

The Reducing Re-offending Action Plan and Prisoner Resettlement

Joy Dalkin and Una Padel examine the Home Office's long-awaited response to the SEU report on reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners.

Almost exactly two years after the publication of the Social Exclusion Unit's widely welcomed report *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners* (July 2002) the Home Office has published its response, the *Reducing Re-offending Action Plan*, setting out clear action points together with target dates for implementation. The SEU report provided an extremely comprehensive and useful analysis of the wide range of problems, which stand in the way of the successful re-integration of many prisoners into the community after release and which precipitate a pattern of re-offending. It painted a picture of a highly marginalised group of people facing a wide range of practical, health and emotional problems on release from prison without the skills or support necessary to navigate their way around the complex bureaucratic systems required to secure housing, training, employment, benefits and healthcare.

The table below provides a stark reminder of the differences between the prevalence of these issues in the general population and the prisoner population. (*Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*, SEU 2002)

	General Population	Sentenced Prisoners
Suffer from two or more mental disorders	5% men 2% women	72% men 70% women
Unemployed	5%	67% (in 4 weeks before imprisonment)
No qualifications	15%	52% men 71% women
Homeless	0.9%	32% (prior to prison)
Receiving benefits	13.7% of working age	72% (prior to prison)
Drug use in previous year	38% men 15% women	63% men 39% women

Historically mainstream government departments like the Department of Work and Pensions and Department of Health have not considered prisoners to be their responsibility once they pass through the prison gate.

The SEU found that efforts to tackle offending behaviour and reduce re-offending were hampered by:

A lack of capacity: "*Prisoners only receive help where it happens to be available, rather than when it is needed.*"

Unclear accountability: "*No-one has responsibility for the individual prisoner, with the result that accountability is fragmented over time; at any one point; and between organisations and geographical areas.*"

Insufficient joint working: "*The engagement of different services with prisoners is not joined up as they pass through the system.*"

Insufficient innovation: "*There has often been little encouragement or support of innovative practice which can break down boundaries and harness the input of those who can reduce re-offending.*"

After publication of the SEU report the Adult Offenders and Rehabilitation Unit was created in the Home Office and immediately took on the task of developing a strategy to address the failings which had been highlighted.

The *Action Plan*, published in July 2004, marks the starting point for a step change in dealing with the interventions which underpin the social inclusion of offenders. The two year wait, which has been frustrating for those working with prisoners, will have been worth it if this really means that the wide range of departments involved have negotiated their roles and committed themselves to the actions it sets out. For far too long some of the biggest problems released prisoners have had to negotiate have been the gaps between services. Parallel systems have been developed by the various agencies without communication or reference to one another, leaving ex-prisoners trying to make sense of the maze they create. The complexity sometimes involved would challenge a highly literate person with good mental health and self-management skills. As the SEU report graphically points out, the majority of ex-prisoners could not be described like that.

The new framework has been devised to fit with the recommendations of the Carter review and the establishment of the National Offender Management Service. The delivery of the national action points it

contains will be overseen by a cross-government board of senior officials, chaired by the Chief Executive of NOMS, Martin Narey, and including representatives from key government departments responsible for the complementary services involved in resettlement. These will include health, education and training, employment and housing. No new resources are to be committed to this, but the emphasis will be on joining up existing services to create a more coherent environment for newly released prisoners.

Regional rehabilitation strategies and the formation of strategic partnerships at a regional level are intended to draw in the wide range of local stakeholders. Based on government offices for the regions, the aim is to offer services in a more streamlined fashion than in the past. The lack of co-terminosity has always created a situation where service provision has been fractured.

The regional resettlement strategies already in place in Yorkshire and the Humber, South-west and North-west are likely to serve as models, and all regions will be required to have developed a strategy by April 2005. This will enable more local operational partnerships to be formed providing the opportunity to remove much of the duplication, particularly in assessment that currently exists.

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An example of the way in which the current system has created perverse outcomes has been the payment of a higher rate discharge grant for those prisoners declaring themselves of no fixed abode. This has encouraged prisoners to conceal the fact that they may have accommodation to go to on release. Many newly released prisoners then fail to arrive at the hostels booked for them because they actually do have somewhere to go. This is wasteful of particularly scarce resources.

One of the main reasons prisoners try to claim the higher discharge grant is that they know they will struggle to access benefits immediately because the Benefits Agency pays benefits fortnightly, a week in advance and a week in arrears. Prisoners have to make their discharge grants, roughly equivalent to one week's benefit payment, last at least a fortnight, and anecdotal evidence from around the country indicates this period is often much longer, until they receive benefits. To survive, many will re-offend during this period.

Potential changes which could ease the financial and accommodation problems prisoners experience are signalled with the news that the Department for Work and Pensions is proposing to change the housing benefit regulations from October 2004 so that tenants who have to pay landlords for a period of notice may be able to claim housing benefit for a period of up to four weeks. This will be important

for prisoners who spend more than 13 weeks in custody and are currently unable to claim housing benefit as they often find themselves unable to access housing on release because of the rent arrears accrued in lieu of a notice period. Improvements to the assessment of housing need and housing advice provision in prison are promised. An accommodation strategy and further research on the accommodation needs of released prisoners will be undertaken.

The possibility of standardising the discharge grant is also being examined (rather than having a higher grant for those released homeless) with the possibility of an additional £50 being paid directly to a housing provider if necessary. The likely success of this depends upon accommodation being found for every prisoner released who needs it. Guidance has already been given to benefits staff to ease ex-prisoners' rapid access to social fund loans to help with initial survival after release while regular benefits payments are being sorted out.

Additional action points are set out, with clear timescales, to improve access to and continuity between prison and community in relation to education, training and help with employment, healthcare and drug and alcohol treatment. The role family support can play in helping prisoners resettle, and the support needs of the families themselves, are

recognised with a reiteration of the commitment to the need for visitors' centres at all closed prisons, better facilities and resources for family and children's visits and improved education on parent-craft, healthy living and sex education. At present information about prisoners' families is not routinely collected, so no-one knows exactly how many children are affected by the imprisonment of a parent for example. The *Action Plan* promises to examine how information about a prisoner's family circumstances can be collected systematically at all points from arrest and imprisonment to release.

The framework itself will be continually updated, and is itself to be followed by the development of a national strategy. The aim is to focus on outcomes rather than processes, providing a real starting point for taking rehabilitation forward.

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References

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