

230918 Outsourcing in Prisons Failing

Private contractors providing services in prisons are delivering 'inadequate' performance, according to a register compiled by Whitehall officials.

Eleven companies and organisations were identified as failing to meet 'key performance indicator' (KPI) targets set by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). They range from **Hovis**, which failed to deliver bread on time, to education providers **Novus** and **PeoplePlus**, which taught too few prisoners at some jails.

Serco, whose vans transport prisoners to court appearances across the south of England, was judged to be providing an 'inadequate' service despite a target which gives it leeway to produce prisoners late in court up to 30 times per month. **Capita Business Services** was "consistently below target threshold" in its work providing electronic tagging for people on probation.

Foreign language translation company **thebigword group** was deemed inadequate for its delivery of assignments. A note in the register blamed a shortage of translators in particular in-demand languages, stating: "This is being addressed through recruitment and engagement activities to improve available pool of linguists."

Amey, which carries out repairs to prison buildings under facilities management contracts, was among those deemed 'inadequate' – although an accompanying note in the register stated: "Anything below 100% considered inadequate. No major performance concerns."

Bidfood, the supplier of food ingredients to prison kitchens, escaped an 'inadequate' rating but was given the next-worst, 'requires improvement', for both availability of stock and fulfilment of deliveries. Notes in the register stated that Brexit, the war in Ukraine, avian flu, the tight labour market and inflation were all making it difficult for the company to source particular food items. Raw poultry and eggs were a particular concern.

Out of 360 KPI targets set for HMPPS contracts, 16 produced 'inadequate' ratings – a rate of 4.4 per cent. Across all Whitehall departments there were 207 'inadequate' findings, relating to 6.5 per cent of all KPIs.

John O'Connell, chief executive of the TaxPayers' Alliance pressure group, said: "Ministers have taken their eyes off the ball when it comes to key contracts ... Whitehall must ensure that it gets a grip on these contracts and brings key indicators back into line with expectations."

Angela Rayner, Labour's deputy leader, called the findings "a damning indictment of the Tory mismanagement of public services" and said: "Labour's national procurement plan will get tough on poor performance, strike off failed providers, and claw back taxpayers' money."

Responding to the individual findings, Chris Hodkinson, contract director for the Serco prison escort contract, said: "Our team has been working very hard to deliver prisoners between prisons and the courts in a challenging post-Covid environment. I am proud of the improvements in performance we have made and that now around 99.8% of the people we are delivering arrive in time to ensure that

there is no delay to Court proceedings. We continue to work to ensure this improvement in our performance continues.”

A spokesperson from thebigword said: “thebigword has a long and very successful history of providing language services to HM Prison and Probation Service. Individual KPI’s do not always tell the full story and should be taken into context, thebigword is meeting 5 out of 6 of our KPI’s and we continue to work in partnership with HMPPS to improve the level of service and resolve any outstanding issues.”

Novus, the biggest of the four education providers in English and Welsh prisons, was set 29 KPIs and was rated ‘inadequate’ on three – the largest number of ‘inadequate’ ratings for any individual supplier to HMPPS. Notes on the register criticised its performance at Oakwood and Swinfen Hall prisons, and Cookham Wood and Weatherby young offender institutions – whilst making clear that some of the problems in providing education at the establishments were outside of Novus’s control. A Novus spokesperson said: “Delivering education in custody for young people, many of whom have had previous bad experiences in the mainstream system, is complex and challenging, requiring collaboration across different areas in establishments to ensure young offenders can access curriculums and make good progress. We are currently working in collaboration with HMPPS to address some of these challenges and ensure we provide a quality provision which enables the young people to gain skills that will support them in breaking cycles of reoffending upon their release.”