Maintaining Service Continuity Under Pressure

Lessons from Rapid Commissioning and Transition

Interventions Alliance

East Sussex County Council

HM Prison & Probation Service

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1. Introduction

Public protection services are self-evidently critical. When continuity is at risk - whether due to commissioning timelines, delivery uncertainty or changes in provision - the system must respond quickly while keeping services stable for the people who rely on them.

In 2025, Interventions Alliance was asked to step in at pace to maintain delivery for two different public protection services. While the circumstances varied, they shared common pressures: limited time, incomplete information, multiple stakeholders, and high stakes if decisions were delayed.

This paper does not examine why these situations arise or the decisions taken by individual organisations. Instead, it focuses on what helps services remain stable - and what makes that harder - when continuity must be secured at pace and under pressure.

Drawing on shared experience with partners including East Sussex County Council and HM Prison and Probation Service, this paper sets out practical learning to support commissioners, providers and partners to respond with confidence when services need to be commissioned rapidly or transferred at pace.

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CEO

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2. The pressures

Services may need to transition at pace for a range of reasons. While the causes differ, the pressures that follow are often the same - limited time, multiple stakeholders, incomplete or changing information, and high stakes if decisions are delayed.

In these situations, services are typically live, with frontline teams continuing to deliver despite significant uncertainty. Commissioners must act quickly to maintain continuity while managing operational risk, workforce stability, and system confidence.

A recurring assumption in some parts of the sector is that some services are “too important to fail”, and that a commissioner’s choices are limited when delivery becomes uncertain or proposals shift. In practice, this can delay difficult decisions and compress the time available to secure alternatives.

Our experience suggests the opposite. Commissioners have multiple options, and system resilience is strongest when those options are visible and credible. This depends on a healthy and responsive sector, with providers capable of stepping in when needed and commissioners willing to act decisively in the interests of continuity.

Maintaining clarity about legal, commercial and operational options is critical. It allows commissioners to act with confidence, avoid unnecessary delay, and protect stability for the people who rely on these services.

3. Timeframes

Instability can begin when continuity is at risk and the path forward is unclear.

Very often in this grey zone, the legal position is clear – there is an agreement in place and it has a clear end date. However, operational realities are significantly different. Without long-term certainty, teams begin to search for new roles elsewhere, suppliers or landlords can raise concerns and the beneficiaries of the service can become concerned about their future. Uncertainty in public protection services can generate significant instability and compound existing risks, including to mental and physical health, vulnerabilities or needs for people services are designed to protect and support.

At this stage, commissioners are often balancing:

- statutory obligations,
- procurement and legal risk,
- workforce stability,
- asset and property considerations,
- the immediate needs of people relying on the service,
- reputation and cost implications.

Commissioners may be managing those nominally responsible for a service, while recognising they will not be the long-term partner and searching for a solution. This is very different from the transfer of services to another provider or a decision to wind up a programme or service. When an incumbent steps away, commissioners want or need the service to continue but it's not immediately clear how it will do so.

These reflections are drawn from two recent examples when Interventions Alliance were asked to step in and transfer services under pressure.

In the case of the charity provider stepping away from managing Approved Premises services, the end of the current contract term was the end date. If any process went beyond that point, provision would be lost. Novation before that time would protect the service. A newly commissioned provider of safe accommodation services for domestic abuse survivors withdrew from the contract before 'go live'. The commissioner needed to look at alternative options in a very limited timeframe. The service end date was the end of the current contract period.

In examples of insolvency, where there is an 'administration event' there is also time beforehand for contingency planning. However, it can be unclear when the insolvency event will take place and there is a specific legal process around that involving the courts, which can limit the ability to act or engage with relevant partners. Importantly, it means that the moment of transfer could take place within a window of time rather than a set date. Plans need to be flexible and responsive in this set of circumstances.

Pressures in any of these scenarios can also be intensified by parallel processes. For example, in the case of the Approved Premises there was a live competition running alongside exit discussions.

In the case of insolvency, administrators are also acting on behalf of creditors including banks and tax authorities, which will be working to financial objectives to maximise value of the bankrupt company's assets.

Key learning
One of the clearest lessons is that delay rarely reduces risk. Uncertainty compounds quickly: staff anxiety grows, messages fragment and trust erodes. The absence of a clear direction, even temporarily, can be more destabilising than an imperfect but honest plan. While there can be a temptation for commercial or legal leads to lead contingency planning processes, in our experience operational colleagues are best-placed to lead. By adopting that approach, the needs of the people using the service are often more effectively protected and inadvertent outcomes or consequences can be avoided.

