

PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND PLACES

Housing and Reoffending: Supporting people who serve short-term sentences to secure and sustain stable accommodation on liberation

1. Introduction

The Ministerial Group on Offender Reintegration (MGOR) was established in October 2013 to facilitate better co-ordination between the justice system and non-justice services, and to focus attention on the role these services have in aiding the reintegration into communities of people leaving custody. Housing was a theme for the group who recognised that many professionals working in housing and criminal justice believed there to be links between finding and keeping stable accommodation and reducing reoffending among people who served short-term prison sentences in Scotland. It recommended that the Scottish Government commission research into the housing experiences of people who serve short sentences (less than four years) in Scotland.

The research was undertaken in 2015, and focused on the problems that people who serve short sentences in Scotland have finding and keeping stable housing and the services that can help improve housing outcomes. The findings describe a complex cycle of housing problems faced by people serving short sentences, their interlinked causes and impacts and the difficulties these problems pose in desistance from offending.

This is a 13 page analytical summary of the findings the full report can be found [here](#).

Main Findings

Housing problems can contribute to difficulties in desistance from offending in people who serve short sentences in Scotland

People who serve short sentences in Scotland can have housing problems before they go to prison and housing problems can be caused by serving a short sentence in prison

This sets up a complex cycle of offending, custody, housing problems and difficulties in desistance

Multiple and wide ranging services (with a housing element) are being delivered to people who serve short sentences in Scotland.

They are delivered both in prison and after release by public and third sector organisations, and by services specialising in housing and services specialising in desistance (reintegration services).

The services provided are not comprehensive (different coverage in prisons and depending on home local authority) and were found to be inconsistent in the level of service they provide or the approaches they use

The key housing problems found were the loss of housing whilst in custody, loss of possessions, difficulties with some forms of temporary housing on release, securing and keeping housing on release and living in poor quality housing

The impacts of housing problems can include: mental and physical health difficulties; poor overall wellbeing; insecurity or not feeling safe and difficulties accessing employment, all of which can have a negative impact on desistance behaviour

These housing problems can be caused and exacerbated by a range of factors including: day to day practical difficulties in delivering housing services to this group including information sharing; individual's inability to recognise they have a housing problem and gaps in services to identify individuals' problems; the size and complexity of the service needs; factors that are out-with scope of the Scottish Government, local government and the Scottish Prison Service (SPS)(for example welfare policy and sentencing practice).

Suggestions for potential next steps include: action to improve comprehensiveness of housing services and consistency in approach, increased information sharing between services, delivery of training to staff on the Housing Options approach and suggestions for engaging with other policy areas and the UK government to address issues such as benefits eligibility.

2. Study background and aims

Background

As evidenced by the establishment and work of the Ministerial Group on Offender Reintegration (MGOR) the Scottish Government places a high priority on reducing reoffending.

The MGOR recognised that the process by which individuals stop offending (desistance), is a complex and individual process, it can take a number of years and may require a lot of support. Further that community support structures help promote desistance, that stable housing plays a critical role and the loss of housing can make it less likely that people will stop offending (see for example McNeill et al, 2012, Ministry of Justice, 2013 Rough Sleepers Unit 2002 and Loucks, 2007 cited in the [full report](#)).

As such the MGOR recommended that we commission research on the issue of housing and reoffending driven by the central theme that finding and keeping good quality accommodation can help reintegration of offenders and desistance.

Aims

This research aimed to provide evidence and understanding to inform the development of policy and practice for supporting people who serve short sentences in Scotland. This was undertaken by exploring (i) the issues and barriers that people who serve short sentences in Scotland experience finding and keeping stable accommodation; (ii) services that could deliver support, advice and other help; (iii) gaps in services and (iv) potential next steps for the Scottish Government, Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and other stakeholders to consider to support improvements in housing outcomes for those serving a short sentence.

3. The research

The research sought to find these things out using four methods. (i) An analysis of literature; (ii) Interviews with people who were serving, and who had served, short sentences, and providers of services to this group; (iii) Collection of snapshot data of numbers of people serving short sentences from each local authority area and (iv) Collection of information on the services that were being delivered to this group in Scotland at the time of the research.

4. Previous research and the context

Earlier research has found that people going into custody can already have housing problems, and that serving a sentence can create further housing problems.

Pre-existing housing problems can range from living in poor quality housing, having rent or mortgage arrears and impending court action (for example, on arrears), to having a 'volatile' housing history including homelessness and living in hostels.

Problems that can come about because of a sentence center on the loss of housing, leading to a need to find housing on release. Major causes of such loss include relationship breakdown, inability to pay rent or mortgage, and failure to take action (or difficulties taking action) by the individual to keep housing. Other problems caused by a sentence, including loss of possessions and increased mortgage/rent arrears, which can both be a barrier to securing and maintaining housing on release.

