

Development Department Research Programme

The Provision of Housing Advice to Prisoners in Scotland: An Evaluation of the Projects Funded by the Rough Sleepers Initiative

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Prisoners have been identified as a group at high risk of homelessness following periods of imprisonment, with consequently increased risks of re-offending. The research examined six projects funded by the Scottish Executive through the Rough Sleepers Initiative to provide support to prisoners with a range of housing issues. Funding for the projects was agreed in 2000, and current funding runs to 2004.

Main Findings

- Prisoners were identified by the Homelessness Task Force as a high risk group and a series of 6 prison-based projects was promoted in 2000 to provide housing advice and other support to short term prisoners. The projects were found to vary considerably in size and approach, with some being, in effect, extensions of mainstream local authority housing services, while others are operated by voluntary organisations.
- Although the research found the projects to be largely well managed and effective, there was evidence of significant gaps in the services provided when staff were ill, or left unexpectedly. There was also evidence that the service specified in some establishments is insufficient to meet the expressed demand. Over the course of the research, in one establishment, a local authority summarily removed services to non-local residents, leaving a majority of the prisoners with no access to advice.
- Overall, there was evidence of a lack of monitoring, target setting and review.
- A key issue identified in the research was that the nature of the service provided is not consistent across Scotland, with prisoners ordinarily resident in a small number of local authority areas receiving a significantly higher level of service than others. This has led to understandable frustration among prisoners and prison staff.
- There was evidence that the projects are making a significant difference with remand and newly sentenced prisoners in terms of reducing the risk of both the build up of arrears and the loss of tenancies. There was some evidence that the projects are making an impact in terms of implementing support packages on liberation, but this is hampered by the way in which homelessness services are currently organised.
- There was evidence of inconsistencies in the approaches of local authorities in terms, for example, of basic issues such as the level of priority given to former prisoners, the operation of local residency and bad neighbour policies. There was also evidence of considerable inconsistency in the application of the right to temporary accommodation, with evidence of some prisoners purposely re-offending as a way of overcoming their eviction from temporary accommodation. There were also practical difficulties evident, for example in allocating interview times and in identifying a specific member of staff prisoners could ask to see.
- The issue of the storage of possessions was identified as a key problem for a small, but significant number of prisoners, leading to perceptions of a "double" punishment, as well as a significantly increased risk of homelessness and potentially of re-offending.
- The main conclusion of the research was that work with prisoners should continue, but that it should be placed on a more strategic basis, with the specification of a national minimum service level, perhaps supported by a contract-based approach to ensure consistency and quality.

Introduction

The research examined in detail six prison-based projects funded by the Scottish Executive through the Rough Sleepers Initiative to provide support to prisoners with a range of housing issues.

It should be noted that a seventh project, operated by SACRO on behalf of Falkirk Council, was also funded. This provides community-based drop-in and supported accommodation services to former prisoners with a local connection to the area. Brief details of this project were included in the report.

Funding for the projects was agreed in 2000, and current funding runs to 2004.

Methodology

The research was largely qualitative and examined the views of those with a key role in the delivery of services, as well as current and former prisoners. The methods used included:

- Detailed interviews with staff of the projects, prison-based social work and other staff, with SPS staff (at HQ and within establishments) and staff from HMP Kilmarnock.
- A total of 153 interviews with prisoners about current and previous housing issues, and their experience of support.
- A total of 43 interviews with former prisoners in a community setting.
- A survey of a sample of 20 local authority housing services in order to identify current policy and practice.

Overall findings

The rationale for the provision of housing support to prisoners lies in the widely accepted view that prisoners, as a group, run a high risk of homelessness on liberation. Short term prisoners, who typically have little or no supervision on liberation, face a range of difficulties, such as financial, employment, addiction and family issues, each of which can compound, or can be compounded by, housing problems. Such problems have also been linked to an increased likelihood of re-offending.

Management

The six prison-based projects examined are managed by Shelter, ECSH (on behalf of Edinburgh City Council), Glasgow City Council, Inverclyde Council, Rowan Alba (on behalf of East Ayrshire Council) and Dumfries and Galloway Council. Support is available at all Scottish establishments holding short term prisoners. The projects were found to vary considerably in size and scope, and in their mode of operation.

