There have been several important developments in the world of probation between the previous and new issue of Probation Quarterly. Unfortunately, these developments combine to create some real concern around the future of probation and the autonomy of probation practitioners.

High workloads and a seemingly unmanageable number of vacancies dominate debate and concern about how the Probation Service can continue to provide a good level of service. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Justice has introduced new rules preventing probation practitioners from including recommendations around release in parole reports. This has – rightly – been met with dismay from many in the sector and will, in my view, only serve to reduce the quality of decisions to release and further depprofessionalise and marginalise what is already the Cinderella service of the justice system (Robinson, 2016).

On the one hand the recent announcement from HMPPS that the Service will be (re)structured to ensure the frontline has the right support and supporting improved outcomes’ and ‘avoid structural change’ makes sense. I have often witnessed the ways in which prisons and probation act in silos, despite working with the same groups of people and individuals. A more integrated, overarching service may overcome some of those longstanding issues. However, history has shown us that prisons will always dominate when it comes to political, financial, and operational priorities and so I share concerns published the Probation Institute, Napo, and HMI Probation. Ultimately, this redesign risks jeopardising the ability of the Probation Service and its staff to act with autonomy, support people under supervision and respond to the priorities of local communities.

Finally, we have seen the appointment of Brandon Lewis MP as the 9th Secretary of State for Justice in twelve years, following the election of Liz Truss as new Prime Minister. We can but hope that a new Secretary of State will lead to action on some of the issues mentioned above. I urge the Minister to focus attention on making the Probation Service as autonomous, professional and local as it possibly can be.
I am delighted to include a range of articles in this issue which - as ever - cover a range of topics from an array of contributors. Using the knowledge of people with lived experience to improve policy and practice is becoming increasingly well-established in the world of probation (and further afield) and the first article in PQ25 tackles this development head on. Parr’s article draws on research with navigators in the CJS to remind us that people with lived experience should be supported with this often-difficult work, to ensure that their knowledge is used ethically and towards socially just ends. In this vein, I am pleased to include an article from Nadia, a member of the Revolving Doors lived experience team. She uses what I hope will be one of many regular contributions from people with lived experience to articulate what she thinks probation should do to support people effectively.

In her article, Wendy Martin summarises her research into the emotional work of victim liaison officers. One of her participants described victim services as being in the ‘dusty corner’ of probation. I would argue that Approved Premises and Unpaid Work might also be found - unfairly - in this dusty corner. I am thus very pleased to include submissions from Andrew Bridges on the former, and Phil Bowen on the latter, both shedding light on important but often neglected areas of probation practice.

There can be a tendency within probation policy to ignore the complex needs of different groups of people under supervision. Four articles in PQ25 deal with this problem. Firstly, Alana Ajani provides an update on the Race Action Programme which was created to reduce ethnic disparity across the penal sector. Both Hannah Wilkinson and Helen Schofield shed light on the experiences of people who have spent time in the military prior to becoming criminalised. Rebecca Wellings - a practising probation officer - offers her views on how the Service does, and should, respond to non-compliance. I’d like to take this opportunity to remind readers that I am always keen to receive submissions from people in practice so please get in touch if you have something you want to write about.

It is well-recognised that employment can be an effective way of reducing the likelihood of reoffending, but self-employment is sometimes forgotten here. Richard Morgan’s article provides important insight into how the Probation Service might support people into self-employment. The Council of Europe’s influence over probation is also often forgotten and so Vivian Geiran’s useful overview of the functioning and relevance of The Council of Europe and Penological Cooperation should be of interest to many. In a piece kindly reproduced from the Magistrate Mike Guilfoyle reflects on being a magistrate and former probation practitioner and, finally, Suki Binning provides an overview of the work of Interventions Alliance and considers the potential for innovation in the post-unification landscape.

I hope you enjoy reading these articles and please do get in touch if you are interested in writing for Probation Quarterly.

References