

Prisoner Resettlement and Accommodation: challenges for the new corrections

Penny Fraser and Roger Grimshaw identify areas needing development to create a comprehensive accommodation strategy.

Following the example of the USA, the rise in custodial sanctions for men and women in all age groups in the UK inevitably poses questions about the ex-offender's re-entry to society and access to settled accommodation (Grimshaw *et al.*, forthcoming). For many years it has been recognised that accommodation needs create obstacles to integration into society. Now we are being asked to think differently about services and case management for offenders, with the prospect of reorganised correctional services. In England and Wales, a National Offender Management Service is about to spring into life. Its commitment to a seamless flow of services from prison into the community puts a new face on the problem of resettlement. There is an historic opportunity to bring new hope to offenders facing release and to give them the first vital step on the road to a law-abiding future.

In this article, we want to revisit the problems of resettlement to stable and decent accommodation by examining the obstacles to its success, and the ways in which these could be combated. Some of the issues have to do with the lingering impact of imprisonment on people already excluded from society; some are about the various social forms of exclusion associated with drug misuse, or types of sexual offence. Our argument is that many offenders need a combination of personal support and fair access to provision, if they are to have any chance of a satisfactory integration into society.

There has been a longstanding consensus in the research that housing needs escalate for many prisoners while in prison and at the point of release (Haines 1990; Social Exclusion Unit 2002). Prisoners may lose their homes for various reasons including housing and benefit regulations. Prisoners in the UK have time-limited access to such housing benefit so that after a 13 week period they risk losing their previous accommodation as rent arrears accrue unless an alternative source of income is found to pay the rent.

Being homeless or lacking a stable address upon release is associated with greater risk of a return to offending and with a range of other negative outcomes. The Social Exclusion Unit cited official research indicating that those with stable accommodation after release had a 20 per cent better chance of reducing their rate of reconviction

compared with those who had severe accommodation problems.

It is known that release from prison brings a significant risk of drug overdose fatalities (Shewan *et al.*, 2000). Not having a stable home makes it difficult to access, or keep appointments with, treatment services or other medical help while increasing use of emergency services (Kushel *et al.*, 2002). Other research has stressed the impossibility of improving treatment outcomes unless basic needs such as accommodation are addressed (Haracopos *et al.*, 2003).

Interviews with probation officers who had referred clients to supported housing run by Nacro found that without support, probation staff feared their clients would be at risk from rent arrears, drugs, crime or emotional difficulties (Nacro 2004).

"If he hadn't gone to Nacro I would have put in a homeless application with the council for him, but he would have been completely unsupported over a very difficult period. I don't think he would have lasted two days. I think he would have gone straight back to prison."

"He was in bed and breakfast initially. That wasn't sustainable. Also, he is vulnerable to more sophisticated offenders. Drinking and drug taking would quickly have become a problem if he was not supported."

Meeting housing needs: provision

Many prisoners will want to access the normal housing market in preference to the supported housing sector and the role of housing advice centres is to build up contacts and to advise a whole range of offenders; Carlisle (1996) recommends the appointment of housing officers who can work specifically with prisoners. The HM Prisons and Probation Inspectors' joint thematic report *Through the Prison Gate* (2001) showed how far there still is to go in providing a service that can overcome obstacles to accommodating ex-offenders, by accessing local authority housing, for example.

Ordinary people want to live with dignity and to choose their social connections, with co-habitees or friends. There is consistent evidence that offenders want independent accommodation rather than managed hostels for the needy (Paylor 1995; Carlisle 1996). Probation officers have concurred in preferring independent accommodation for many of

their clients (McIvor and Taylor 1994). These views tend to support the emerging assumption that hostel provision can best be described as temporary and emergency accommodation. 'Move-on' accommodation is intended to provide a stable and independent housing base for those placed in temporary accommodation. As properties are eventually assigned to users, there is a need for new properties to be added to the pool. Hence good inter-agency working is essential for 'move-on' and integration to occur.

Traditionally, 'supported housing' meant a housing provision that also gave support to the residents. 'Floating support' is defined as support that is provided wherever the user is housed (Carlisle 1996). The support is delivered to the individual who occupies any suitable address. Offenders can change accommodation while still accessing a support package.

If a placement is found, a major priority is to provide access to services. A challenge in providing for offenders is to give them access to a normal lifestyle especially if there are court-imposed restrictions on what they can do. Boredom is a threat in conditions that limit opportunity (HMIP 1998, HMIPP 2001). Support can be designed to encourage and facilitate access to services. Support staff need to be advocates as much as carers if external prejudices are to be tackled.

Meeting housing needs: strategy

A range of objectives for accommodation interventions can be suggested, some of which are oriented to social care, and others to specific risk management.

- Promote access to and stability in suitable accommodation
- Advise and support individuals and their networks
- Facilitate care, education, training, or treatment (including services for mental health disorders and addictions)
- Facilitate criminal justice programmes for offenders (reparation, offending behaviour, etc)
- Distance likely offenders from opportunity
- Distance likely offenders from anti-social influences
- Promote appropriate surveillance
- Engage agencies, offenders and communities in a positive dialogue about the terms on which accommodation is provided and managed

A focus on outcome requires a willingness to make forward plans that meet the full duration of need. The creation of NOMS means that better planning should be a major priority. Services for offenders tend to be time-limited, yet the cut-off points pay scant attention to the timescales needed for social reintegration (Travis *et al.*, 2001; Carlen 1996). Part of the problem is that agency timescales are led by managerial targets specific to one agency and not shared with others. If there was a clearer continuum of responsibilities so that the needs of ex-offenders could be placed more strongly on the agenda of agencies outside the criminal justice system it would be possible to envisage more extended and appropriate time scales. For many groups of offenders there is also a very high official outcome expectation — avoiding reconviction within two years, for example — that bears little explicit relationship with service input over the relevant period.

There is a case for high-level strategic interventions that help to structure accessible housing provision. Access to decent housing is widely accepted to be a fundamental feature of citizenship. However there have been tendencies within the

market and in social policy that have been exclusionary. Only a positive dialogue involving politicians and communities can reverse that trend and ensure effective management of the market for accommodation as well as policies for allocation that are accepted as fair and reasonable.

In a multi-agency context, the broader management and policy issue is how to deliver support that is close enough to understand and engage the individual yet avoids supplanting specialist services and gives case managers in the criminal justice system adequate scope for planning and reviewing progress. There is scope for confusion if it is unclear who is the advocate for the user, who provides a particular service, or who is responsible for assessing risks or sanctioning breaches of orders or agreements. It is evidently inadequate to simply throw agencies together and expect individually tailored services to emerge by some chemical process of interaction. Some groups of users may need interdisciplinary projects that focus contributions from all the agencies.

The key parts of an effective accommodation strategy are: objectives, planning, provision, and support. New and seamless correctional services have the opportunity to address them as never before.

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