The projects are locally managed within the broad scope of local outcome agreements which exist between the Scottish Executive and local authorities. The only exception to this is the Shelter project which operates within a free standing outcome agreement with the Scottish Executive.

It was found that there was relatively limited monitoring of the projects either individually or as a group, and no specific monitoring framework was agreed covering projects of this type.

Although the projects were found to be, in general terms, well managed, there was a range of issues identified which impacted on the service which prisoners received. Foremost among these was that most of the projects had been, at various times, unable to provide cover for holidays or sickness, or to replace staff who had left unexpectedly, leading to significant discontinuities of service.

A further area of concern was that one project summarily withdrew its service to non-local residents, leaving the majority of the population, including women transferred from Cornton Vale, with no access to housing support.

In some establishments, it was also found to be questionable whether the level of provision is sufficient to cope with demand.

Working conditions

Working conditions within establishments were found to vary considerably. In, for example, Polmont, Edinburgh and Kilmarnock, projects are based within Throughcare Centres. These operate on the basis that all agencies are based in one location, and prisoners are escorted from their halls. Generally, this appears to work quite well, although there are issues with the very short working day and access to essential administrative tools such as telephones and computers.

In other establishments where Throughcare Centres have not yet been implemented, project staff generally interview prisoners in halls. This causes a range of practical difficulties, including a general lack of space and difficulties in securing escorts (where project staff are not "key trained").

Services to prisoners

The services provided by the projects were found to be, with one fundamental exception, similar.

Most projects deal with both remand and sentenced prisoners, and will attempt to interview prisoners on reception to ascertain whether they require support with either housing benefit issues or with surrendering a tenancy (due to the 13 week limitation on housing benefit for many prisoners). In most establishments, this appeared to work well with a high level of cooperation between agencies and there was evidence of a decline in the number of prisoners building up arrears, or whose tenancies are being terminated. This approach, however, relies on there being an effective induction process, and this is not yet in place across all Scottish Prison Service (SPS) establishments.

Projects, in all cases, will provide on-going support to prisoners throughout their sentences, and as they approach liberation. The system of identifying prisoners requiring support appeared to work well across SPS, although in some cases, prisoners could be identified earlier, thus allowing additional work to be undertaken where required.

Perhaps the key issue identified by the research was the fact that the nature of the service provided on liberation is quite different, depending on the nature and approach of the project concerned. Staff from Glasgow City Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council can carry out assessments *prior* to liberation and can generally put in place support packages, usually involving accommodation.

Staff within the other projects can only refer prisoners to local authority housing services on liberation. This process appears fraught, with a general complaint from projects of a lack of cooperation and feedback.

This disparity of treatment was found to be most obvious in Cornton Vale and Polmont (where two service providers operate), but was also identified in Barlinnie and Low Moss, as well as in Dumfries. In these establishments, local residents were found to receive a substantially different level of support to other prisoners, leading to understandable frustration and feelings of unfairness among prisoners.

Issues on liberation

Overall, although it is recognised that change will follow from the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, there appeared to be apparent lack of consistency in the way local authorities interact with former prisoners.

Among the main issues highlighted in the research were a general unwillingness to provide interview times or named staff, a lack of temporary and permanent accommodation, and inconsistent operation of local connection and bad neighbour policies.

Perhaps the aspect of most concern to both prisoners and projects is that some local authorities appeared to offer very limited periods of temporary accommodation to homeless former prisoners, with eviction likely in as little as 28 days. A range of evidence suggested that some former prisoners are re-offending rather than be forced to re-present as homeless, or sleep rough. This suggests an urgent need to clarify policies on the provision of temporary accommodation.

Impact

In terms of the impact of the projects, it is clear that the six prison-based housing advice and assistance projects are making a difference. The extent of that difference is difficult to assess accurately, due to inconsistent approaches to monitoring and the inability of many of the projects to identify final outcomes.