Moment that Mattered: Workforce Stability

Protecting delivery from uncertainty

During periods where continuity is uncertain and a clear path forward has not yet been agreed, the impact on the workforce can be immediate. Staff confidence dips and colleagues often begin to explore alternative roles. Referrals from partner agencies can slow or halted entirely, despite ongoing need or pressures elsewhere in the system.

This is not driven by a decline in service quality, but by uncertainty about the future. Once a clear direction is established, confidence will stabilise and delivery recover.

Our experience highlights how even short periods of ambiguity can translate into tangible operational risk in public protection services - particularly where workforce stability underpins safe and consistent delivery.

4. Progress without a playbook

Across all situations, a consistent theme emerged: to reach a successful outcome, relationships, pace, and values mattered more than perfect process.

These kinds of situations are unlikely to have been encountered before as there will be issues specific to each set of circumstances. That means availability and responsiveness – from commissioners and providers alike – are critical. Decisions were taken and progress made because people were willing to engage early, speak openly and stay close to issues as they evolved.

In cases where all parties could be brought together, commissioner-led chairing of discussions helped maintain focus on outcomes rather than positions. It reduced the risk of competing agendas and provided a clear centre of gravity when tensions arose, particularly around cost, timelines or asset issues.

Progress was fastest where those around the table had the authority to take decisions. This typically meant direct involvement from chief executives and senior leaders across operations, people, communications and legal functions, alongside commissioner leads empowered to act on behalf of their organisations. Where this mandate was present, issues were resolved in days rather than weeks.

Honesty also mattered. Not everything could be shared, and not all risks could be resolved immediately. Being clear about what could not yet be answered, while remaining open about what was known, helped maintain trust and momentum. All parties need to be confident enough to recognise that not everything can be shared immediately. Being transparent about what cannot be shared and as much of the rationale as to why helps build trust in the parties.

While each set of circumstances was very different, the issues to be addressed grouped into key areas, with dependencies between each. Broadly these were:

- Colleagues and beneficiaries
- Stakeholders
- Landlords, leasing and suppliers
- Commercial and legal
- Continuity and contingency.

Early in each step-in process, the parties involved agreed a shared objective and a clear sequence of thresholds that would need to be reached to progress to subsequent stages. This provided structure and shared expectations, without over-specifying the route to get there.

Built-in flexibility allowed the process to adapt as new information or issues emerged. One practical way this was achieved was by avoiding hard-coded milestone dates. Instead, the parties worked to an agreed “ambition date”, with other milestones expressed relative to it (for example, Ambition Date +2 days or Ambition Date −2 weeks).

This approach conveyed the necessary sequencing and time dependencies between activities, without committing prematurely to a rigid timetable that might later need to shift.

Key to making this work is having the right people around the table with the mandate to make decisions. From the providers – incumbent and new – this meant the chief executive and people with specialist knowledge in operations, people, communications and the law. The lead commissioner also needed to lead discussions on behalf of their organisation with the right counterparties to each of the above.

Key learning
Circumstances differ but change will affect services in similar ways. Setting out a proposed choreography for transfer rather than setting dates in concrete allows progress to flex in line with issues as they emerge. It means that delays do not derail the process.

5. Where complexity surfaced

Outcomes in these transfers were positive. Services were transferred and beneficiaries were largely unaware of the change, particularly as colleagues were also protected.

However, the process exposed complexities that weren't always foreseen. The lessons we learned may help commissioners and providers in the future.

In particular:

- Terms of reference, templates, and clear role definitions were developed as we went. This largely reflects the range of potential scenarios leading to an unexpected exit.
- Expectations around timelines and minimum standards for novation or transition were unclear, creating avoidable tension. In some scenarios the exiting party is motivated to 'hang on' until the last possible moment and that can create tension.
- While commissioners could approve service transfer, delivery also depended on third-party consent. Unresolved issues relating to head leases and landlord approvals when properties are involved, have the potential to halt transfer of services entirely even at a late stage in the process. Although alternative locations can be secured, this could create a period of service disruption and undermine continuity. This risk only becomes fully visible when the process of transition gets underway, highlighting the importance of early scrutiny of property and lease arrangements. Although alternative locations could eventually have been secured, this would have created a period of service disruption and undermined continuity. This risk only became fully visible once transition was underway, highlighting the importance of early scrutiny of property and lease arrangements.
- Messaging across multiple parties was difficult to align, especially when exiting providers communicated differently at different levels. The new provider is unlikely to be permitted to communicate directly with colleagues transferring into them until very late into the process.
- Exit planning had not always been treated as integral to commissioning, despite being essential to service continuity.

These are not individual failings. They reflect the reality that commissioning frameworks are generally designed for orderly competition and transfer or agreed wind down, not for transfer under pressure.

Moment that Mattered: Property Risk

When third party decision-making becomes part of the critical path
In some transitions, continuity depends not only on commissioner approval but on third-party agreements—particularly property, lease and landlord arrangements. These dependencies are not always fully visible at the outset.

As issues emerge, property considerations can quickly become the critical path. Without the necessary consents or transfer arrangements in place, continuity may be at risk, even where alternative options exist in principle. While new locations could often be secured over time, this would likely create a gap in provision and undermine stability.

Progress is typically achieved through early engagement with property owners, transparency about delivery arrangements, and active commissioner facilitation. The experience highlights how quickly factors outside the contract can become the primary risk to maintaining continuity.

Key learning
While commissioners can manage the contract, service continuity depends on a wider system that sits beyond it. This system includes people, property, timing, incentives and relationships, many of which are not directly governed by formal commissioning arrangements. When disruption occurs, risk tends to emerge at these edges rather than within the contract itself, underlining the importance of early stakeholder mapping, realistic transition planning and active relationship management alongside contractual controls.

6. What helped services remain stable

It is important to recognise what did not happen. Across all these examples, people using the service were not affected by the transition. Frontline delivery remained consistent, statutory responsibilities continued to be met, and access to accommodation and support was maintained throughout. This outcome was not accidental; it was the result of a set of practical and relational factors alongside formal contractual arrangements.

Central to this was a strong culture of partnership on both sides. A shared, non-negotiable focus on service continuity anchored decision-making. Commissioners and providers were aligned in prioritising the retention of provisions for participants and the uninterrupted delivery of support, even where legal or commercial pressures might otherwise have encouraged a more rigid approach. This clarity helped avoid adversarial positions that could have destabilised delivery.

Where staff uncertainty arose, it was mitigated through early reassurance, visible leadership and clarity around employment protections. For example, as soon as Interventions Alliance was able to meet colleagues transferring to us we did so. Leaders were directly involved in engaging with teams, setting clear expectations and reaffirming that roles were protected. In particular, a shared understanding of TUPE arrangements helped prevent unnecessary anxiety and avoided prolonged consultation processes that can destabilise services during transition.

Strong operational relationships were equally important. Regular, open communication between service managers, commissioners and providers ensured that issues were surfaced early and addressed collaboratively. Conversations did not wait for formal milestones; instead, emerging risks were discussed as they arose. This was particularly important where dependencies sat outside the contract, such as property ownership and lease arrangements, which had the potential to become critical path risks.

Commissioner facilitation also played a stabilising role. Bringing together incumbent providers, incoming providers and, where necessary, landlords enabled shared problem-solving and helped align expectations. In cases where property owners sat outside commissioning frameworks, progress was achieved through transparency, information-sharing and trust rather than formal leverage.

Trust also mattered. Confidence in the incoming provider’s track record, governance and values reduced friction across the system, including with landlords and partners outside commissioning frameworks. Being a known and credible organisation helped decisions be taken more quickly and with less resistance at key moments. Commissioners and partners were reassured that the service would be delivered with professionalism and care, reducing resistance at key points and enabling decisions to be taken at pace.

Taken together, these factors mattered as much as contractual mechanisms in maintaining stability. They demonstrate that service continuity during disruption depends on active stewardship of the wider system in which contracts sit.

Key learning
Contracts enable transfer, but relationships, leadership and system awareness protect continuity.

When unexpected change occurs, stability is most effectively maintained by prioritising service continuity, reassuring staff, surfacing risks early and actively managing dependencies - particularly people and property - that sit beyond the formal commissioning framework.

7. Strengthening readiness

If there is one overarching lesson from these experiences, it is this: contingency should not be treated as an admission of failure. In complex public protection services, unexpected provider exit is a foreseeable risk and can be planned for as part of good practice, not treated as an exceptional breakdown.

A practical starting point is to keep multiple options open for longer. Where provider confidence, financial resilience or delivery capability begins to weaken, maintaining parallel conversations allows commissioners to respond proportionately as risks crystallise. This includes exploring alternatives to strict contract enforcement where doing so better protects service continuity and the people who rely on it.

Importantly, commissioners may need to recognise when enforcing a contract is legally possible but operationally unwise. Commissioners can choose not to compel a provider to deliver a service they no longer had confidence in, despite having contractual rights to do so. Starting a long-term public protection service from a position of dispute or bad faith risks embedding tension, undermining collaboration and detracting from service quality. If it becomes necessary, facilitating a managed transition to another provider is a more responsible way to protect continuity and avoid destabilising relationships from the outset.

Maintaining visibility of market health is equally important. Early, honest dialogue with providers about sustainability, workforce stability and emerging pressures helps identify potential step-out scenarios before they become acute. These conversations should be normalised and framed around shared responsibility for continuity, rather than compliance alone.

