the Prison Service – are unlikely before end-2004
- Arrangements for extracting data from CRAMS (the case management system currently in use in the majority of areas) are not straightforward. There is in our view insufficient clarity from the NPD for areas as to which reporting tool is regarded as most appropriate for use. Training and support arrangements for the package most widely used (BIQ) are not satisfactory and its use is heavily dependent on the expertise of individual staff members, which varies between areas.

### **GENERAL EXTENT OF PROGRESS SINCE HMIP REPORT**

4. Substantial work has been done in establishing the foundations for future IT developments, particularly for the development of new functionality under the planned SALSA (Strategic Applications Linked to the STEPS Architecture) modules. There have also been a number of improvements to the existing functionality of probation IT, particularly in support to OASys (see paragraph 15 below), in IAPS (paragraphs 16-19 below) and in CRAMS, though there have been delays in some of this work. For the future,

substantive developments under SALSA are likely to start appearing around the end of 2003. However, implementation of some of the planned SALSA modules is likely to take several years.

5. ITG consider that the pace of progress since the establishment of the NPD is good in view of the substantial work that has been required to address previous IT problems, establish new management arrangements and build up necessary technical expertise. ITG managers point out the need to follow appropriate project management principles – particularly given the past criticisms of probation IT – and that these preclude quick and dirty developments. They consider that the progress made since the establishment of the NPD compares well with that in other organisations with similarly complex IT environments.
6. We fully acknowledge the time required to make sound IT developments and welcome the progress in the last two years. Nonetheless, IT developments generally appear to us to take a long time, particularly in the public sector. It has not been possible in this limited review to investigate fully the pace of progress, nor make comparisons with other organisations. We have no reason to question the NPD's view that progress on probation IT compares well with that in other similar organisations. Nonetheless, the substantial time required for IT developments in the public sector in general is of concern and it would be useful to identify reasons for it.
7. One issue which has caused problems for ITG is the difficulty in quickly recruiting specialist IT staff to the Home Office and other government departments,

particularly given the requirement that posts first be advertised internally and, in some cases, that candidates must have passed an assessment centre. We suggest that these restrictive requirements need to be reconsidered.

8. One general concern about probation IT prior to 2000 – reflected in our thematic report – was an insufficient focus on business needs, both of probation areas and of the Home Office. As a result of developments since the establishment of the NPD, the position has much improved. There is a clear recognition that the IT strategy should be driven by business needs – reflected in particular in the NPSIMS, and in considerable involvement by business representatives in the development and specification of IT systems. However, we believe that there is scope for still closer liaison between NPD business units and ITG to ensure that central NPS and other Home Office business needs are fully met.
9. We earlier had some concerns about the arrangements for prioritising changes to IT systems, particularly for changes required nationally. One example was the introduction of the new race and ethnicity codes for the 2001 Census where it was not possible to make changes quickly to CRAMS and, as a result, alternative and time-consuming interim arrangements needed to be made (the changes required have subsequently been made well within an extended timescale). Arrangements now in place – particularly the head of ITG’s membership of the NPS Service Delivery Board, and the procedures now defined under NPSIMS to identify information

requirements of policy developments – should help to ensure that strategic national changes are identified quickly and given priority.

10. More specific points on our recommendations are set out below.

## **NATIONAL RISK OF HARM REGISTER**

11. We recommended that:

*"The Home Office should, within the structure of the Information Strategy Review, give priority to the establishment of a national risk of harm register to be available on the NPSISS infrastructure".*

NPD managers have stated that they intend introducing a national risk of harm register. They plan to do this using the intended joint police/probation system ViSOR (violent offender and sex offender register) and an interface between this system and e-OASys which will identify cases assessed as high or very high risk. However, the timescale for roll-out of this system to probation areas is not yet clear and is dependent on the resolution of security of access and other issues. It will not be in place before 2004 at best. It is also not yet clear (in view of security and affordability issues) that the system will be available to staff in all probation offices. If it is not, this could limit its usefulness as a comprehensive national register.

