

OUT OF JAIL BUT STILL NOT FREE

Experiences of temporary accommodation on leaving prison



Fiona McHardy

with Charlie Martin, David Kennedy, Maggie Munro and Robin Tennant



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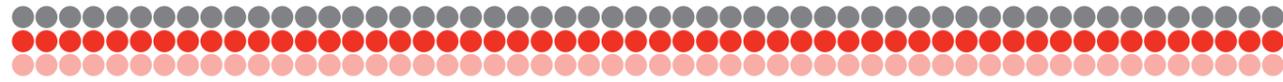
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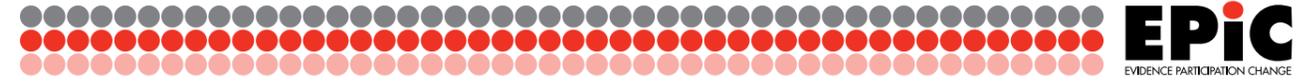
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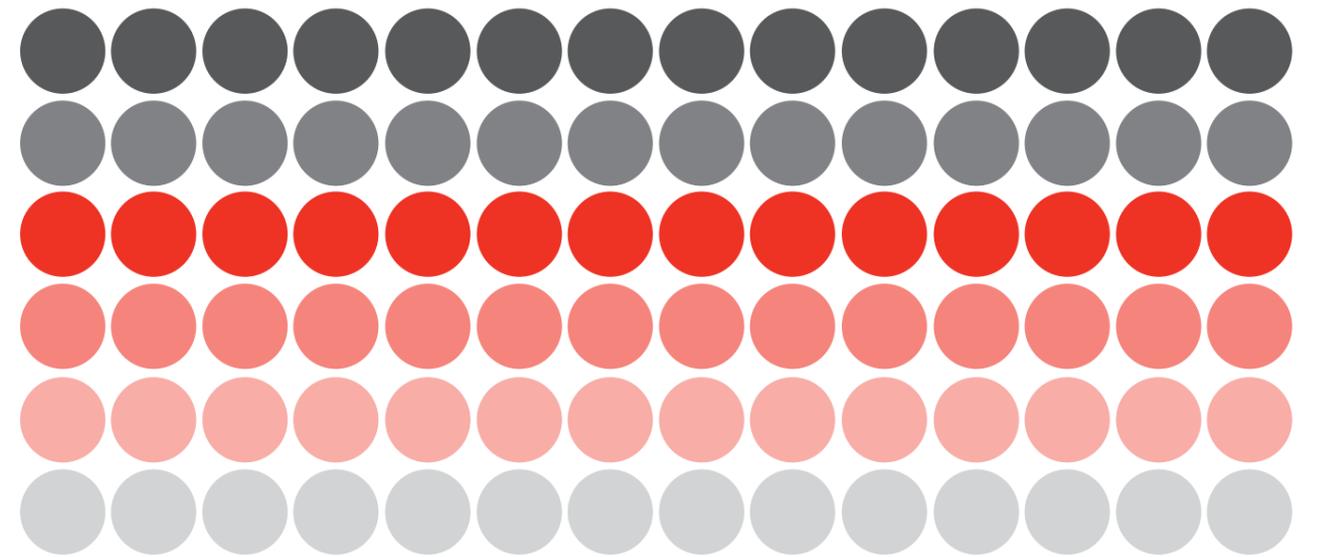
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INTRODUCTION





This report focuses on the experiences of ten ex-offenders, all part of the Wise Group's Routes out of Prison partnership (RooP), from across local authority areas in the west of Scotland. All were homeless on release from prison. Using a community research approach, research was conducted into their experiences of temporary accommodation on leaving prison. The research set out to:

- Examine ex-offenders' experiences of temporary accommodation ;
- Understand how experiences of temporary accommodation affected the transition to permanent housing ;
- Discover best practice in the provision of temporary accommodation ;
- Provide policy recommendations which could alleviate poverty amongst ex-offenders.

The key findings of this research were:

- Obtaining good housing is a cornerstone for individual well-being.
- This housing must be appropriate for the individual's needs and circumstances.
- Unsuitable or poor temporary accommodation impacts negatively on reintegration and rehabilitation.
- Hostel accommodation is rarely suitable for ex-offenders, especially for those with drug and alcohol problems.
- Those whose housing circumstances had been unstable before incarceration were the most apprehensive about housing after release.
- Housing services and support varied across local authorities; in general, however, support for ex-offenders was poorly integrated across service providers.
- Advocacy services for ex-offenders are crucial, especially in the period immediately after release.
- Delays in the welfare benefits system represent a serious failing and result in some ex-offenders having no money and or running up debts. For example, it can take between six to eight weeks before someone leaving prison receives full benefits.

Scotland imprisons a higher proportion of its population than almost anywhere else in Western Europe.¹ The numbers being imprisoned continues to rise, partly due to the recent creation of new crimes (such as breach of an anti-social behavior order). The length of sentences is rising as the judiciary imposes stricter penalties in crimes causing public concern e.g. carrying a knife.

However, a significant proportion of sentences are still for relatively short periods of time. Data on persons receiving a custodial sentence in 2009-10, 38%, received a custodial sentence of three months or less and 32% received a sentence of three to six months.² Whilst the proportion of shorter sentences appears to be declining, it is within the context of a continuing increase in the number of sentences overall. Research into reconviction rates for offenders within Scotland shows 72% of people discharged from custody after a short sentence of six months or less are reconvicted within two years, compared with 25% of those who served a sentence of four years or more.³ Short term prison sentences are problematic if they are used inappropriately. The Scottish Prisons Commission (2008) noted that "Increased use of prisons is the result of using it for those who are troubled and troubling rather than dangerous. High prison populations do not reduce crime; they are more likely to create pressures that drive reoffending than to reduce it."⁴ And whilst re-offending can be the result of various pressures, not having safe, affordable and stable housing on release definitely plays a role. It is estimated that 30% of those liberated from prison have nowhere to live on release.⁵ The Social Exclusion Unit highlighted (2002:96) that "research suggests that stable accommodation can make a difference of over 20% reduction in reconviction."⁶



Poverty affects around one in five people in Scotland today. However, some groups are more vulnerable to poverty than others. People who have experienced prison are more vulnerable to poverty both prior to imprisonment and after release. Data on prisoners' backgrounds shows that:

- 80% have the writing skills of an 11 year old
- 65% have the numeracy skills of an 11 year old
- 50% have the reading skills of an 11 year old
- 70% have used drugs before coming to prison
- 70% have suffered from at least two mental disorders
- 20% of male prisoners have previously attempted suicide
- 37% of women prisoners have attempted suicide
- 90% of women in prison have drug and alcohol problems, and
- 75% have a history of abuse and major health problems.⁷

Issues such as unemployment; low pay; debt; poor, insecure or unaffordable housing; low educational attainment; lack of access to education and training; physical or mental health problems; are all dimensions of poverty and all play a role. Whilst these issues affect most people living on low incomes, for people with experience of the criminal justice system these problems are often exacerbated as a result of their imprisonment.

The main body of this report is divided into five sections. Section 1 looks at methodology and the role of using participatory approaches when researching with vulnerable groups. Section 2 examines the policy contexts in relation to temporary housing and to ex-offenders. Section 3 examines housing circumstances prior to imprisonment, throughcare experiences, and expectations of housing after release. Section 4 considers release and its aftermath, including the barriers to stability and reintegration. Section 5 discusses key challenges identified by interviews and stakeholders. Section 6 outlines the conclusions of the research and makes some recommendations for policy and practice in relation to ex-offenders and housing.

1 Scottish Government (2010) Statistical Bulletin Crime and Justice Series: Prison Statistics Scotland: 2009-10, [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/12/15154652/3> [Accessed: 14/4/2011].

2 Scottish Government (2010) Statistical Bulletin: Crime and Justice Series: Criminal Proceedings in Scotland, 2009-10, [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/01/20092640/19> [Accessed: 02/1/2011].

3 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/08/27112240/2> cited in The Prison Reform Trust (2010) Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile December 2010, [online] Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/FactfileDec10small.pdf> [Accessed: 20/1/2011]

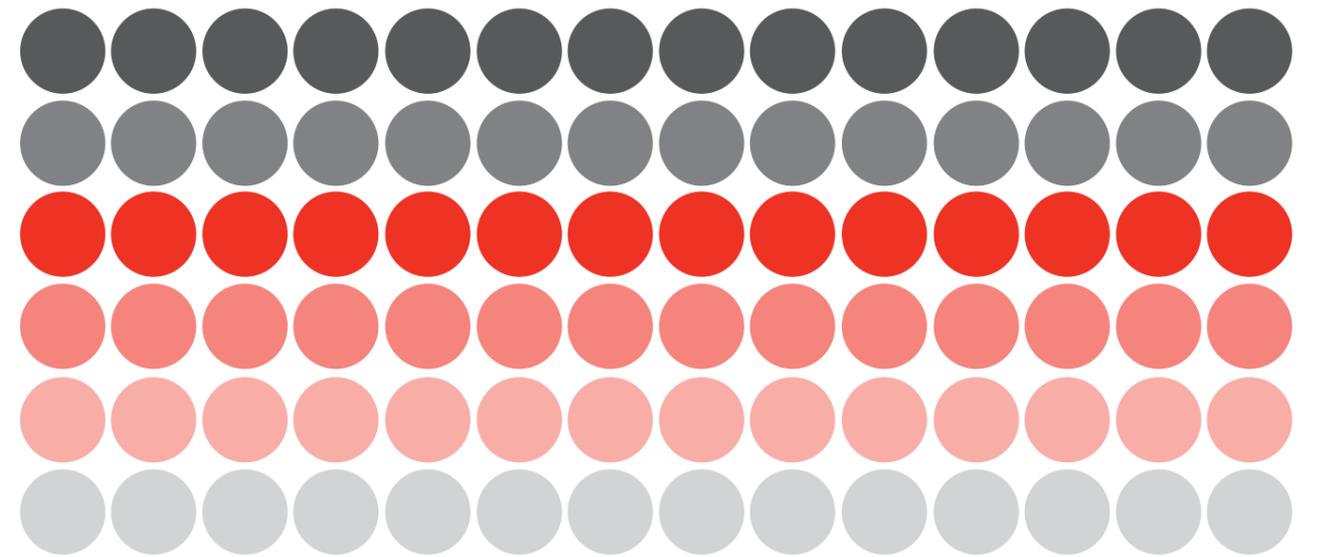
4 Scottish Prisons Commission Report (2008) 'Scotland's Choice' p2

5 Niven, S. and Stewart, D. (2005) Resettlement outcomes on release from prison, Home Office Findings 248, London: Home Office cited in The Prison Reform Trust (2010) Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile December 2010, [online] Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/FactfileDec10small.pdf>

6 Social Exclusion Unit (2002). 'Reducing Reoffending by ex-prisoners'. London: Social Exclusion Unit p96

7 Scottish Prisons Commission Report (2008) 'Scotland's Choice' p16

SECTION 1: METHODOLOGY





This research focused on exploring the following key question: On leaving prison as homeless, what are people's experiences of temporary accommodation in the West of Scotland?