Insolvency scenarios merit particular attention. Where administrators are involved, decisions are driven by asset value rather than service continuity, and the timing of transfer can be uncertain or led by the courts. This creates a materially different risk profile and reinforces the need for early planning around assets, leases and fallback delivery options.

Commissioners can also strengthen resilience by preparing light-touch frameworks for unexpected exit. These need not be prescriptive playbooks, but should provide a common starting point: high-level terms of reference, indicative timelines, minimum expectations for cooperation, and clarity about roles during transition. In the cases reviewed, the absence of these frameworks increases pressure and uncertainty, particularly under compressed timescales.

Attention should be paid to dependencies beyond the contract. Property ownership, head leases, landlord consent and third-party agreements can quickly become risks to service continuity. Other organisations may have their own approval processes to follow in scenarios where their counterparty will be a different organisation. It is worth mapping these dependencies at service inception and revisiting them when risk increases, ensuring there is clarity about what can and cannot be transferred and what contingencies may be required.

Clear expectations around behaviour and communication also matter. Active commissioner facilitation, early multi-party discussions and transparent information-sharing helped align messaging, reassure staff and prevent destabilising uncertainty.

Ultimately, public protection services are too important to be negotiated under pressure. Embedding contingency, openness and system awareness into commissioning practice better protects services, staff and beneficiaries when disruption occurs. The appendix below sets out practical tools we wish had been available at the outset - not as prescriptive solutions, but as starting points for informed conversation and timely action.

Key learning
Existing contingency planning works best when it is extended beyond the contract. Commissioners routinely plan for risk, but these experiences show that service continuity during disruption depends on factors that sit outside formal contractual frameworks, including people, property, timing and relationships.

Stability was strongest where commissioners complemented established contingency arrangements with early dialogue with partners and potential partners, flexible responses to delivery risk, and active facilitation of transitions. Paying explicit attention to these wider system dependencies helped protect services, staff and beneficiaries when unexpected change occurred.

8. Readiness toolkit

A small number of tools that would have reduced uncertainty, eased pressures and helped all parties focus more quickly on the key areas to resolve. The elements set out below are not intended as rigid templates or additional bureaucracy, but they reflect the practical templates that would have provided a shared starting point when unexpected exit or transition began to emerge.

These were all created through the process but it's useful to build them from the start.

In each of these cases, positive outcomes were achieved through goodwill, rapid problem-solving and strong relationships. However, much of the structure that supported decision-making, coordination and communication had to be developed in real time, under pressure. Once developed, these tools quickly became stabilising and reduced duplication, misalignment and unnecessary anxiety. Having them available from the outset would have materially reduced pressure on all parties.

1

A light-touch "unexpected exit" framework

- Clear recognition of different exit scenarios (strategic withdrawal, failed mobilisation, insolvency).
- Early decision points and escalation thresholds.
- Explicit focus on BAU continuity and public protection.

2

A ready-to-use terms of reference

- Named roles across all parties.
- Clear chairing arrangements (typically commissioner-led).
- Time-bound milestones and decision points.
- Agreed principles for transparency and information-sharing.

3

A communications skeleton

- Who needs to know what, and when.
- Separate but aligned messaging for: staff, partners, service users (where appropriate), and external stakeholders.
- A shared understanding that messaging affects day-one morale.

4

Minimum expectations on pace and information

- Indicative timelines for novation or transition.
- Agreed minimum transparency on cost profiles and assumptions.
- Early clarity on what information is essential versus desirable.

5

Exit and asset scenarios built into contracts

- Clear provisions for landlord arrangements.
- Clarity on fixtures, fittings, and assets.
- Consideration of administrator behaviour in insolvency scenarios.

6

A simple FAQ and issues log

- One shared document to track questions, risks, and decisions.
- Visible ownership and version control.
- Reduces duplication and misalignment across parties.

7

A shared understanding of workforce protections

- Early confirmation of TUPE positions.
- Proportionate engagement with unions.
- Clear reassurance to staff where appropriate.

Unexpected exits and rapid transitions are rarely planned, but they are not unique to any one sector. We encourage commissioners, providers and partners to reflect on whether similar light-touch tools exist within their own systems, and to consider developing them in advance, collaboratively and proportionately. Sharing learning, assumptions and practical frameworks before pressure hits can reduce risk, protect people, and support calmer, more confident decision-making when it matters most. We would welcome dialogue with others who are reflecting on or responding to similar pressures, and are open to sharing our learning where it may be helpful.

10. Contact

For further discussion or to share learning in response to this paper, please contact Interventions Alliance at enquiries@interventionsalliance.co.uk