12. We are concerned that this key recommendation – of high importance to public protection management – will not be in place until at best four years after the recommendation. In this connection, the NPD investigated at an earlier stage the possibility of an interim national

arrangement based on one of the public protection systems in place in certain areas. However, it was decided not to pursue this option since these systems did not have the capability to meet in full the requirements on the police and NPS of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. In retrospect, given the time that has elapsed since the original recommendation and the importance of public protection issues, there might have been a case for introducing earlier an interim national arrangement as above to provide a basic national risk of harm register, ahead of the fuller functionality that it is envisaged ViSOR will bring. That said we recognise that decisions about the allocation of resources between interim and longer-term solutions are not easy.

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS AND OTHER CASE MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

13. We also recommended that:
- "The Home Office should develop an effective case management system which:*
- a) supports staff in complying with national standards and working to what works principles;*
  - b) provides management information on compliance with national standards and other aspects of service performance;*
  - c) is integrated into the development of the systems to support OASys and accredited programmes.*

ITG managers have advised us that (a) and (b) will be met by the offender assessment and the contact log module (particularly the latter). These will be the first two of the SALS modules to be developed. However, they are unlikely to be fully in place until around 2005. In the

meantime, considerable resources are required by areas (and by the NPD planning and performance unit) in the manual scrutiny of samples of cases for national standards monitoring. These arrangements are time-consuming for NPS staff. Further, there are doubts about the reliability of the data (as indicated in our report on the QA exercise of reliability of data – HMIP 14(2) 2002), which is likely to be improved if data are instead available from a well-defined IT system.

14. In this connection, we welcomed the announcement made by the Director General, Eithne Wallis, in spring 2002 that the NPD will be proceeding with a standard national case record. This development – which was called for in our *Annual Report 2001/2002* (Foreword, paragraph 12) – will be important for improving the reliability of performance information and in facilitating the smooth transition of cases between areas when offenders move, particularly in public protection cases. We are concerned that there has as yet been little specific progress by the NPD on this, although the development of e-OASys (see paragraph 15 below) should provide some of the foundation required. It has now been decided that work on a standard case record will be subsumed into the joint development by the NPS and Prison Service of a single case record, along with a single case management approach. Work has now commenced on developing the business specification for the single case record, and it is intended that the IT specification will derive from that. The NPD are planning that at least part of the joint electronic case record will be developed by end-2004. We recognise that such work takes time. Nonetheless,

given the importance of this facility, the total time lapse before an IT-integrated standard case record will be fully available to the NPS is of considerable concern.

15. Recommendation (c) above has not yet been fully met, but there has been significant progress in respect of OASys. There were earlier considerable delays in developing the IT version of OASys and, reflecting this, OASys was initially launched in paper form without IT support. The full IT version of OASys will not be available until some time in 2004. It is recognised that these delays largely reflect the considerable previous problems on probation IT and lack of expertise at an earlier stage of development. Recently, however, the NPD have made substantial progress on OASys by developing interim IT arrangements (ODC and e-OASys), and providing a flexible pathway for areas to progress to the full IT solution when available. These developments are very welcome.
16. There have been considerable problems with and delays in the development of IAPS, the system to support accredited programmes. In most areas it is still only available as a 'back office' application. Until very recently areas have not in general been able to extract data (including psychometric test results) from IAPS and, as a consequence, alternative monitoring arrangements for data on accredited programmes have had to be established, requiring additional work by areas. There have been problems with the development of reports, and the system has therefore been providing little either to areas or to the NPD on either

management information or operational support. It is not known whether all areas have been entering data on it. We have commented on these problems in audit reports on individual areas over the last two years. We have recommended in our audit reports that the NPD urgently review IAPS with a view to establishing a viable monitoring and evaluation system.

17. We recognise that the problems with IAPS mainly reflect earlier substantial problems in the way the system was developed as a stand-alone arrangement and earlier lack of technical expertise in the NPD. The position has nonetheless been unsatisfactory. However, the NPD has recently undertaken significant work to improve the system, including steps to ensure that it will run under the technology upgrade. Reporting arrangements have also been developed: 'Phase 1' reporting – offering limited capability – was made available early in 2003, with 'Phase 2' planned for the next release of IAPS (3.3) to enable areas to extract further key data, including those required for the regular monitoring returns. Release 3.3 has been delayed somewhat – from March to July 2003. Nonetheless if successful, and straightforward for areas to use, these new reporting facilities should remedy a number of the above problems. Also where IAPS has been piloted as a front-office system – i.e. available across an area – there are indications that the contact log can provide good operational support to case managers and programme tutors.
18. The recent progress on IAPS must now be consolidated so that there is a fully operational monitoring and evaluation system.