The research objectives were to:

- Examine ex-offenders' experiences of temporary accommodation.
 - Contribute to evidence on the experience of temporary accommodation affects the transition to permanent housing.
 - Identify best practice in service delivery of temporary accommodation
- and
- Provide policy recommendations to address poverty amongst ex-offenders.

This research adds to existing studies of how people experience homelessness and temporary accommodation in Scotland. Due to the scale of the study this study cannot be viewed as to be fully representative. Instead, it provides a snapshot of the experiences of ex-offenders and the barriers they face in the current economic and political climate.

Approach:

This research was carried out by The Poverty Alliance in partnership with the Wise Group's Routes out of Prison project (RooP).⁸ The community researchers were drawn from volunteers from the Routes out of Prison project.

The volunteer researchers underwent training on the designing and conducting of research. Training focused on: Understanding the issues, Research Methods, Designing research, Reflexive practice, Entering the field, Data collection, Data analysis, Writing research reports and Developing a research action plan.

The volunteer research group worked with service users to map initial poverty issues in relation to pre- prison, prison and post-prison contexts. This map yielded a shortlist of the most recurring issues. This shortlist was then drawn onto topic cards which clustered issues and were illustrated with pictorial methods. Topic cards included a section for open ended responses to allow for further topics to be identified. Topic card surveying was then undertaken with RooP service users who were encouraged to think of any additional topics. They were then asked to prioritise three topics in order of importance for research on the subject they felt should be explored through the research.

In total 15 responses were obtained from service users. All of the service users engaged in this process were male. Responses came from a number of geographical areas, service user responses ranged from four local authority areas: Glasgow City (2), Renfrewshire (5), North Ayrshire (7) and West Dunbartonshire (1). Using this approach gave RooP service users decisive input into the topic of research.

Based on the results of this survey, the volunteers opted to explore the experiences of homeless ex-prisoners in temporary accommodation through semi-structured interviews with ten ex-offenders. In addition, the researchers organised a stakeholder discussion group and one-to-one interviews. This involved five workers from organizations working with ex offenders.



Participants were recruited from the following local authority areas: Glasgow (3) East Ayrshire (2), North Ayrshire (2), Renfrewshire (1) North Lanarkshire (1) and South Lanarkshire (1). All of the participants in the research had been assessed as homeless and in priority need. The profile of participants is outlined in the tables below and a breakdown of participants' details is as follows

Table 1: Age Profile

Age of Participants	% of sample (n)
25-34	40 % (4)
35-44	40% (4)
45-54	10% (1)
55-64	10% (1)
Total	100% (10)

Table 2: Disability Profile

Participants describing disability according to terms of DDA	% of sample (n)
Yes	30 % (3)
No	70 % (7)

Table 3: Type of Impairment

Type of impairment	% of sample (n)
Physical impairment	20 % (1)
Sensory impairment	0%
Mental health condition	80 % (4)
Learning disability	0%
Long standing illness or condition	60% (3)
Other disfigurement	0%
Prefer not to say	20%
	100% (5)

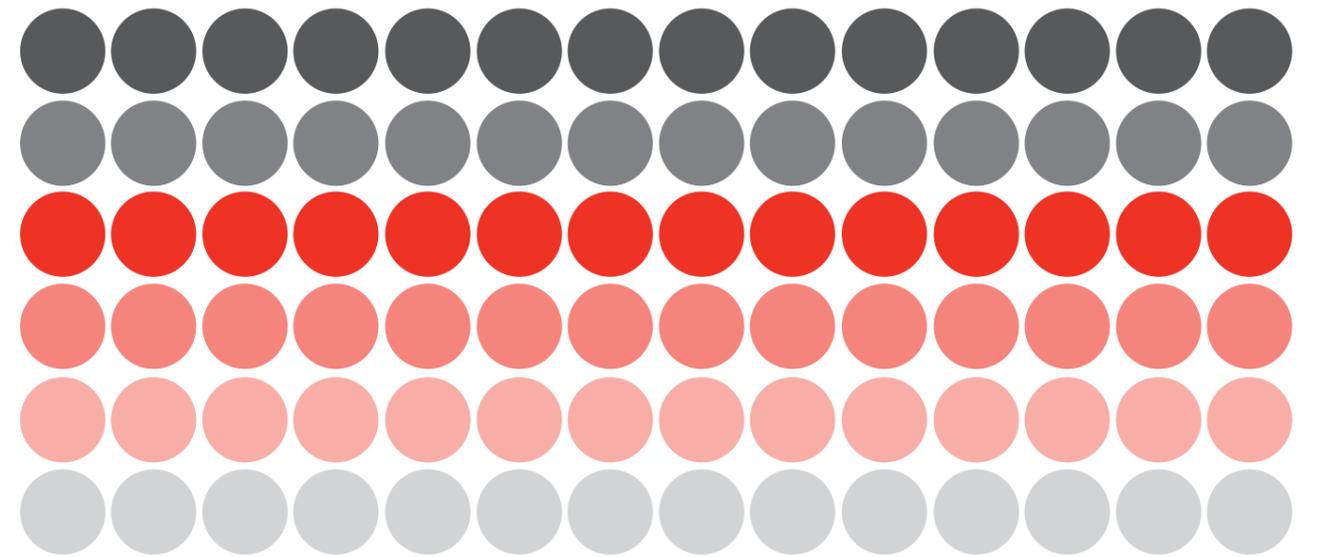
Table 4: Gender Breakdown

Gender	% of sample (n)
Male	80% (8)
Female	20% (2)
	100% (10)

Interviews and discussions were transcribed, analysed and thematically coded. This was carried out in conjunction with volunteers from Routes out of Prison. The report has also been written with their input. The personal qualities and professional experience of the volunteers helped to ensure that the research process was grounded in the views of those with experience of the issues of homelessness and ex-offenders. This approach assisted greatly when working with a vulnerable or hard to reach group such as former prisoners. By drawing upon their personal and professional experiences, the volunteer group have been able to ensure that the research was conducted with sensitivity and incorporated the experiences of the participants effectively. Using the initial stage of the research (the topic cards described above) ensured that the views of ex-prisoners actively informed the focus of the research.

⁸ RooP is a partnership with the Wise Group as a lead agency working with Scottish Prison Services, Apex Scotland and Families Outside. For more information please see http://www.thewise.org.uk/content/default.asp?page=s5_2_1

SECTION 2: POLICY CONTEXT





Housing is a devolved matter within Scotland. The Scottish Parliament has passed a substantial amount of progressive legislation, especially The Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, which reshaped housing and homelessness policy in Scotland:

“The Act introduces a change of culture, concentrating available resources on rehousing homeless people successfully, rather than investigating whether they can be rationed out of the system”⁹

The Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 extended the categories of homeless individuals and families viewed as being in priority need (and therefore entitled to suitably permanent housing) and introduced a target that all unintentionally homeless households will be entitled to this by 2012¹⁰. Progress is being made towards ensuring that all socially rented housing will meet a minimum quality standard by 2015. Scotland’s policy on homelessness has been praised as being amongst the most progressive in Europe.

However, these progressive policies and the housing sector more generally have come under increasing pressure owing to housing shortages and the recession. Family breakdown, unemployment, an ageing population and other demographic factors have increased the demand for social housing. Long waiting lists for council and housing association accommodation are the result. Shortages have worsened during the recession, with its high and rising levels of unemployment and rising home repossession. In the light of the economic downturn and cuts to welfare and service budgets, pressures on housing are likely to increase¹².

Figures on homeless applications in the period of April to September 2010 across local authorities, found that around 4% of those applying for homeless accommodation had been due to discharge from prison, hospital, care or some other institution¹³.

More generally, survey research conducted on prisoner resettlement indicates that around 30% of people released from prison are homeless¹⁴. Along with other issues, this correlation between homelessness and leaving prison makes ex-prisoners a vulnerable group.

Homeless people almost invariably require temporary accommodation while a decision is awaited on their

homeless application and while waiting for an offer of permanent housing. Temporary accommodation was already under pressure prior to the major public spending cuts. Figures for December 2010, indicated there were 10,952 households in temporary accommodation in Scotland. This was an increase of 674 households (6 per cent) from December 2009¹⁵. It is not yet known if public spending cuts may reduce the quantity and quality of temporary accommodation on offer from local authorities.

In addition, homeless people often require housing support which meets their needs. Some housing support workers are employed by local authorities; others by voluntary sector organisations. The impact on services such as these is also unclear due to public spending cuts is also unclear.

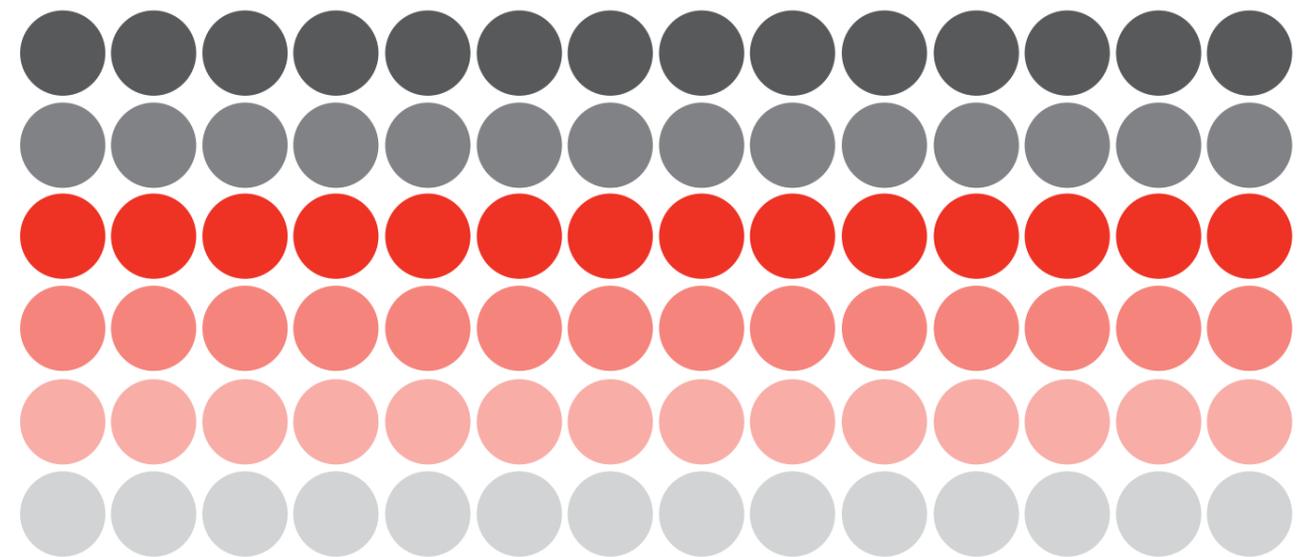
Scotland Housing and ex-prisoners

Housing has been recognised to be a key issue facing prisoners before and after release. As the Scottish Prison Service has stated “acquiring and maintaining accommodation is a key factor in resettlement for offenders and a critical part of rehabilitation”¹⁶.

Local authorities and various agencies across Scotland work in partnership with prisons to assist with prisoners’ needs on release, such as addiction support and housing support. Through-care services are delivered by a wide range of service providers (including voluntary and statutory agencies) that work inside and outside the prison.

This provision is regulated by law and certain categories of prisoners must engage with support. “In Scotland, local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide throughcare services to offenders sentenced to prison terms of over 4 years and for those sentenced to Supervised Release Orders and Extended Sentences. Local authorities also have statutory responsibility to offer voluntary aftercare to other prisoners in the first 12 months of their release from prison” (Criminal Justice Social Work Scotland)¹⁷ although the take up of voluntary throughcare is low. Recent reviews of throughcare have seen the introduction of systems such as the Integrated Case Management (ICM) system. ICM is a multi-agency approach that is focused on reducing re-offending.¹⁸

SECTION 3: BEFORE LEAVING THE PRISON GATES



9 Scottish Council for Single Homeless (2006) SCSH Briefing Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, [online] Available at: http://www.scsch.co.uk/information/briefings/briefing_12.htm [Accessed: 14/4/2011].

10 Council of Scottish Local Authorities (nd) The 2012 Homeless Steering Group [online] Available at: <http://www.cosla.gov.uk/attachments/execgroups/cw/cw100301item07.doc> [Accessed 10/4/2011]

11 Seenan, G. (2003) Scotland moves to end homelessness, The Guardian, 6th March, [online] Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/mar/06/housing.scotland>

12 Ogilvie, D. (2010). Housing & Poverty: Making a Difference in Scotland. In Poverty Alliance European Preparation Meeting Seminar. Greenock, 12th of May 2010.

13 Office of National Statistics (2011) Homeless persons legislation in Scotland, [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/03/08094006> [Accessed: 10/4/2011].

14 Niven, S. and Stewart, D. (2005) Resettlement outcomes on release from prison, Home Office Findings 248, London: Home Office cited in The Prison Reform Trust (2010) Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile December 2010, [online] Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/FactfileDec10small.pdf>

15 Office of National Statistics (2011) Homeless persons legislation in Scotland, [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/03/08094006> [Accessed: 10/4/2011].

16 SPS Making a Difference Brochure cited in Reid Howie Associates Ltd (2004) The Provision of Housing Advice to Prisoners in Scotland: An Evaluation of the Projects funded by the Rough Sleepers Initiative

17 Criminal Justice Social Work ‘Throughcare Aftercare’ [online] Available at <http://www.cjsw.ac.uk/cjsw/110.html> Accessed: 10/1/2011

18 Scottish Prison Service Website ‘Friends and Families Information’ [online] Available at <http://www.sps.gov.uk/default.aspx?documentid=b7e48be8-6594-4672-a4a9-3d3a27bf0470>



Summary

This section explores and highlights issues and housing experiences of ex-prisoners prior to release.

- Within the study sample ex-prisoners came from a range of housing circumstances. Many had previously experienced homelessness prior to imprisonment.
- Expectations of housing provision after release were mixed, with those who had experienced longer sentences highlighting particular concerns about obtaining accommodation and about difficulties in coping due to institutionalization.
- Service provision prior to release varied with geographical factors which affected the assistance individuals had received within the prison.

Housing circumstances prior to prison

Research interviewees were from a wide variety of housing circumstances prior to imprisonment. Some had been in permanent rented housing. Other participants had already been in the homeless system for example housed in temporary accommodation such as hostels or temporary furnished flats¹⁹. Others had been in even more insecure circumstances, staying short-term (frequently on an overcrowded basis) with friends or relatives, a practice known as “sofa surfing”. Sofa surfing is a term widely used to refer to people staying at friends or family and being part of the hidden homeless population. Such experiences are typical of those who have been in prison. Research conducted on housing experience in England has shown that 15% of men, 19% of women and 10 % of young people were not in permanent accommodation before entering custody²⁰.

Those who had experienced instability in housing prior to incarceration expressed the most fear and apprehension regarding their housing circumstances when released. This was compounded by many participants expressing concerns at the lack of support prior to release, although one participant did praise highly the housing support service received. This participant’s experience emphasised the importance of a personalised approach within (and outside) the prison giving advice to particular practical needs.

This was supported by evidence from stakeholder agencies, emphasizing that more was required in terms of preparing people for release. In particular for those serving longer term sentences (say, two or three years), it was felt that greater support was needed due to the level of institutionalisation experienced.



Expectations of Housing Provision Prior to Release

Housing on release was a key concern amongst interviewees and apprehension about where they would live upon release was frequently discussed. For those who had served longer sentences or for first time offenders there were heightened levels of concern. Institutionalisation and the lack of confidence this induced were cited as a key factors.

“I have been in and out of jail, a lot of people say that you are institutionalised you are this, you are that, sometimes I feel that way because I have found it hard”. (Interviewee)

“I was scared, even a few nights before I came out the prison I was scared”. (Interviewee)

Worryingly, some research interviewees had expressed very low expectations about the homeless system. One participant had expected to sleep rough on leaving prison despite prison leavers being a priority group under The Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003.

“I was quite stressed out because this was my second time , the first time just went to the same , just had to skipper for a week before I got into a tenancy”. (Interviewee)²¹

This was reinforced during discussions with stakeholders who stated that if the offer of accommodation on release was not deemed appropriate to the individual’s needs, they would seek alternative accommodation or sleep rough to avoid this.

“Some of them have refused to go to these places and will sofa surf if they can or sleep on the street rather than go into the most undesirable of places”. (Stakeholder)

Stakeholder discussions on the subject of expectations were mixed. It was felt that some individuals had extremely unrealistic expectations of housing provision, and of the homelessness process given the availability of accommodation and length of waiting lists in more desirable areas. Others highlighted that some people had very low expectations.

“Some of them don’t bother presenting to the homeless system as they think they aren’t going to get anything”. (Stakeholder)

Importance of housing

Safe, secure and stable accommodation upon release was a priority for both interviewees and stakeholders. This was seen as fundamental for rehabilitation, especially for reintegration into the community and a stable lifestyle.

For this process to be effective, accommodation had to be personalised and appropriate for the individual’s needs and circumstances. Failure to address this would hamper reintegration and rehabilitation as this stakeholder highlighted.

“The theory about reintegration is brilliant, but the crucial starting point is trying to establish secure accommodation for people who have been predominantly chaotic and unstable in terms of their previous lifestyle”. (Stakeholder)

Inappropriate access to housing had far reaching consequences in terms of supporting individuals, for example getting help with addictions, mental health support, obtaining benefits and maintaining support networks. This is supported by research conducted in England by NACRO (1999)²² into the relationship between accommodation and reoffending.

The relationship between housing and health was a key theme. Specific needs of offenders could affect which type of accommodation they required, for example those with a disability or illness. One participant described requiring specialized accommodation due to illness and having problems accessing this despite medical certification stating the specific requirements for accommodation. This had resulted in the need for advocacy support regarding this issue.

During stakeholder discussions the importance of ensuring people could access appropriate support for their health needs was emphasised.

“The single most important priority is suitable accommodation and suitable support to manage a tenancy. It’s absolutely crucial in terms of linking people into services if they don’t have accommodation prior to release then you have difficulty linking them to a GP , you have difficulty linking them into appropriate methadone programmes”. (Stakeholder)

¹⁹ a temporary furnished flat is a council or housing association flat which is furnished and let to one homeless household after another. Local authorities sometimes refer to these flats as “scatter flats” or “dispersed properties” as there should be a network of flats spread across a wide geographical area rather than a ghettoising concentration in a single area.

²⁰ Stewart, D. (2008) ‘The Problems and Needs of newly sentenced prisoners, results from a national survey’, London , Ministry of Justice.

²¹ Skipper is a slang term meaning to sleep rough.

²² NACRO (1999) ‘ Going Home Straight’



Service Provision Prior to release.

Various agencies across Scotland work in partnership with prisons to assist with prisoners' needs on release such as addiction support and housing support. Through-care services are delivered by a wide range of service providers including voluntary and statutory agencies that work inside and outside the prison.

Through-care provision is variable between prisons and between the local authority areas into which prisoners are released. It is important to recognise that the research did not seek to explore experiences of prison through-care directly. Research participants did discuss this, but their comments must be interpreted with caution.

Within the study, all interviewees were from a prison which contained a Community Link Centre as part of preparation for release. These centres provide prisoners with access to support services for example access to housing support services, mental health support services, addiction support and Jobcentre Plus to enable prisoners to start dealing with the issues they will face on release.

Prisoners will serve their sentence in different categories of prison depending on the sentence passed. Scotland's prisons are located across the country, although with the majority located in the central belt. As a result, prisoners may be incarcerated far away from where they live, in a different local authority area from where they lived prior to imprisonment.

Research participants were asked to describe the support they had received within the prison with regards to their housing needs on release. The responses indicated that individuals had wide ranging experiences of assistance and support within the prison. While, nearly all research participants referred to having had contact with housing staff within prisons, some had limited or no contact with housing staff.

Issues outlined by interviewees included being unable to get access to the appropriate staff from their local authority at the pre-release stage²³, receiving limited support and only given phone numbers to contact on release.

One participant described their experiences in the Community Link Centre in a negative way. They were advised they would not be able to contact their local Housing Office to arrange an appointment until immediately after release and would therefore have to address this on day of release. This resulted in them having to actively seek out support and self refer to agencies for through care assistance.

"See the wummin from housing , she says there was nothing I could do, I asked if I could put in an appointment on for the day I got out for the housing and she said I wouldn't be able to do that." (Interviewee)

Geographical issues were highlighted: one participant expressed being unable to access any support from the relevant local authority prior to release, precipitating stress and anxiety. Another research participant's experience was of the local authority attempting to contact them whilst in prison regarding their housing situation but being unable to do so, resulting in problems with their housing on release. One participant described through-care support that they had accessed in prison providing no assistance on release.

"I don't think they have contacted me once since I have been out that door". (Interviewee)

Those with support networks (especially family members) had used them to access advice on housing support. They reported a more positive experience, for example a family member being able to arrange a meeting with housing staff within the prison. Another participant emphasised how useful the housing service in prison had been.

"Staff were alright that helped me in the jail..... he was the one that helped me get all this house sorted out".(Interviewee)

²³ This is a crucial stage of a prisoner's sentence, normally four to six weeks before liberation, at which there is the opportunity to meet one-to-one with a range of staff in the Link Centre



In addition, many research participants emphasised the value of the support they had received from RooP Prison Life Coaches prior to release. Life Coaches aim to provide a holistic service dealing with barriers to resettlement including homelessness.

Discussion with stakeholders strongly indicated that more should be done to prepare prisoners for release. Some stated that although there had been great improvements within prison, more was needed to build upon prison policies such as the Integrated Case Management (ICM) system. ICM is a multi-agency approach that is focused on reducing re-offending²⁴. This connects prisoners with services which assist with them on release. Despite ICM, some stakeholders felt that information sharing remained patchy.

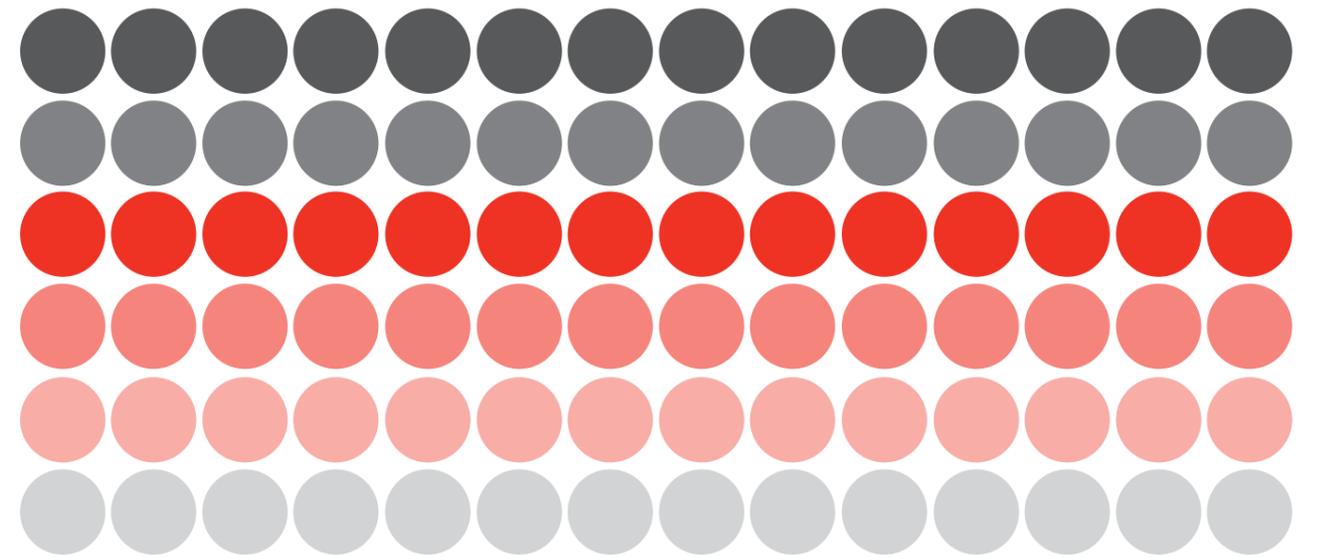
Examples were given of housing providers having people present as homeless with no prior notification they were being released to that local authority. Stakeholders emphasized the need for more and better partnership working and preparation with agencies prior to prisoners' release, although it was highlighted that in some situations there were issues with resources in service provision. The benefits of greater information sharing were emphasised as this stakeholder indicates:

"Agencies need to be sharing information, put everything in a core location and make prisons more open and receptive". (Stakeholder)

One stakeholder suggested that prison should look towards other systems of support (such as the protocols implemented in hospitals in the form of discharge assessments) for more effective support.

²⁴ Scottish Prison Service Website (<http://www.sps.gov.uk/default.aspx?documentid=b7e48be8-6594-4672-a4a9-3d3a27bf0470>)

SECTION 4: BEING RELEASED: THE TRANSITION TO REINTEGRATION





Summary

It is widely recognised that being released from prison is a critical time for individuals, in particular for those who have served longer term sentences. This section explores the experiences and the challenges and barriers faced by prisoners upon release.

- A myriad of factors affected former prisoners' experiences of housing including the location of accommodation and the suitability for their needs.
- Hostel accommodation was viewed as problematic by both interviewees and stakeholders.
- Significant financial difficulties were often experienced upon release such as delays in receiving benefits.
- Transition to a permanent tenancy was problematic and was a period requiring further support.

Experiences of housing provision

The first few weeks after being released from prison entail significant challenges for former prisoners. It is viewed by both them and stakeholders as a crucial time for gaining stability.

"If there's no support available for people they are going to come out the gate ... and go to the off sales and then they are likely to reoffend in the first week of liberation". (Stakeholder)

The findings indicate a range of factors that shaped individuals' experiences of housing. These included service variations across local authorities, availability of social housing, type and suitability of accommodation and treatment by service providers. Leaving prison represents a significant transitional stage that all almost all research interviewees found difficult and stressful.

Participants spoke openly about the impact on their mental health of entering, and in some cases re-entering, the homeless system. For some the uncertainty about what would happen to them on release was particularly hard to bear:

"I was coming out the prison and I didn't know where the hell they were going to put me, they could have put me on the moon do you know what I mean". (Interviewee)

After release, some participants initially stayed with family members but then had to leave due to overcrowding. Others presented to the homeless team in their local authority area and were allocated temporary accommodation (a place in a hostel or a temporary furnished flat). No one interviewed in the study had been given specialized supported accommodation. Research participants' experiences of temporary accommodation were a mixture of the positive and the negative. The location of accommodation was cited as a key determinant of its suitability. There was a strong preference for accommodation that allowed people to re-establish and maintain support networks such as family and friends. A considerable body of previous research has shown that the maintenance of support networks is a crucial factor in reducing re-offending²⁵.



Several participants emphasised that temporary accommodation was vital in maintaining relationships with their children. An example of good practice was indicated by a participant who described being able to have children stay with them in the accommodation which was important in rebuilding family relationships.

Other interviewees experienced barriers (such as transport costs and restrictions on visitors) to suitability of accommodation in maintaining social relationships and family ties. One participant spoke of the additional costs of travel they faced in travelling to visit their child to continue family relationships as their temporary accommodation was unsuitable for their child to visit. Other barriers included the restrictions imposed by territoriality in the west of Scotland and a reluctance to return to an area where they had previously offended or where they wished to avoid gang culture.

"I have problems in area X, I cannae stay in area X".(Interviewee)

Stakeholders supported the view that ensuring people were provided with accommodation in appropriate areas was crucial but acknowledged the limitations for service providers in being able to meet this need.

"These are huge issues not only for the client but also for the services supporting them as they may have accommodation but they can't allocate it to the client".(Stakeholder)

Reflecting this, stakeholders discussed the risk of destabilising individuals and hampering reintegration by putting them into areas where they had previously had problems. In particular, stakeholders stressed that for those with addictions, this could present challenges in maintaining abstinence.

Housing suitability was raised as a key concern by a number of interviewees. Options given to research participants were usually limited and in some cases inappropriate; in a number of cases, no alternative accommodation was offered. Several participants described the importance of advocacy when dealing with housing officers in ensuring that their rights were met. One participant described being told that there were no temporary flats available and so their only option was a hostel. This decision was reconsidered only when someone advocated on their behalf that hostel accommodation was fundamentally inappropriate.

Some participants felt they faced stigma and discrimination through having been in prison. One participant described an example of discrimination by housing staff and being told:

"Well if you have been in prison you can stay anywhere" (Interviewee)

Others, however, highlighted the importance of being treated well by staff and praised staff who had recognised them as individuals and who had been supportive of them.

"I used to ask for him all the time as I had built up a good relationship with him" (Interviewee)

Being informed of how their housing application is progressing is important for homeless people. There was great variation in how much information was provided to participants. Some highlighted being given clear and useful information on the waiting time they could expect before being moved into better accommodation (for example from a hostel to a temporary furnished flat).

However, this was not the case for all participants. One individual described their experience of having to present to a local housing office on a daily basis until temporary accommodation became available. Although not the case for all participants this was an example of unlawful practice. (Refusing interim accommodation (hostel, B & B hotel or furnished flat) to someone who presents as homeless and completes a homeless application is unlawful under section 29 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 as amended).

²⁵ Ministry of Justice and Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) 'Reducing reoffending supporting families, creating better futures', London, Ministry of Justice cited in Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile December 2010, [online] Available at: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/FactfileDec10small.pdf>



The availability of social housing varies across local authorities, depending on the overall stock of social housing, level of demand, turnover of tenants and management systems employed to manage of the housing stock. Stakeholders discussed the availability of social housing, acknowledging that demand clearly outstrips supply and that the shortage will worsen during the recession and through public spending cuts.

“They are demolishing housing without rebuilding, we have got to have something, cutbacks on public housing and public services mean workers are juggling and plate spinning” (Stakeholder)

“It’s about availability and it’s about social policy and unless issues are addressed at a government level these issues will increase” (Stakeholder)

One stakeholder stressed that the particular shortage of supported accommodation was challenging, given the need for help with independent living skills among people requiring this accommodation.

“There’s a real shortage of supported tenancies particularly for people with no skills managing money, cooking ...and it’s not always appropriate that they have an unsupported tenancy” (Stakeholder)

Treatment by service providers was crucial in shaping interviewees’ views of the housing system. The complexity of the housing system meant that many interviewees were unsure of their rights and were dependent on housing officers and housing support staff for knowledge and guidance. For vulnerable people this could cause problems:

“I often find the person has been informed but they have not necessarily understood what the information has been given to them, it’s not always checked they understand what they have been told” (Stakeholder)

For some who were repeat offenders, or had previously engaged with the homeless system, it was felt that service providers simply assumed that people were familiar with housing procedures and frameworks. Often, however, there is ignorance or misunderstanding.

Although no specific question on this was posed, no interviewees mentioned awareness of the legal obligations of housing services and housing providers. Some had limited knowledge of their rights and spoke of how advocacy workers, such as RooP Life Coaches, had helped ensure their rights were met.

“If they think they are dealing with somebody that knows what they are talking about, they treat you differently” (Interviewee)

“X did the talking for me and things moved from that whereas I have spoken to other people who were homeless who were getting told we can’t do anything for you” (Interviewee)

The importance of continuity, e.g. dealing with the same worker, was emphasized by interviewees and stakeholders.

“They get to know you and you get to trust them” (Interviewee)

Stakeholders discussed that when working with a group which is hard to reach and engage with and can be mistrustful (such as former prisoners) workers need to be honest and realistic about how much assistance can be provided. Keeping service users informed in the community can be challenging owing to literacy difficulties. In addition, a service user may not have a phone or may not have credit in their phone. Issues around data protection may also play a part on what information stakeholders are given on those they are working with.



Being released: Experiences of temporary accommodation and the transition to a tenancy

Participants were asked to describe their experiences of temporary accommodation and their journey through the homeless system. Several interviewees were at the stage of having an offer of a permanent tenancy, while others were still in temporary accommodation. As with temporary accommodation, there are issues with high demand for, and lack of availability of, permanent housing. Within the housing system, the offer of permanent accommodation is dependent on availability and demand within the local authority area.

The study reflected the variety of purposes served by temporary accommodation. For example, as accommodation during the initial period when assessment is being made; as a final outcome for households assessed as non priority or intentionally homeless; and as a holding solution to those who are owed a duty of permanent accommodation but are waiting for this to be made available²⁶

Stakeholders viewed the transitional period of temporary accommodation as a problematic stage for people who had experienced prison. Barriers and challenges were illustrated by both stakeholders and interview participants. Issues were far reaching and multi faceted, reflecting the often complex and multiple needs of people who have experienced prison and the challenges they face in reintegrating into the community (such as institutionalisation and substance misuse).

Experiences of different types of accommodation

The type of temporary accommodation provided should be based on an assessment of the homeless person’s needs. The options for temporary accommodation include a temporary furnished flat, house or bedsit; a hostel or homeless persons unit; or a bed and breakfast hotel or guesthouse²⁷. Accommodation is normally owned and managed by the local authority; but sometimes properties owned by housing associations or private landlords are used.

Interviewees had been in various forms of temporary accommodation such as hostels and temporary furnished flats. No one interviewed in the study had been given supported accommodation.

Service users’ experiences and views of hostel accommodation were predominantly negative. Stakeholders were divided on the benefits that hostel accommodation provided. While some stakeholders viewed it as safe and secure accommodation with support staff on hand, there was concern about an excessively regulated environment:

“They don’t like the hostel because there are rules there, there are curfews, they are just out of prison and maybe they feel like that it’s too much like that” (Stakeholder)

Research participants spoke of the similarities between prison and hostel accommodation in terms of the regulation and institutional similarities.

“I was very scared to come down the stairs as it was all cameras and all the rest of it and it just reminded me of prison, and doing their room checks and all that it just totally reminded me of prison” (Interviewee)

One participant spoke of ‘sofa-surfing’ rather than utilising hostel accommodation. Another spoke of their hostel accommodation being unsuitable for family members to visit. This limited the opportunity to interact with family and rebuild relationships with them.

²⁶ Shelter (2009) ‘Briefing , Raising the Standards of temporary accommodation’ [online] Available www.shelter.org.uk

²⁷ See appendix for diagram of housing process.



Some stakeholders argued that hostel accommodation was simply not suitable for most people who have experienced prison, in part because of the social problems of other hostel residents. One stakeholder stressed that people were actively targeted within hostels by drug dealers; and for interviewees, the use of alcohol and drugs within the hostel was a major issue.

“Loads of syringes outside the window”.
(Interviewee)

“I didn’t like it because there were always people coming and going looking for drugs and stuff like that”.(Interviewee)

In general, participants felt that temporary accommodation was of a habitable standard and that the public areas of hostel accommodation were kept clean. However one participant criticised shared cooking facilities as being unfit for purpose and unhygienic due to a lack of care by other hostel residents.

Participants who were placed in or moved into temporary furnished flats had more positive experiences. However one interviewee described problems of anti-social behaviour within this type of accommodation, which is sometimes referred to as scatter flats. They told of being accommodated in a block with a number of other homeless households and having difficulties with these households and with local people:

“They see people with scatterflats as party dens and on Friday and Saturday night they just boot your door in”. (Interviewee)

Across both hostel accommodation and scatter flats, there was consensus amongst stakeholders and interviewees around isolation and boredom:

“Clients tell you the boredom of being in these homeless accommodations doing nothing all day. Every day the temptation is too great”
(Stakeholder)

Some stakeholders discussed the isolation people experienced in homeless accommodation and the impact of this on mental health. Support throughout any stay in temporary accommodation was seen as vital this time period was viewed as crucial in maintaining motivation and mental health.

“Keeping the door open Let them know you are always there”. (Stakeholder)

“if they have mental health issues , they can disengage and become very disillusioned”.
(Stakeholder)

Both interviewees and stakeholders expressed concerns about institutionalisation.

“ the main challenges are that they are used to people doing things for them. It’s like people coming out the armed forces – it is challenging” .
(Stakeholder)

Institutionalisation was seen as a problem for those serving short term and long term sentences. For some, this resulted in loss of confidence and a negative impact on their mental health. One interviewee who had served multiple sentences discussed how this had affected their ability to reintegrate into community life.

“See to be honest it’s hard to reintegrate myself back into society especially when I have done crimes”.(Interviewee)

Stakeholders articulated the need for consistent and thorough support during temporary accommodation. This is viewed as a crucial stage in preventing reoffending. Reference was made to the phenomenon of “the revolving door”, a term describing the waste of a life entailed in recidivism and repeat homelessness. The high costs of reoffending were highlighted; the targeting of support to reduce reoffending would be good value for money in saving the high costs of imprisonment. The estimated cost of housing someone in prison is between £31,000 to £40,000²⁸.

In some local authority areas a very high standard of housing support services were provided in an intensive way to meet needs. This support would be extended if there was evidence of need by front line workers. This was considered to be best practice.



Being released: financial barriers

All participants were experiencing financial difficulties, such as fuel poverty, financial exclusion and other barriers related to living on a low income. Stakeholders acknowledged that financial difficulties could lead service users to disengage from services.

“a lot of accommodations have a rule that they don’t pass messages on and they don’t tell even tell the client that someone has phoned for them and because of their financial issues they don’t have phones , you can’t send a letter as they may not receive it”. (Stakeholder)

A further barrier was service users being unable to access services through not having enough money to attend meetings.

On release from prison, a discharge grant is issued. This grant is money to assist with living expenses for the first week after prison²⁹. This is intended to provide money until the receipt of welfare benefits. The transition from this grant to benefits is problematic. Interviewees spoke of waiting a number of weeks for payments to be received and how this delay led them into debt or forced them to depend on friends and family. Difficulties in obtaining identification were highlighted as worsening delays.

For those who were rough sleeping and for those who were part of the ‘hidden homeless population’ or sofa surfing, the extreme insecurity of their housing created further barriers when applying for benefits.

Both interviewees and stakeholders were concerned about the adequacy of the benefit system. Findings discussed the levels of benefits being unsuitable to access their needs and the impact this had on for example the mental health of individuals.

“People not coping, living a hand to mouth existence makes people depressed.” (Stakeholder)

“I know for some people 6 to 8 weeks is a quick turnaround but for these people they live hand to mouth it’s a lifetime”. (Stakeholder)

Identification issues were also highlighted in the various steps people have as they go through the homeless system and the impact this has on claiming welfare benefits such as delays in processing information as the person moves through the stages of the homeless system.

Stress and anxiety was a key feature of this period for interviewees. Having limited income was difficult for many in a period where there would often have

multiple appointments with a number of agencies. One interviewee described having to meet with multiple services on release and the challenge this presented on a limited income.

“I had to take money off my dad for bus fares”
(Interviewee)

Stakeholders also described the impact of this when trying to engage people in support services.

“Well if they have no money, if they have to use public transport to get to me although I can refund it they can’t get to me as they have no money to get to me if they are living on crisis loans and things like that”. (Stakeholder)³⁰

For those who were rough sleeping and for those who were part of the ‘hidden homeless population’ or sofa surfing, the extreme insecurity of their housing created further barriers when applying for benefits.

Due to the lack of income, many interviewees reported having to apply for Crisis Loans. These are repaid through deductions from benefits, which creates further pressures in managing a low income. One interviewee spoke of having almost ten per cent of their benefits deducted until the loan was paid off, leaving them really struggling. Indeed, the transition period from release grant to benefits often resulted in interviewees accruing substantial debts as a result of the administrative process on leaving prison. These are often added to previous debts, exacerbating financial pressures.

One participant recalled:

“£9 a week for five weeks to pay it off but because they haven’t got your benefits sorted out you have to get a Crisis Loan”. (Interviewee)

Another participant discussed having to survive on a series of multiple crisis loans: and the effects of this.

“ I had to get quite a few Crisis Loans particularly with being just out the jail... the council had dumped all my stuff and when I got out the prison, I got out basically with what I had”. (Interviewee)

Losing personal belongings when imprisoned causes major problems on release. Research conducted by Ross Howie Associates (2004) highlighted examples of individuals needing Community Care Grants to replace belongings disposed of during their time in prison.³¹

28 “Scottish Prison Service, written evidence to the Prison Commission, November 2007. The low estimate includes only annual operating expenditure on prisons (e.g. staff salaries and services like food and electricity). It excludes, for example, capital charges and the cost of transporting prisoners to court and between prisons” cited in Scottish Prisons Commission (2008) Scotland’s Choice Report of the Scottish Prison Commission , [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/230180/0062359.pdf> m[Accessed: 01/4/2011].

29 Citizen Advice (nd) Leaving Prison [online] Available at http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/index/p_leaving_prison.pdf

30 Service users would be reimbursed for transport at meetings but may require money upfront. .

31 Scottish Executive Social Research (2004) ‘The Provision of Housing Advice to Prisoners in Scotland: An Evaluation of the Projects funded by the Rough Sleepers Initiative’.



One interviewee described the humiliating process of applying for a Crisis Loan for food, electricity and gas and feminine hygiene products:

“he just wanted to make me feel small”.
(Interviewee)

Stakeholders saw the experience in similar terms:

“they have what they are released with , that doesn’t last too long and it can take at the minute six to eight weeks for benefits to come through... so there’s all the added humiliation of going for crisis loans and having to beg for money”.
(Stakeholder)

In addition, it was highlighted during discussions with stakeholders that individuals may often be coming out facing previous debts, thus compounding their financial exclusion.

Financial exclusion

Financial exclusion affected interviewees in a number of ways. These included being unable to afford, or to afford to use, mobile phones, problems obtaining basic bank accounts and lack of affordable credit.

As noted above, maintaining contact with services and families and friends was crucial for individuals on their release from prison. This however was not always possible due to financial exclusion.

Re-establishing and maintaining contact with family and friends was hampered by rarely having credit on mobile phones. Some participants acknowledged that a contract mobile phone was a far cheaper option but could not get this owing to a lack of identification and living in temporary accommodation. So the only way of keeping in touch was through ‘Pay as You Go’ mobile phones, a much more expensive tariff, and for which they often had no money to buy a top-up:

“Because no one would give me a contract phone”.
(Interviewee)

Lack of a bank account or difficulty in getting one due to identification issues presented problems. For example benefits are paid into a post office account or a bank account. Stakeholders noted the difficulties associated with providing bank accounts for their clients. One stakeholder highlighted the experience of multiple interactions with a bank in order to enable an individual to open a basic bank account.

“ they are just dismissed even when written on verified by A, B , C and D at a verified address , its no no we need a birth certificate and again depending on who the bank is and who they deal with at the bank or the post office the goals change all the time”. (Stakeholder)

One stakeholder highlighted Grand Central Savings³² as good practice in setting up basic bank accounts. The issue of financial exclusion has been widely researched. For example, studies by Pratt and Jones (2009)³³ and Bath and Edgar (2010)³⁴ discuss the serious implications of financial exclusion and the resulting barriers for those with criminal convictions.

Affordable credit was almost unavailable. While one interviewee described being able to access a loan through the credit union, others were restricted to borrowing money from family and friends.

Other methods of accessing money, was raised by one stakeholder who discussed the problems of loan sharks targeting vulnerable people such as those leaving prison. They argued that certain types of accommodation such as hostels were vulnerable to this.



Fuel and food poverty

A person is living in fuel poverty when they have to spend more than 10% of their income on heating. Participants had problems in heating their accommodation in an affordable way. Fuel poverty was a key issue, with many reporting spending more than 10% of their income on heating bills. Electricity and gas in temporary accommodation were paid for through pre-payment meters, with residents being given no alternatives. Pre-payment meters often have higher tariffs than any of the other options such as regular card payments, Direct Debits or quarterly payments.

In addition, several interviewees stayed in properties which relied on more expensive electric heating, such as storage heaters. Several participants were distressed and anxious:

“ I’ve got this electric heater that I have just got to switch on just to heat the place up and I have to put it on and its baltic in that flat. Its freezing and that electric heating is just chewing the money”.
(Interviewee)

Several participants talked of the methods they used to cope with this:

“I’m scared of using the heaters as its burns up nearly £3 a day and I have just not got it”.
(Interviewee)

“I am actually opening the box and turning everything off at the mains to make sure that nothing is getting done and making sure everything is turned off”.(Interviewee)

Stakeholders also highlighted the serious problems people faced with heating bills and the lengths they would go to in avoiding putting on their heating:

“One guy at the moment has no electricity , no food has to go and sit in the library or a bookies to try and keep warm or sits in the house with loads of clothes on”. (Interviewee)

Participants discussed problems in affording other essentials, especially food. This was a problem particularly before the first benefit payment was received. One participant spoke of being offered a food parcel by a service provider but feeling embarrassed that they needed it.

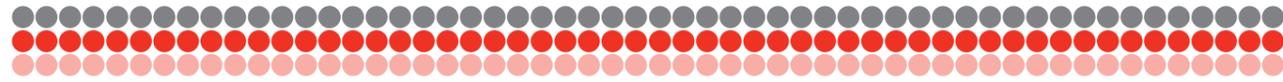
Poor facilities adversely affected the type of food bought. Some who were in temporary accommodation with limited cooking facilities became dependent on purchasing takeaways. Several participants (including one who had been sleeping rough) discussed having to get food from family. One participant had to use a Community Care Grant not to buy furniture but to buy food in an emergency:

“and I have barely got enough to feed myself if I need to eat something but I am waiting for this community care grant my saviour kind of thing other than that is impossible”. (Interviewee)

32 For further information on this project see <http://www.grandcentralsavings.org.uk/>

33 Revolving Doors Agency (2004) Hand to Mouth The impact of poverty and financial exclusion on adults with multiple needs , [online] Available at: <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/documents/hand-to-mouth/>[Accessed: 28/3/2011].

34 Bath, C. Edgar K(2011) Time is Money Financial Responsibility after Prison , [online] Available at: <http://www.unlock.org.uk/userfiles/file/financialinclusion/timeismoney.pdf> [Accessed: 28/3/2011].



Moving on to a permanent tenancy: support to settle in

After a period in temporary accommodation, individuals will be offered permanent housing. This offer will depend on a number of factors including the areas chosen by the applicant, the availability of housing in each area and any special circumstances or needs disclosed by the applicant. The time taken to be offered permanent accommodation varies. One participant had been on the waiting list for housing for several years prior to prison. Timescales within the sample for this study (each of whom had been assessed as homeless and in priority need) ranged from six weeks to several months. Some interviewees had already received offers of permanent accommodation; others were still waiting. One interviewee had signed up for a permanent tenancy prior to their last sentence and described the help and assistance they received in getting furniture.

For those interviewees who were current recipients of a permanent tenancy this brought different challenges such as how appropriate the accommodation was for their needs.

The tenancy options given to participants had been broadly appropriate to their needs and requirements but this was not always so. One participant described being offered accommodation not appropriate for their medical condition, but of feeling unable to refuse this as they would then be classified as intentionally homeless. Interviewees spoke about having to be flexible in making decisions. One participant was offered a flat in an area which they had not requested. However, on moving into the accommodation, found that it was well located for transport, for visiting family and for engaging with support services.

On moving in, the main barrier to making a house into a home was the cost of furniture. Experiences varied across the sample. One participant discussed applying for a Community Care Grant (CCG). This grant is provided to assist with a community care needs and can be issued in a wide range of circumstances.³⁵ This participant had spent the Community Care Grant on what they deemed as priority purchases of a cooker and washing machine, leaving no money for any other items. This left the participant dependent on a tenancy housing support worker for basic furniture such as beds and on family support for carpets. Another participant discussed moving into property which was partially furnished and acknowledged how helpful this had been at the start of the tenancy.

One stakeholder spoke in detail about the transition to permanent accommodation, emphasising the need for practical support with furniture and support with independent living skills in order that someone maintains their tenancy.

“When they move into their own tenancy that’s when the problems start, no furniture, have to apply for grants”. (Stakeholder)

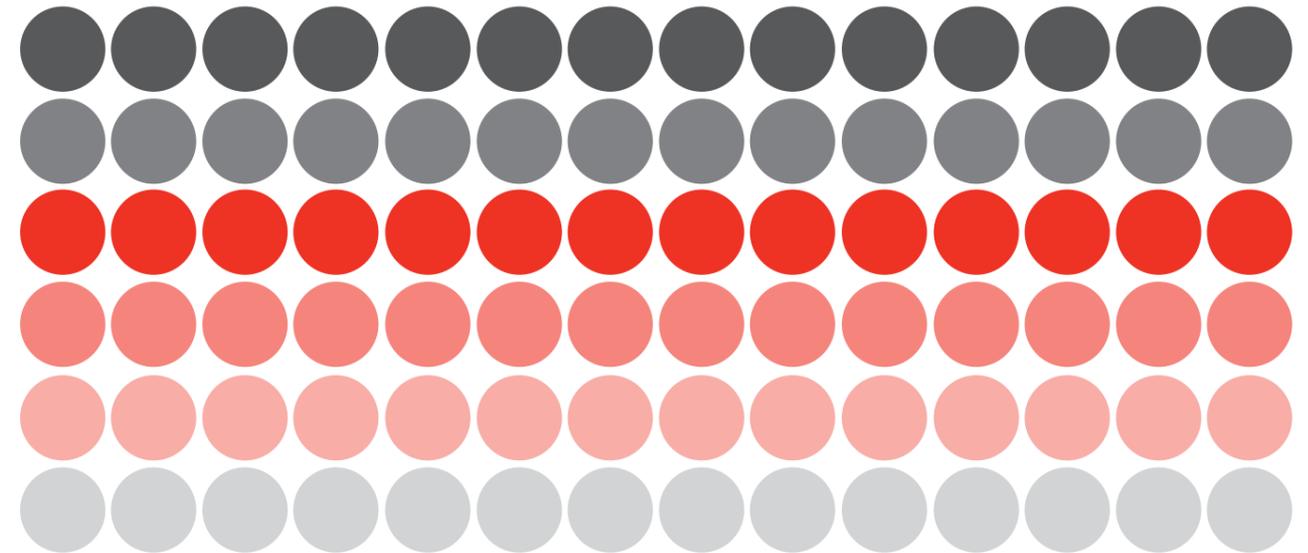
Stakeholders emphasised the cost of failing to support people adequately, and highlighted an example of a person being provided with short term support when long term support was required, with the tenancy failing as a result. The challenges of coping with bills and isolation were also highlighted

“get support in short term but don’t get bills for three to four months , tenancy support not there when bills come in”. (Stakeholder)

“ its an isolating experience where they are on their own and they don’t want to associate with the wrong crowd”. (Stakeholder)

Stakeholders also stressed that territorial issues were vital and that permanent housing would fail if it was in an area where a service user would feel unsafe.

SECTION 5: DISCUSSION: IMPROVING POLICY AND PRACTICE



³⁵ Department of Work and Pensions (2010) Community Care Grants , [online] Available at: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/specialist-guides/technical-guidance/sb16-a-guide-to-the-social/community-care-grants/#howmuch> [Accessed: 12/3/2011].



Summary

This section looks at ways of improving the homeless service for ex-prisoners.

- Personalisation of service support was seen as crucial in temporary accommodation and in the transition to permanent tenancy.
- Funding provision for support services was also highlighted as a key concern.

Improving service provision

The research asked interviewees and stakeholders about improving policy and practice. In some cases interviewees found it difficult to articulate what they would change, perhaps because they are unaccustomed to being asked questions like this. Interviewees did speak of the need to end stigma and discrimination, furnish permanent tenancies, improve housing availability and provide effective advocacy and support.

Several participants reported feeling stigmatised for having been in prison and felt that attitudes towards ex-prisoners were in need of considerable improvement.

“ I think sometimes people, they see a drug addict, they see alcoholics , they see mental health and they are always quick to label them, and I think that’s wrong”. (Interviewee)

As discussed in the previous section, participants described the benefits of starting a permanent tenancy with some furniture. Some interviewees spoke of previous experiences where they had been provided with starter packs of basic household goods or had been permitted to take bedding from temporary accommodation scatter flats to their permanent flats. One interviewee discussed people in their area being furnished with white goods on moving into a permanent tenancy.

Other core themes emerged around demand for housing and the options offered to people and the time waiting to be offered a permanent tenancy. It was acknowledged that there was shortage of housing in many areas and that this also affected the general population. They realised that this shortage went some way towards explaining the limited options offered and the delay in offers of permanent housing. One participant highlighted the issue of older ex-prisoners.

“Older ones have got more needs, they have got a lot more needs they have lived their lives, they’ve got familiesAnd they will want to get settled into life a lot quicker”. (Interviewee)

There is a clear connection between the need for social housing options for ex-offenders and housing needs for the general population. It is therefore important to locate the problems that ex-offenders may experience in this broader context. This is particularly important for those who are advocating on behalf of ex-offenders.

Interviewees were clear on the need for advocacy services to help them deal with the homeless process and for support services on release to allow rehabilitation. The period immediately after release was seen as a particularly testing time.

Stakeholders discussed in depth where service provision could be improved, this focused on issues wider than housing provision, but was viewed as interlinked. Discussion covered both pre and post release of prisoners into the community setting. During a sentence a prisoner must be given thorough preparation for release, including help with literacy and numeracy, as well as training in independent living skills such as budgeting and coping with daily life. A smoother transition to benefits on leaving prison was seen as crucial in avoiding destitution and debt.



Improvements to the housing service focused on increasing the availability of housing. Housing staff were seen as under great pressure. Demand for social housing was seen as high and increasing across local authority areas. Stakeholders agreed with interviewees on the importance of sensitive housing allocation, with a variety of accommodation types and areas being on offer. It was argued that offering applicants housing in their preferred area would reduce the number of failed tenancies, with a discussion of the cost savings involved in this. Failed tenancies represent significant costs to local authorities through having to re-house households elsewhere and in properties remaining empty for short times, as well as any costs of removing and storing belongings and other housing support. Again, it is important for those advocating on behalf of ex-offenders and their housing needs articulate their demands in the context of current concerns with preventative spending and early intervention.

Stakeholders were quite clear that housing support was equally important when someone is in temporary accommodation (prior to being in permanent housing) especially when applicants wait a long time for permanent housing. Greater provision of supported accommodation was seen as crucial for those facing complex and multiple issues. There was also a concern with the “hidden homeless” and the wide-ranging barriers this (often ignored) group faced.

People leaving prison with complex needs such as dual addictions (drug and alcohol misuse) pose particular challenges for support agencies but it was felt that significant improvements had been made in terms of multi-agency working. However one stakeholder argued that some support agencies would not work with people who were actively misusing substances³⁶. Another stakeholder agreed on the importance of an open door policy to those who were dual addicted.

It is clear from the evidence that has been gathered that the better integration of the many services that ex-offenders rely on is an important issue. In particular improving information sharing across services was recognised as an important but essential step that service providers must look to address.

Stakeholders were keen that agencies learn from best practice. One stressed the benefits of greater service user involvement and participation: often those experiencing poor service are well-placed to suggest the changes needed. A stakeholder also argued that hospital discharge protocols, which link ex-patients seamlessly into community services, could provide a useful model.

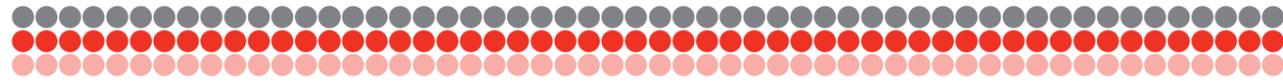
It was also acknowledged that ensuring those released from prison avoided poverty and poor housing would help reduce reoffending. But, additionally, more money was needed for offence-focused work to challenge deep-seated behaviour, both in prison and in the community.

Future challenges

Future challenges identified during the research included funding pressures, the changing welfare state and harsh public attitudes to people leaving prison.

Funding pressures were a key concern. Increasing use of short term funding for service providers made long term planning very difficult. It was anticipated that funding cuts in services would have an impact on the support people released from prison would receive. Several commented that these cuts could lead to an increase in reoffending rates and rehabilitating both short term and long term offenders as ex-prisoners become more vulnerable and isolated with less support being available for rehabilitation. The cost implications of failing to reduce reoffending were highlighted as a key reason for support projects to receive continuation of funding.

³⁶ Although this was not discussed this was because of the risk assessment procedures for example organisations prohibited staff to actively work with those currently known to be using substances.



As one stakeholder stated

“They are storing trouble; they are storing a much larger issue for future years because these people aren’t going to go anywhere, they are not going to disappear this problem is not going to go away”. (Stakeholder)

Changes to the current benefits system were a key issue. The forthcoming tightening of rules on Housing Benefit were seen as a particularly problematic area. In terms of pressures on housing provision, the changes within the welfare system to housing benefit would also place increased pressure on housing in relation to housing availability and stock. Concerns were raised that it was difficult to anticipate the full impact of the changes proposed and how it would impact on an already stretched housing system.

There were concerns raised on the wider changes to the welfare system, particularly to Employment Support Allowance (ESA). Stakeholders discussed the assessment process for benefits such as employment and support allowance and discussed the additional workload that resulted in for service providers as a result of many applications requiring appeals and provided example of this.

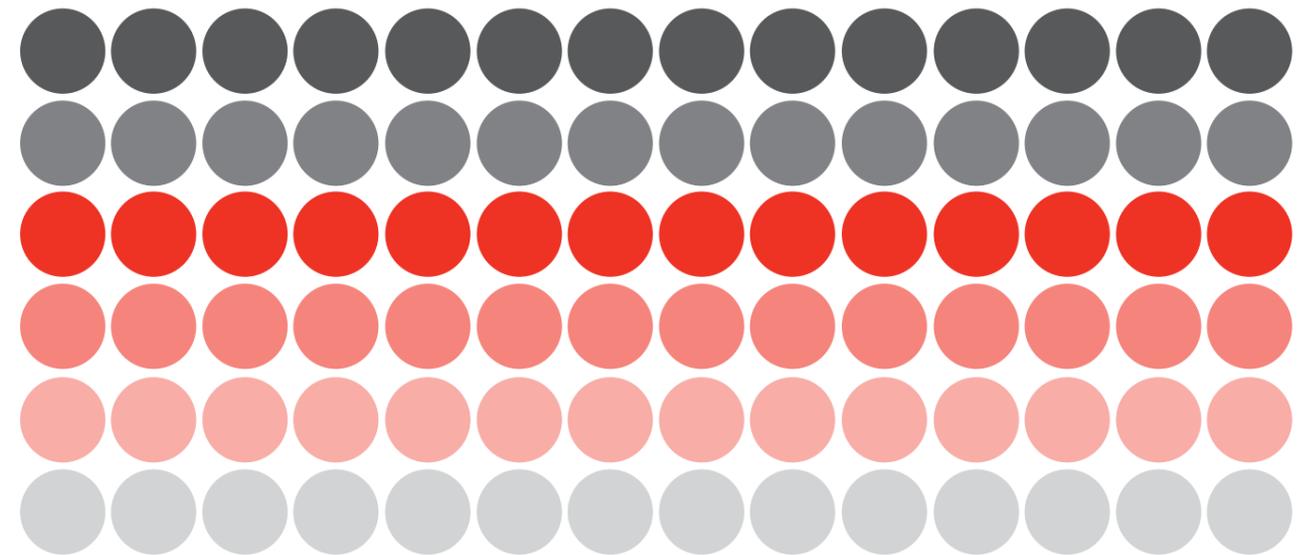
“Benefits are under review...these reviews can take months, people cannot afford that”. (Stakeholder)

Regarding policy targeting offenders it was felt that public attitudes and perceptions were key drivers of policy and work was required to educate the public on the complexity of factors which lead to offending.

“I think the biggest challenge for services that work with offenders is to have more balls in terms of educating the public about offenders there are a lot of myths about and not all offenders are posing a risk to you and me”. (Stakeholder)

Employability was also discussed reintegrating people into employment is extremely challenging in the current economic climate with high unemployment levels (and extremely high levels of youth unemployment).It was argued that services should be targeted around re-skilling people to assist the transition to employment.

SECTION 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS





The research report provides a snapshot of the issues being faced by a group of people who have experienced prison and been homeless on release. It outlines multiple and complex barriers to resettlement faced by a vulnerable group.

Homelessness was a crucial barrier facing many people upon release and experiences of temporary accommodation illustrated a myriad of issues including unsuitable accommodation, lack of support services and the difficulties for agencies in engaging over the longer term with those in temporary accommodation. Homeless ex-prisoners in temporary accommodation unquestionably form a vulnerable group, characterized by multiple support needs related to the effects of institutionalisation, drug or alcohol misuse and mental health problems.

Dealing with this requires co-coordinated approaches of personalized support and advocacy within the housing and criminal justice systems. Stakeholders spoke extensively of the cost implication of reoffending and the impact on society if people are not supported to reintegrate into community life. Interviewees reinforced the importance of personalised support and advocacy within the housing system.

The big issue remains how to deliver a better service when public finances are constrained and grant funding limited. On the other hand, there are costs involved in poor housing and support services. Stakeholders spoke extensively of the high costs of reoffending and the wider impact on society if ex-prisoners who are homeless fail to reintegrate into community life.

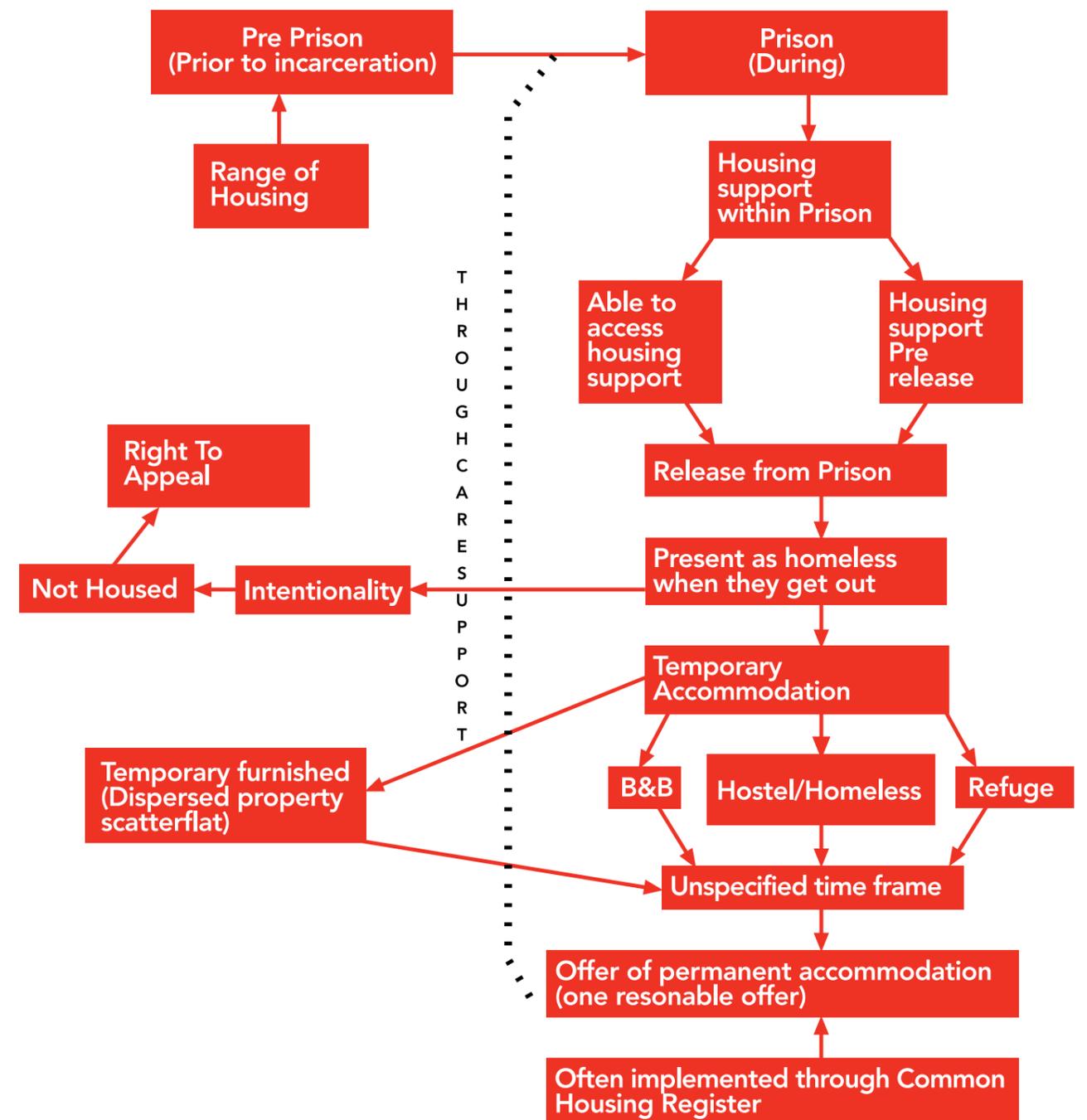
On the basis of these findings, the researchers make some policy recommendations for those working in the field of providing housing support to ex offenders. The aim is encourage debate about the issues affecting people who have experienced prison and how they can be tackled in order to reduce social exclusion and to help support the work of reintegration of people who have experienced prison.

The following policy recommendations are made based on the research evidence:

- There is a need for more advocacy services for ex offenders during the transition from prison to community. To ensure that they engage with agencies and receive a good service.
- The use of hostel accommodation for ex-offenders should be phased out in favour of alternative temporary accommodation such as temporary furnished flats. Hostel accommodation is often very unsuitable for individuals leaving prison, especially for those with drug and alcohol problems.
- More supported accommodation is required for those with multiple and complex needs.
- Where possible, claims for welfare benefits should be initiated in prison so the benefits are available upon release.
- Support should be provided for a longer period to facilitate the transition to permanent housing, with support reduced on a planned basis to avoid dependency.
- Support services and practice should be standardized across local authorities, with best practice being adopted.
- Support must be individualized and person-centered, ensuring that specific needs are recognized. Social housing provision needs to be increased across local authorities.
- More work is required to raise public awareness of the issues faced by people who have experienced prison.
- Further research is needed to explore the housing advice and guidance within prisons.
- Further research is needed to explore the housing experiences of former prisoners on release and the impact of this on accessing other service provision and on promoting or hampering rehabilitation.



Appendix 1: The Housing Process



Please Note: This diagram is for illustration purposes only



OUT OF JAIL, BUT STILL NOT FREE

Experiences of temporary accommodation on leaving prison

This report is based on the views and experiences of ex-offenders living in Central Scotland who took part in a participatory research project throughout 2010. Issues around housing were identified as central to the challenges that many offenders experience when they leave prison. The report highlights the many barriers ex-offenders face when trying to negotiate their way through a complex and at times confusing system.

This report has been produced as part of the Big Lottery funded Evidence Participation, Change (EPIC) project which aims to put participation at the heart of anti-poverty policy making in Scotland. It brings together people with experience of poverty, community and voluntary organisations and policy makers to discuss and find better solutions to the problems our society faces. For more information about EPIC visit:

www.povertyalliance.org/projects

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