The identification and prevention of arrears, and the work to terminate tenancies is making, and will, over time, make a significant contribution to the life chances of many prisoners. It will also make a contribution to reducing the work of local authorities, and to the maintenance of the housing stock. Two main issues remain outwith the scope of projects – the 13 week rule for Housing Benefit and the lack of provisions for storing prisoners' possessions.

It was less clear that some of the projects are making a significant difference in relation to the liberation of prisoners. This is not really a shortcoming in relation to their work, more that they lack the means to undertake assessments and allocate properties (as exists with two of the projects). This is a significant area of inconsistency.

[It is also worth noting here that the seventh project, delivered by SACRO in the Falkirk Council area, also appeared to be making a direct impact on the likelihood of re-offending both through its advice and assistance work, and particularly through its supported accommodation strand, albeit with a relatively small number of men and women.]

Overall, the research suggested a clear need to continue to undertake work of this kind in prisons. Changes to legislation may place less of an emphasis on the pre- and post-liberation work of the projects, although in the absence of changes to Housing Benefit legislation, there remains an urgent need to prevent arrears and abandonments. There are, however, a range of issues which, it is suggested, should be addressed if the projects are to be fully effective and accountable.

Recommendations

The key recommendations suggested by the research were:

For the Scottish Executive:

- Although Housing Benefit is a reserved matter, further representations should be made on removing the current 13 week limitation.
- The Scottish Executive could consider whether there is any effective means of providing storage for prisoners' possessions.
- In the interests of consistency, the Scottish Executive should consider accelerating the commencement of at least some of the provisions of the Homelessness (Scotland) Act 2003.
- The Scottish Executive should monitor the implementation of the right to temporary accommodation, and assess whether clarification of the guidance is required in the light of apparent local interpretations.

For the Scottish Executive and SPS:

- A housing service should continue to be provided in Scotland's prisons.
- This service should be provided on a consistent basis across Scotland.
- A strategic approach should be taken to the identification and development of projects, with an assessment being undertaken of the demand (or need) for the service and the level of service tailored to this. This could then form the basis of tender process (or a direct contract) in relation to the delivery of a housing service to prisons across Scotland.
- It is essential that any future work is guided by a detailed specification of services. The current situation where services can be withdrawn arbitrarily is clearly unacceptable.
- For any future work in a prison environment, a comprehensive and effective monitoring system should be designed and implemented.
- Any service developed in future should be structured in a way to ensure that cover is provided for periods of staff illness or where a post holder leaves.
- Remand prisoners should receive a service which meets their needs. While not all remand prisoners have housing-related needs, many do, and there is currently no certainty that these will be identified or addressed.
- Although it was outwith the scope of this exercise, SPS should consider examining whether the housing needs of long term prisoners, at the point of sentence, are being met.

For the Scottish Executive and CoSLA / Housing Services:

- The Scottish Executive should clarify to local authorities how they might interact with prison-based projects, and set out clearly the basis on which these projects can interact with prisoners in custody.
- Local authorities should nominate a single point of contact with whom prison-based workers and SPS staff can liaise.
- There would be considerable benefits to prisoners and to their chances of resettlement if a means could be agreed whereby housing officers based within prisons could undertake homeless assessments on behalf of receiving local authorities prior to the prisoner being liberated.
- In the light of the work done by prison-based housing projects in preventing the build up of arrears and in reducing the likelihood of abandonments, the Scottish Executive may wish to consider whether to recommend that more local authorities adopt "responsible surrender"

policies for prisoners whose sentence is longer than 6 months.

For SPS:

- It would be helpful to develop a network for SPS and PPS staff involved in this area of work.
- SPS could consider the development of a short course in housing issues (with intranet support) for staff involved in Throughcare Centres or induction.
- There are a small number of practical issues which SPS could consider addressing in future work, perhaps by the agreement of a protocol. These include access for prison-based workers to a confidential interview area, access to a phone, access to a computer and access to SPIN.
- It is important, in establishments where there is no induction available to all or some prisoners (e.g. those on remand), that SPS staff cooperate fully in publicising housing issues and making referrals to project workers.

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