19. The SALSA modules will include systems for drug treatment and testing orders (DTTOs) and for victims (respectively). However, implementation of these remain several years away at least, yet no IT arrangements are being made by the NPD in the interim in respect of these important aspects of NPS work. We appreciate that resources for development work are limited and that the main focus needs to be on the development of SALSA. However, we suggest in the interim that spreadsheet arrangements could allow for at least basic recording of cases on a common basis across areas, ahead of the fuller functionality under SALSA, particularly for DTTOs.

## **DATA EXTRACTION ARRANGEMENTS**

20. Arrangements for extracting data from CRAMS are not ideal. The reporting tool mainly used – BIQ – is not particularly user friendly, and so can generally only be used by specialist information staff rather than operational staff. The version of BIQ available to areas dates from 2000 and is not the latest version. Available external training in BIQ is expensive and not specific to probation IT (the training materials are based on a chocolate factory) and has not been run for some time. Work is needed by area information staff to adapt the BIQ tool to CRAMS data, and extraction of information from CRAMS is heavily reliant on the acquired expertise of staff in use of BIQ. While in some areas staff have become skilled in the use of BIQ, the position varies between areas.

21. To a large extent these problems – as with those above on IAPS – reflect the previous problems with probation IT, whereby systems were developed without plans for extracting data from them and arrangements for information retrieval then needed to be added subsequently. This underlines the need for incorporating information management and retrieval requirements from the start as an integral part of IT system specification. This approach has been adopted by the NPD in NPSIMS for the new SALSA modules.

22. The NPD has established a CRAMS user group including a sub-group aimed at sharing expertise between areas on BIQ. However, there appears to be a lack of clarity in some areas as to the preferred reporting tool for CRAMS and to the availability of adequate support arrangements.

23. For the future, ITG managers are, appropriately, making plans for data extraction arrangements as an integral part of the development of each SALSA module. For each one a substantial set of standard reports will be available. The set for OASys (the first module) is now largely specified, and ITG have involved the business side strongly in its specification. ITG managers envisage that the standard reports for a module will cover the large majority of the information which area staff will require, but that any further analysis – likely to be ad hoc – will be carried out using a reporting tool such as BIQ. A possible disadvantage to this is that the latter will require specialist expertise, and so not able to be carried out directly by all staff. This may be the only option feasible in the short term, but for the longer term the NPD may want to consider the

desirability of making available data extraction arrangements that can be used straightforwardly by all staff.

## **NPSIMS**

24. The NPSIMS study provides a good overall framework for addressing IS/IT issues in the NPS, and in particular for helping to ensure that information issues are identified at an early stage of consideration of new policy initiatives. This latter principle – if followed consistently – will be important in avoiding the problems that have arisen in the past. NPSIMS is also valuable in establishing IT and information requirements ahead of the development of future systems. We agree with a good deal of the analysis and conclusions of the strategy though, as indicated above, we consider that there should have been more coverage of certain key issues. On a specific but important point we are also concerned that the NPSIMS study does not cover serious incident reports as a business issue. More generally, the strategy report tends to focus rather more on management information requirements than on IT support for operational work. Both issues are of course important. It will be appropriate to ensure that support for operational work – to help NPS staff improve their performance and efficiency – is given sufficient attention in the specification of the new modules under SALSA.
25. The NPSIMS study also recommends criteria for deciding on the priorities for the sequencing of the SALSA modules and these have been used accordingly. We agree generally with these criteria. However, we have reservations that the criterion for effectiveness does not explicitly refer to meeting Ministerial

priorities. The NPD consider that the reference instead to improvement in EFQM score includes this. We think an explicit reference would have been better.