The resolution of housing problems for people who serve short sentences can be hindered by a range of issues and barriers, including benefits eligibility, lack of facilities to deal with housing problems in prisons, (for example, access to telephone or internet) and this group's lack of skills. (See [full report](#) for detailed review of previous research).

Policy and practice context

The SPS has services in place to identify housing problems of people serving short sentences. This centers on a 'core screening' which involves collecting information from people when they enter prison and includes a section on housing. Additionally there is an voluntary induction process which can identify housing problems, it is available to all, but not taken up by all.

In Scotland all people seen as unintentionally homeless (including those liberated from prison) have the right to settled accommodation, if seen as intentionally homeless, they have the right to temporary accommodation. These homelessness services are delivered by local authorities and include the need to have a local connection, for example, having previously been resident in the area.

Everyone serving a sentence in Scotland has, in principle, access to throughcare services. These are holistic services that focus on reintegration and desistance, delivered by specialist staff during and after a prison sentence. Being holistic they include a housing element. The service is voluntary and not taken up by all. Further the level of service provided can vary and people serving a (short) sentence may not know about it.

For financial problems with setting up in housing people released from custody can apply to the Scottish Welfare Fund for help which could fund, for example, furniture or appliances.

5. Research Findings – The housing problems faced by people who serve short sentences in Scotland

This research found extensive evidence that people who serve (short) sentences in Scotland face problems with housing. This confirms and adds detail to the findings of previous research. This section, briefly, describes the problems and Section 7 sets out analysis on the impact of the problems.

Loss of housing whilst in custody

As in previous research the study found that people who serve short sentences can lose housing when in custody. Analysis of this research shows that this loss can be described as 'managed' where the individual gives up the property voluntarily and without delay, or 'unmanaged' which could have significant impacts on other housing problems (including accruing arrears and finding housing on release).

Loss of possessions whilst in custody

Again reflecting earlier research this study found that loss of possessions can be a consequence of loss of housing. This can include clothing, furniture, appliances and key documents such as birth certificate or passport.

Accommodation not secure whilst in custody

A further problem found related to instances where people did not have the opportunity to secure their accommodation before going into custody (for example of, not expecting a custodial sentence or being remanded). This can increase the risk of burglary or vandalism, making housing unsuitable to return to and incurring substantial costs to the landlord or owner to make good any damage.

Arrears

Arrears build-up was found in earlier research, and this study confirmed it, as a housing problem occurring where people in custody do not or cannot make arrangements for paying their rent or mortgage. In addition the research reflected previous findings that people can enter custody already in debt to their landlord. Another problem found by this research was debt that occurs if people serving short sentences do not or cannot take action to have their utilities disconnected.

Finding and keeping housing on release

At the time of this research being homeless on release from a short sentence happens in Scotland. There was also evidence that people who serve short sentences can have problems coping with independent living which can lead to loss of housing when and if it is secured.

Poor quality housing and areas with high crime rates

Two housing problems that people that serve short sentences experience are poor quality housing and being housed in areas where there are high levels of crime. These are not unique to this group but these problems can have a detrimental effect on reintegration (see Section 7).

Temporary housing

There can be sound reasons for people leaving custody to be allocated temporary housing, for example, a halfway house as they may not be ready for the responsibility of a full tenancy immediately. The research found, however, that living in certain types of temporary accommodation (for example hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation) on release can raise significant problems for this group.

The problems reported included the availability of drugs and alcohol in these settings and a lack of security. This is not a problem with temporary versus permanent housing rather about the nature of certain types of temporary accommodation.

Interconnections and desistance

Housing problems that this research found people serving short sentences can experience, were found to be interconnected. So for example, arrears could lead to loss of housing and difficulties finding and keeping a house on release whilst trying to pay the debt. Loss of housing could lead to loss of possessions making it more difficult to set up in housing on release.

As custody can cause or exacerbate housing problems and a lack of secure housing can make desistance more difficult and as each problem can compound others the research found a complex cycle of offending, custody, housing problems and difficulties in desistance.

6. Research Findings - Services

The research explored which services would help people who serve short sentences to resolve the housing problems set out above, and it collected information on the nature and extent of the services provided, and the gaps in those services (for detailed information see [Full report](#)). This section sets out a high level analysis of that material.

What services are needed?

The research found that comprehensive services including advice on housing and support are needed by people that serve short sentences to help them resolve their housing problems.

Services are needed on entry to prison to stop problems from occurring or to stop them escalating; during a sentence and when approaching release to help secure suitable housing (where possible) and finance and to develop skills; and after release to help set up and sustain housing.

For services to have the most impact they should focus on supporting short term prisoners to keep existing housing where possible. Where this is not possible they could most usefully focus on supporting people, when liberated, to secure resources (housing, essential furniture, clothing and funds for food) and to develop the skills (coping with a tenancy, budgeting and how to shop cook and clean) to set up and sustain housing.

Current services

The research found that there are extensive and wide ranging services being delivered in Scotland. The services are delivered at all stages and address the full range of housing problems. Some are delivered by the public sector (prison staff,

housing staff and reintegration staff) others by the third sector. The research also found that they can have a positive impact on desistance.

Despite the extensive activity in delivering services with a housing element to people who serve short sentences the research found extensive gaps. Further it identified barriers to comprehensive and consistent delivery including practical difficulties and the sheer scale and complexity of the issue.

Comprehensiveness

The research found that services with a housing element are not comprehensively delivered across Scotland; as such there was a gap in the availability of services both between prisons and between local authority areas in which individuals were resident. For example, people serving their sentence in HMP Cornton Vale had access to housing services covering all local authority areas whereas people serving their sentence in HMP Edinburgh only have access to housing services if they were previously residents in Edinburgh City or Fife Council areas.

Consistency

A further gap was an inconsistent level of service and an inconsistency in the approach.

An example of inconsistency in the level of service is that some local authorities enable people serving a short sentence to apply for and be allocated housing shortly before release and others do not (17 of the 32 local authorities would accept such applications and only 8 of 32 would consider allocating housing pre-release).

A further example is that some housing officers are based in prisons full or part time, for example HMP Addiewell has a full time housing officer that will deliver services to people from any local authority area. Other prisons have housing services attending regularly, for example HMP Glenochil one half day a week but this service only delivers to people from Fife and Forth Valley.

An example of inconsistency of approach is that not all housing services use the Housing Options approach (which can be defined as a process which involves considering people's options and choices in the widest sense, with a focus on early intervention) when carrying out a homelessness assessment.

Practical difficulties

A barrier to service delivery identified by the research was practical difficulties. For example, the research found that, although prison staff were consistent at liaising with landlords to prevent immediate repossessions because of abandonment procedures, there were found to be limited opportunities for prison staff to arrange payment plans to help individuals manage arrears.

Size and complexity of the problem

Further, although the research found that prison staff, despite not being experts in housing, can provide services to help resolve housing problems, the size and scale of the problem is acting as a barrier to comprehensive service delivery.

The research collected data from one day in April 2015 to indicate the complexity and the potential size of the issue.

The results showed that each of the 14 prisons in Scotland that hold people serving short sentences was holding people who were residents of different local authorities (between 9 and 29). Looking at the issue the other way, the research showed that 25 local authorities had residents serving short sentences in at least seven prisons, and for 13 of the 25 their residents could be found in 10 or more prisons.

A few examples illustrate the complexities further

- At HMP Castle Huntly the 15 short-term prisoners held on 3 April 2015 were residents of 10 different local authorities, and at HMP Edinburgh the 343 being held came from 24 different local authority areas.
- 541 people from Glasgow City Council were serving a short sentence on 3 April 2015 and they were distributed amongst all 14 prisons, whilst 25 people from East Dunbartonshire were serving a short sentence that day and they were distributed among 8 prisons.

These numbers illustrate how problematic it is for local authorities to provide a comprehensive housing service to all people serving short sentences from their area not least in terms of resources. And for SPS staff this complexity makes it highly problematic to secure the same level of service provision for all those in custody.

In summary

Extensive effort and resources are being deployed to deliver services with a housing element to people who serve short sentences in Scotland. These services can help with desistance from offending. There are, however, gaps in coverage and level and approach of services. There are practical barriers to delivering comprehensive services not least the size and complexity of the issue.

7. Research findings – The impact of housing problems

The housing problems of people who serve short sentences in Scotland described above were found to have a detrimental impact on their personal lives including a negative impact on mental health, drug and alcohol use, general wellbeing and employment opportunities. None of the impacts described here are specific to people serving short sentences, for this group, however, the research findings suggest that the impacts could have a detrimental effect on reintegration into a community.

Health

This research found that mental health problems can be caused and exacerbated by the housing problems people serving short sentences can experience. In general participants reported suffering stress, anxiety and depression and specifically, that poor quality housing can lead to feeling hopeless, that loss of housing can cause frustration and that housing in which they felt was unsafe made them fearful.

Drug and alcohol abuse

An increase in the risk of drug and alcohol abuse was linked to housing problems by participants in this research. In the main this was linked to being allocated specific types of temporary housing (hostels, for example) where the availability of drugs could be commonplace and alcohol abuse extensive.

General wellbeing

Overall wellbeing of this group was found to be affected by poor quality housing and by temporary housing.

