

# Resettlement Plus

Ian Galbraith describes Nacro's development of housing advice and brokerage for prisoners under 'Prison Service Plus'.

**P**S Plus is a European funded employment scheme operating in 28 English prisons. The project aims to remove barriers to employment and includes elements addressing education, careers advice, mentoring and accommodation. Nacro are contracted to provide housing advice and this article describes the approaches used by Nacro and identifies issues for the future development of resettlement services.

The results of a survey shortly to be published by the Prison Service Custody to Work Unit confirm that most prisons provide some housing advice service by advisers who have some training to at least some of the prisoners. In reality, the services provided are variable in accessibility, reliability and quality. The majority of prison housing advice services are provided by prison officers, by prisoners and by voluntary sector organisations. Most officers and prisoners providing advice have received some training from Nacro. Resources do not meet needs and often advisers are limited to offering 'signposting' interviews. Advisers are committed but lack of time, knowledgeable management support and the reluctance of housing providers to house ex-prisoners often builds frustration. In an attempt to address these shortcomings, performance targets for housing prisoners on release are about to be trialled.

In developing housing advice through PS Plus, Nacro was conscious that, as part of an employment project, the objective for each prisoner had to be for them to go to 'sustainable housing'. Many existing services focused on finding an address for the first night only. Whilst 'sustainable' was never defined, the concept of a housing placement which meets the needs of the ex-prisoner, is affordable and which the prisoner has the skills to manage was clear to Housing Advice Officers.

The key components of Nacro's approach have been assessment, tenancy intervention, arrears intervention, advice, brokerage, networking and management.

## Assessment

Prisoners (beneficiaries in Euro-jargon) identified by PS Plus employment workers as having a housing barrier to gaining employment are referred to Nacro for full assessment. In devising the structured assessment, the focus on sustainability required post-release support needs to have equal prominence with housing needs. Cognisance was taken of existing practice with particular reference to forms used by Cheshire and Lancashire Probation areas and the Nacro Housing Advice Centre forms. The PS Plus assessment form was reviewed after six months op-

eration and following minor amendment has remained in use.

## Tenancy intervention

Many offenders enter custody requiring urgent assistance to close down tenancies. The urgency arises from the fact that rent arrears are being accumulated; it being common practice among local authorities and housing associations for rent to be charged to prisoners for the full notice period required under their tenancy agreement.

Many landlords, particularly in the public sector, will not consider housing those with rent arrears. PS Plus staff encourage prisoners to make payments towards their arrears through deductions from their (very limited) prison pay. While most prisoners are unable to clear their arrears whilst in custody, most housing providers recognise the effort that has been made and are then prepared to consider offering housing, often writing off some of the outstanding arrears.

## Brokerage

Brokerage service by PS Plus workers involves applying for housing and promoting the applicant's case. Applications are complicated because each housing provider has its own criteria and scoring system for allocating housing. Well targeted applications, taking account of the provider's criteria, have a greater chance of success. Brokerage is important because, despite the providers' procedures, allocations staff often stereotype ex-prisoners unjustifiably as anti-social neighbours and bad tenants. Very often a package is brokered which unites support from one provider with accommodation from another.

Unexpectedly, for significant numbers of those with whom we have worked who were released to 'sustainable housing', this was with family or friends (39%). Investigation revealed that those involved were genuinely homeless when referred and that substantial work was done with both beneficiaries and families to reach a point where they could return home. In many cases this was the interim stage of a housing plan leading to a local authority or housing association tenancy.

Family involvement is also perceived as essential in providing support in the early days of being a tenant. The Social Exclusion Unit report on re-offending, as well as confirming the key role played by housing in reducing recidivism, identified the breakdown of relationships with families as a contributory factor in returning to crime. Links between family and housing were not identified but it would

appear from Nacro's experience in PS Plus that work with the family could be the solution for many homeless offenders. It is however resource intensive.

## Networking

PS Plus has been fortunate to have sufficient resources for networking - engaging with providers and other stakeholders through visits, forum attendance and addressing conferences. The investment in time has been invaluable in persuading providers to consider offenders as individuals and in ensuring that local authorities link their responsibilities for reducing crime with their gate-keeping role for accommodation. Whilst networking has been carried out specifically to create opportunities for PS Plus beneficiaries, it undoubtedly has a wider benefit extending to other prisoners facing homelessness on release. The scale of PS Plus has meant that most of the country has been engaged in the process. The difficulty of 134 prisons engaging effectively with 353 local authorities has often been commented on. The limited engagement of the Homelessness, Housing and Supporting People Strategies with ex-prisoners' needs has been alleviated by the involvement of Nacro through PS Plus.

## Management

All prison housing advisers build a network of contacts, but within PS Plus, because of the scale and the networking support, a central, staffed collating point has been developed which is able to hold more extensive information than existing databases and to include subjective information, such as how a local authority interprets the *Homelessness Act*.

An attempt to carry out evaluation after release has faltered because of the limited number of beneficiaries that would consent to follow up. Initial results for the small numbers who have consented are however encouraging.

Nacro PS Plus managers have knowledge of advice-giving and housing issues and are able to support and inform the advisers. Many prison housing advisers do not have this level of housing expertise and feel unable to tackle more complex situations.

The scale and scope of PS Plus has helped identify key issues:

- How do we develop performance targets that promote sustainable housing solutions for prisoners and thus impact on re-offending rather than promoting 'first night' solutions?
- How do we ensure that integrated strategic planning involving prisons and local authorities becomes a reality?
- What are appropriate standards for housing advice in prisons to ensure the maintenance of quality and appropriate support for advisers?
- How do we develop family work so that it resolves housing problems?

- How do we ensure that all prisoners can access quality housing advice at appropriate times during remand and sentence?
- How do we fund and manage evaluation of effectiveness in housing advice?

Looking for answers to these questions and further development of best practice in housing advice in prison would be one of the most effective possible ways of reducing reoffending and supporting ex-prisoners to reintegrate into wider society.

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## References

Social Exclusion Unit (July 2002) *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*. London; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister