

## Evaluation of the Community Reintegration Project

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The Community Reintegration Project (CRP) formed part of the Scottish Government's wider Reducing Reoffending Programme and focused on addressing the needs of offenders serving prison sentences between six months and less than four years. Launched in March 2012, the project focused on male offenders with home addresses in Dundee in HMP Perth; and on female offenders from Dundee or Lanarkshire (North and South) in HMP Cornton Vale, Edinburgh or Greenock.

### Main Findings

- There was general support for more work to be done to address reoffending amongst short-term offenders, with a structured process and the development of stronger links to community services.
- All four prison sites operated a process that was consistent with the broad CRP model – in that it involved structured engagement with offenders through five broad stages, referral to CJSW and relevant services – but there was considerable variation in how activities were delivered.
- The number of offenders eligible for – and participating in – the project was relatively small in all prisons except HMP Perth, raising questions about whether the pilot reached 'critical mass'.
- Meaningful engagement with the CRP (participation in a Comprehensive Screening) appears to have happened in around half of all eligible admissions, but there was a high degree of attrition beyond this with many scheduled meetings not taking place.
- Practitioners were generally supportive of the principle of the CRP but were concerned about particular aspects of the process, such as the paperwork and training. There was also evidence that systems for monitoring progress were not always effective.
- There is some evidence that the CRP facilitated progress towards short and medium-term outcomes for organisations and staff, though there remains scope for further improvement in joint working and in the engagement and motivation of eligible offenders. At this stage there is limited evidence about the impacts of the CRP on individual offenders, though some qualitative accounts indicate the *potential* to achieve the intended long-term outcomes.
- Key contextual factors shaping implementation and impact included the 'crowded landscape' of overlapping (and potentially competing) services; broad cultural and strategic shifts within the Scottish Prison Service (SPS); and the physical and organisational contexts within specific sites.
- The CRP process could be optimised through greater clarity about inter-agency roles and communication channels; a distinctive 'brand' identity for the project; and creative responses to the constraints of individual sites.
- There is evidence that the CRP's theory of change remains broadly plausible, but throughput needs to be increased and attrition reduced for it to achieve impact on a significant scale.
- The gains would be magnified if the project were to form the basis of a system-wide, coherent and consistent approach to voluntary throughcare and related support services, an approach which would require an explicit engagement with the broader preventative spend agenda.

## Introduction

The Community Reintegration Project (CRP) aimed to increase the provision and take-up of throughcare services for offenders serving short prison sentences in Scotland. It involved the piloting of a single business process for the effective and tailored needs screening of offenders, the provision of appropriate services and support whilst in prison, referral to the relevant criminal justice social work (CJSW) team, and continuing support on transition to the community.

The project focused on: male offenders with home addresses in Dundee serving short-term sentences (six months to less than four years) in HMP Perth; and on female offenders with home addresses in Dundee or Lanarkshire (North and South) serving short-term sentences in HMP Cornton Vale, Edinburgh or Greenock. The CRP was launched in March 2012 for an initial 12 month pilot period and then extended for a further 12 months.

The main aims of the evaluation were: first, to examine how the CRP process was working in practice; second, to explore the evidence that the project achieved its short and medium-term outcomes; and third, to consider lessons for any future roll-out of the scheme or other expansion of throughcare for offenders serving short sentences.

## Implementation and operation

All four prison sites operated a process that was recognisably part of the CRP, in that it involved structured engagement with eligible offenders through five broad stages: referral to CJSW, referrals to services, and an element of coordinated pre- and post-release support. But there was significant variation in how each establishment organised itself to deliver these activities and, to a lesser extent, in the character of the activities themselves. There were also some modifications to the process during the period in which the CRP was running, both locally and at the level of the project as a whole.

The total number of offenders eligible for and actually participating in the CRP was relatively small in all prisons except HMP Perth, raising questions about the scope to generalise from a pilot phase in which did not necessarily achieve 'critical mass'.

A sharp increase in the number of eligible offenders after March 2013 suggests that not all those eligible were initially identified; and the picture of throughput and attrition is rendered uncertain by incomplete monitoring data.

What might be considered the minimal level of meaningful engagement with the CRP – participation

in a Comprehensive Screening (Stage 3) – appears to have happened in relation to around half of eligible admissions. The monitoring data suggest a high degree of attrition beyond this, with many of the meetings due to take place not actually doing so. While there is evidence that offenders were being referred to other services, it is not clear from the monitoring data whether such referrals would have been generated in other ways in the absence of the project or whether offenders are continuing to interact with CJSW staff in the community.

## Practitioner experiences and views of the CRP process

There was general support for a structured approach to needs assessment and for mechanisms for connecting offenders more effectively to external services; but there were also concerns about particular aspects of the CRP as implemented.

The Comprehensive Screen (at Stage 3) was generally felt to be useful, but there was consensus that it should not take place too early and a view that new needs were perhaps more likely to be identified during Standard Reviews (at Stage 4), once a degree of trust had built up between offenders and their Personal Officer (PO).

Lack of offender motivation was seen as the key factor in explaining why scheduled meetings did not go ahead, but there was also variation in the extent to which different prisons prioritised or monitored progress on undertaking the various stages of the process.

There was considerable dissatisfaction among prison staff with the CRP forms and information recording requirements, which were seen as involving too many 'tick boxes' and as being insufficiently integrated with other SPS systems.

Prison staff generally felt that CRP training and support had been inadequate. Despite sessions held in participating establishments, some staff indicated they had received no training, while others felt the training they had received had lacked detail about the process or rationale for the project.

## Evidence of organisational and staff outcomes

There was clear support among practitioners for the principle of joint working; although this was sometimes tempered by a concern to avoid duplication and clearly demonstrate added value.

The nature of the links between prisons and CJSW influenced the way in which the CRP was delivered,

with some evidence that an ‘embedded’ rather than ‘arms-length’ model offered potential advantages in terms of familiarity between SPS and CJSW staff, ease of information sharing and the profile of CJSW within prisons. But the embedded model, in itself, did not ensure working links between frontline staff on a case-specific basis.

On the ground, communication and coordination with external agencies also appeared to be limited. Some POs reported direct dealings with external agencies, but most had what could be described as a ‘hands off’ approach once a referral was made.

There was evidence of good links and regular communication between CJSW and other external agencies. However, there was also a view that more needed to be done at a strategic and frontline level to ensure effective coordination of services.

There was also a clear view that the CRP’s structured process helped to identify needs more systematically. In particular, it was felt that the system might otherwise rely on proactive members of staff and risked overlooking the needs of less demanding, more reserved offenders.

Overall the evaluation suggests the CRP is facilitating progress towards the expected short and medium-term outcomes for organisations and staff, but that the practice of joint working could be further enhanced and that more effective motivation and engagement of offenders would improve needs assessment further and increase interaction relating to reintegration.

## Evidence of offender outcomes

In general, the CRP process appears to support POs in their interaction with individual offenders and their role of promoting engagement with relevant services. But some prison staff were not clear about the importance of actively promoting the CRP to offenders or felt poorly equipped to do so. As a result, the *quality* of staff-offender interaction around the project varied, with the result that some offenders – when presenting to CJSW – showed little awareness of the reason for their referral or motivation to engage.

Many of the offenders interviewed appeared to have a good awareness of their own needs. Although it is not possible to show that the associated referrals were a direct result of the CRP and would not have happened anyway, there were accounts from offenders of how interactions around the CRP had helped them to understand or address their needs. There were also aspects of the CRP process (in particular the regular reviews) which appeared to support the development of trust between offenders and practitioners.

The opportunity to address pressing needs (such as housing) was a key driver of offender motivation to engage. Staff were also conscious of the impact of being unable to meet offender expectations because of external resource constraints.

Involvement in the CRP did lead to increased engagement with reintegration planning, in that offenders attended reviews and pre-release meetings during the course of their sentence that would not otherwise have happened. However, the rates of initial involvement and subsequent attrition suggest that there is scope to increase this level of engagement further. It is less clear whether the CRP led to increased post-release engagement with services, although both offenders and staff felt that contact pre-release made such continuing engagement more likely. The challenges of sustaining engagement beyond the prison gate appear to be greatest in relation to male offenders.

Across all the offender outcomes – whether short, medium or long-term – the evidence is limited and does not allow for causal attribution. However, the indication of positive impacts is in line with existing evidence on addressing recidivism.

## Key contextual factors

Three broad contextual factors shaped the implementation, outcomes and operation of the CRP. The most significant is the challenge of carving out a distinctive role and identity for the project within a ‘crowded landscape’ of overlapping and sometimes competing service provision. This makes it difficult to explain to SPS staff and other practitioners, and – even more importantly – to offenders, for whom word of mouth is a critical means of learning of and making decisions about service use.

A key enabling factor is the general direction of travel within SPS, with a renewed emphasis on constructive work with offenders, recognition of the need for partnership working ‘beyond the prison gate’ and a restatement of the importance of the PO role.

A further set of important contextual factors relate to the character of the local prison environment – in particular, the diverse nature of the built environment and inevitable flux associated with offender movement, and staff changes and working patterns. These posed significant challenges in terms of maintaining relationships and awareness and understanding of the project.

## Lessons, implications and conclusions

A pilot of this kind will always struggle to generate the critical mass necessary to establish familiarity and understanding among both staff and offenders, and effective working relationships with external partners.

Training needs to be more compelling and comprehensive than has been the case to date, particularly for staff in prisons, providing not only detail of the process but also the underlying objectives of the project and roles of key stakeholders within it. And it needs to be ongoing, so that knowledge and awareness are not disrupted by staff turnover or absence.

While much of the attrition across the various stages of the CRP process is a result of offender disengagement, there are also shortcomings in monitoring meetings and referrals. More effective mechanisms – and clearer responsibilities – would help maximise engagement at each stage.

The paperwork associated with the project needs to be streamlined and integrated with existing systems, so that it is not seen as burdensome by staff. At the same time, there should be greater scope to include narrative information that will help POs and others to work effectively with individual prisoners.

Inter-agency relationships are often under-developed and over-reliant on personal links between individual staff. This should be addressed through the development of clearer roles and responsibilities, increased attendance at cross-agency meetings, and improved communication channels.

Wider considerations include whether CJSW should deliver services directly or focus on signposting and coordinating; whether throughcare for short-term

offenders should operate on an opt-in or opt-out basis; and whether there is scope for greater integration with other aspects of the custodial system.

In terms of key contextual factors, there is a need to bring greater coherence to the service landscape in this area and to build a distinctive 'brand' identity for voluntary throughcare. Recent strategic and cultural shifts within SPS mean the organisational context is potentially conducive to such a development. However, a genuinely multi-agency approach will require creative responses to the physical and administrative constraints of the prison environment.

Overall, the evaluation concluded that a structured and staged approach to offender engagement, coupled with the strengthening of links between SPS, CJSW and external agencies has the potential to improve pre-release planning and achieve a higher level of contact with community services. In that sense, the CRP's underlying theory of change remains broadly plausible and intact. However, for it to achieve impact on any significant scale, throughput would need to be increased and attrition reduced; and adequately resourced, evidence-based services would need to be available within the community.

The evaluation found strong support for the principle of enhancing provision of and access to throughcare, and scope to optimise the contribution of CRP by addressing some of the issues identified above. However, the gains would perhaps be greater still if the lessons were to inform the development of a system-wide, coherent and consistent approach to voluntary throughcare and related support services. Such an approach would have significant resource implications, especially for community services. This issue needs to be seen, then, as not belonging simply to SPS or CJSW but as being integral to the wider preventative spend agenda and debate around public service reform.

This document, along with full research report of the project, and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>. If you have any further queries about social research, please contact us at [socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk) or on 0131-244 2111.