

Supported accommodation for ex-offenders: Identifying effective practice

The supply of accommodation and support for ex-offenders is outstripped by demand. Research by the University of Stirling found that supported accommodation projects in the Grampian area of Scotland provide an important breathing space for ex-offenders but are not always fully effective in helping people to establish and maintain independent lives in the community. The research found that:

- f** Only one in three homeless ex-offenders have their needs met through supported accommodation. The remainder have little or no access to housing with or without support.
- f** Almost half of the ex-offenders referred to the projects were under 20 years old, and had complex personal problems. Most were either in custody or were of no fixed abode at the point of referral. Only one quarter of the referrals made led to an offer of accommodation in a supported accommodation project - generally to those subject to supervision by social workers [probation officers].
- f** Statutory supervision through, for example, probation orders, community service orders or parole licences, acts as a passport to supported accommodation for ex-offenders. Funding through criminal justice services makes supported housing for ex-offenders different to other types of supported accommodation.
- f** Expectations about what the projects can and will achieve differ markedly between funders, service planners, residents, referrers and project staff.
- f** Residents value the projects highly. Supported accommodation was recognised as providing not only shelter, but structure and a breathing space.
- f** A high proportion of residents left the projects with nowhere to go. The supply of follow-on accommodation cannot be guaranteed.
- f** The objectives set for the projects are ambitious and unrealistic in relation to the resources and opportunities available to them. The complexity of the problems presented by clients and the financial policy framework within which projects operate make meeting these objectives all the more difficult.

Background

With 42 places of supported accommodation, Grampian has a higher level of provision, relative to its crimeload, than any other region in Scotland. Three projects provide this accommodation. Two are residential hostels with 24-hour support cover, owned and managed by the Social Work authority (the equivalent of the Probation Office in England and Wales). The third is a dispersed model of supported accommodation in properties leased to and managed by the local office of Sacro, a voluntary organisation which provides services and support to offenders and ex-offenders throughout Scotland. Sacro leases properties from councils and locally-based housing associations. Most provision is concentrated in Aberdeen even though need arises throughout the region.

The projects each have a slightly different focus: one deals particularly with young male offenders; the second deals with a wider age group and both men and women; the third also deals with a wider age group and both sexes but also accepts offenders with a wider range of offending histories, some of whom would be excluded from other projects.

The projects are grant-funded by the Scottish Office Social Work Services Group, acting in a similar capacity to the Home Office in England. The National Objectives and Standards for Social Work Services to the Criminal Justice System determine the framework within which the projects are organised. As of April 1994, this limits the length of stay funded by central government, which can be as little as 4 months.

Unmet need

A total of 128 ex-offenders with accommodation problems were identified from a search of the caseload of 28 social workers (equivalent to probation officers in England) over a six-month period. One-third of these ex-offenders were in need of support as well as housing. Over half were under 20. Family difficulties, homelessness and the temporary nature of existing accommodation were the most common reasons for accommodation being required. The majority of ex-offenders were thought to need housing, not necessarily with support.

Housing providers took no account of the special needs of ex-offenders except for Aberdeen District Council which ran a homelessness 'surgery' in the local prison. None were able to analyse the profile of those housed and it was therefore not possible to identify whether ex-offenders were being housed through the normal channels. Fewer than half the ex-offenders who needed accommodation were able to obtain it and the chances of being housed in a

supported accommodation project were much higher than in mainstream housing.

Getting into supported accommodation

Most of the ex-offenders referred to supported accommodation were either in custody or of no fixed abode. Only one in four of the actual referrals over a two-year period led to an offer of accommodation. Residents admitted to a project have generally been referred by a social worker acting in the role of probation officer. Social workers, who were the main source of referrals, had very limited knowledge and understanding of project aims, referral criteria and priorities.

Formal supervision is a key element in gaining access to supported accommodation. Offenders on parole, probation or a community service order were more likely to gain access to a place in supported accommodation than those under voluntary aftercare arrangements. Residents under statutory supervision orders had to remain in contact with their social worker and can lose their accommodation if they are in breach of their supervision order or their 'personal contract'. This criminal justice dimension makes supported accommodation for ex-offenders different to other types of supported accommodation.

Project objectives

The broad aims of the projects are to help ex-offenders live independent lives in the community and to prevent further offending.

The projects offered a service to people with a range of complex personal problems, many of whom had been failed by other caring services and who considered it unlikely that they could function effectively outside a supportive setting. Residents had access to a keyworker employed by the project. In many cases the resident had to liaise with both a social worker who provided formal supervision, and a keyworker who provided practical and personal support. The projects achieved a good mixture of structured support and independence.

Though it was possible for some residents to stay for a year or more, the average length of stay on the projects was 20 weeks. Those admitted to the projects tended to have complex problems which could not be addressed adequately in this time.

"I've stopped taking drugs - that was the big thing. Other problems are getting better but I've got a long way to go. If I hadn't come here I would have stayed the same and probably got worse. There's not enough places of this kind."

The recent change in the funding arrangements which restrict government financial support to a 4 month stay in supported accommodation for some ex-offenders will mean that opportunities for some residents to deal with their problems are more restricted.

Residents' views

Residents valued the time they spent in the projects which offered an opportunity to assess their problems and needs and to begin to address their offending behaviour.

"Here the door is always open. You can please yourself but other people and staff are always available. I needed to start from scratch again."

"I'm getting together with the other residents and coping with having to live with other people. This has been the longest that I haven't been in bother. I'm just getting on with my life."

The projects were generally successful at meeting the immediate support needs of residents. Hostels residents valued the combination of privacy, structure, the company of other residents if desired and the immediate access to staff if problems arose. Most people believed they had made personal progress since moving in.

"I've been trying to get off drugs for over a year. I've only stayed off altogether since I came to this place. I have something to go for - a chance to get sorted out. It's another step towards getting a flat."

The greater independence associated with the dispersed project was also appreciated.

"I've come out of myself more and I'm learning to trust people, to do things for myself and cope with different problems ... I don't think I could have made the progress that I have if I hadn't come to Sacro."

Moving on

Over one-third of the 74 people who left the projects over the two-year study period were asked to leave, usually as a result of rent arrears or repeated minor infringements of the rules. One-fifth 'disappeared' - that is, left without telling staff where they were going. One in ten went back to prison. During the study period, only five moved into their own tenancy in spite of a mechanism in Aberdeen to provide follow-on accommodation. Where follow-on accommodation was provided, landlords often sought assurance from referring projects that ongoing support would be available before allocating housing.

The long timescale, uncertainty and constraints around an offer were thought to have contributed to the rate of disappearance from the projects.

A high proportion of residents left projects with nowhere to go, even though most expected to remain in the project until they were ready to take on the responsibilities associated with a tenancy.

"It's helping me to stay out of trouble. The staff will know when I'm ready to move on. I'm not ready yet to move into my own place."

Project staff recognised that these expectations were not always realistic as an immediate outcome.

Planning for supported accommodation

Planning frameworks exist for housing, community care and criminal justice services, each designed to serve a different purpose in a different timescale. Accommodation does not feature highly in the criminal justice services plan although in practice staff recognise the significance of homelessness. There was no attempt to integrate the various planning structures or conclusions. No systematic assessment of need or demand in the local area was in evidence.

There was little relationship between plans and what happened on the ground. While most demand for housing (with or without support) was in Aberdeen itself, there was a sizeable minority demand for the surrounding rural areas. There was a social work perception of lack of supply, contrasting with the view of most local housing providers that there was no demand for accommodation from ex-offenders in their area. In the few cases where provision was made, the take-up rate was low.

The level of provision of supported accommodation for ex-offenders is relatively much lower in Scotland than in England. The Criminal Justice Services framework and planning arrangements in Scotland pay limited attention to the issue of accommodation on release and the prevailing official, criminal justice view of supported accommodation is as an alternative to custody. Unlike the Housing Corporation, Scottish Homes funds very little supported accommodation for ex-offenders on the grounds that it is an alternative to prison. In practice, those accommodated are more commonly on statutory supervision orders. However, only part of the overall demand for accommodation and support relates to offenders whose release or diversion from custody depends on the availability of specific accommodation. For the majority of ex-offenders in need, supported accommodation should not therefore be seen as an alternative to custody.

Effectiveness of supported accommodation
If judged by the number of people who leave in a planned way, the projects studied achieved only very limited success. This should not, however, be seen as the most important, or even a useful, measure of their success. The projects had considerable potential to be able to match the needs of individuals to a range of services. However this was not entirely fulfilled. The reasons for this include the high level of need for places, inadequacies in the referral process, tight financial regime, limited scope to transfer between projects and limited scope to move people on to follow-on accommodation. Although the outcome measures do not suggest a high level of effectiveness, if the projects are judged in terms of process residents clearly value their experience in the projects.

Policy implications

The Grampian projects need to clarify their purpose and respective roles to improve the chances of ex-offenders being placed in the accommodation most suited to their needs. The projects need to make the process of referral, assessment and admission clearer and more explicit. They also need to improve co-ordination on this issue between projects. There need to be clear priorities and operational criteria and better information systems.

The following wider recommendations emerge from the project:

- better recognition of the links between homelessness and offending;
- development of accommodation policies at a local level which recognise the vulnerability of ex-offenders and aim to prevent or reduce offending;
- improved access to funding for accommodation projects for ex-offenders;
- establishment of a mechanism for identifying and analysing the housing and support needs of homeless ex-offenders.

About the study

The study was conducted at the University of Stirling by Dr Gill McIvor of the Social Work Research Centre and Mary Taylor of the Housing Policy and Practice Unit, with the co-operation of Grampian Regional Council's Social Work Department and Sacro.

The study was conducted over 7 months in 1993/4 involving analysis of project records over a two-year period, interviews with residents and staff currently in the supported accommodation projects, surveys of field social workers and of local housing providers.

Further information

A copy of the full report is available from the Department of Applied Social Science at the University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Tel: 01786 473171.

Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 53** Survey of tenants with HIV (Dec 91)
- 54** Support for young women homeless because of sexual abuse (Jan 92)
- 57** Provision of supported housing by housing associations (Mar 92)
- 58** Housing and community care (Mar 92)
- 76** Disabled people's access to housing (Feb 93)
- 80** Housing provision for refugees (Mar 93)
- 85** Local authority responses to women and children escaping from domestic violence (Apr 93)
- 86** Housing provision for people with health problems and mobility difficulties (Apr 93)
- 98** The effect of closing resettlement units (Nov 93)
- 99** Shared living in supported housing (Nov 93)
- 116** Self-build schemes for homeless young people (Jun 94)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line for publication queries only; an answerphone may be operating).



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