Participants reported that in temporary accommodation there could be restrictions on having visitors, or it could lack facilities for this, most particularly in the case where individuals wanted to have their children to visit or stay overnight. This made it difficult for people to reintegrate into family or social life.

Another issue was that individuals in poor quality housing said they were too embarrassed to show family and friends where they were living and that this had a detrimental impact on self-esteem.

Safety

A key issue, especially prevalent for women and young people, was feeling unsafe in housing, whether this was temporary or permanent. This was related to housing being physically insecure (poor quality doors and windows and locks) or to being in an area where there were high levels of anti-social behaviour and criminality including illegal drug activity.

Employment

In general all of the other impacts described above were seen to create barriers to finding and sustaining employment and securing employment was seen as key to reintegration. Three specific issues were also reported (i) difficulties applying for work without a permanent address, (ii) difficulties looking clean and tidy for interviews or work without the facilities to enable this (iii) that housing problems could be a distraction or preoccupation which made it difficult to engage in looking for work.

Interconnections and desistance

The research found that, as housing **problems** were rarely found in isolation, neither were the **impacts**, rather they were interlinked and could compound and exacerbate each other and be circular. So, for example, mental health problems could create barriers to employment, difficulties getting a job could compound mental health problems. Another example is that a lack of feeling safe could exacerbate drug and alcohol abuse which could then in-turn make people less safe.

Health problems, low self-esteem, safety issues, drug and alcohol abuse and difficulties finding employment were all found to act as a barrier to reintegration and in that way to make desistance more difficult. This sets up what participants described as a 'vicious circle' of a prison sentence for offending causing or exacerbating housing problems, the impacts of the problems making reintegration and desistance difficult, leading potentially to reoffending and a return to prison.

As such it is clear that individuals' efforts to desist would be helped if they were liberated to safe, secure housing, with essentials (furniture, clothes), funds to buy food, and if they had the skills to sustain a tenancy and live independently (or support to achieve this).

8. Research findings – Causes and exacerbating factors

The research identified factors that can both cause housing problems and exacerbate them. As explained above the problems themselves, and the impacts of the problems are factors that can lead to more problems and further impacts. The research also identified a number of difficulties with service delivery that had potential to resolve housing problems (see Section 6). This section sets out other factors the research identified.

Benefit eligibility

Eligibility for housing benefit (HB) or the housing element of universal credit (UC) for those in custody has an impact on whether someone can keep a tenancy (or service a mortgage) whilst serving a sentence. In essence people serving a short sentence in Scotland are entitled to between 13 and 26 weeks HB or the housing element of UC from date of imprisonment (see Shelter, 2013d Universal Credit Regulations 2013, Regs 19 [2] and [3] in the [Full Report](#)). Clearly, this means that people on benefits serving sentences over 13 (or 26) weeks that have no other means are unlikely to be able to pay their rent or mortgage and can lose their tenancy or mortgaged housing.

Identification of problems

Despite the action being taken in Scottish prisons to identify housing problems (see Section 4) the research found that not all of them are identified. Further, where they are identified it can be too late to take effective action to avoid negative consequences, for example a build-up of arrears or eviction.

Recognition of problems

A related issue is that people who serve short sentences may not recognise that they have a housing problem, may not wish to engage or may be unable to engage. The SPS has identified this and is drafting fact sheets to help individuals recognise when they have a housing problem.

A similar issue is that people entering prison or during a short sentence can find it difficult to focus their attention on housing problems, as coping with life in prison on a day to day basis can be found stressful.

Gaps in service providers' awareness

The research reported that not all people delivering services to people serving short sentences understood their specific needs and participants had experienced discrimination and prejudice. This suggests a need for greater awareness of the issues and problems people in prison face. In addition understanding of the benefits of stable housing and the impact it can have on desistance is needed.

Information sharing

A difficulty was found in the limited ability of services to share information which could mean that people fell through the gaps as one service might assume another service was delivering what was needed to a particular person.

A further problem for individuals, where they were receiving services, was that they had to repeat their circumstances to a range of different service providers, which could discourage engagement.

Data gaps

The research identified gaps in the data (both that collected and in use of data that is collected). In particular it found a lack of a systematic approach to monitoring housing issues and housing-related service provision in prison and a lack of data on housing outcomes for this group. Clearly, this makes it difficult to quantify the scale of housing problems for people serving short sentences, and to use this as the basis for specific service planning.

Lack of organisational skills

The issues above were found to be compounded by other difficulties that can be faced by members of this group. These included a lack of organisational skills, chaotic lives and health issues including drug and alcohol addiction. The research found difficulties in this group in either knowing how to, or being unable to, inform their landlord or mortgage provider about their change of circumstances. Such a lack of skills can stem from a life spent in institutions or neglect, and include a lack of knowledge about benefits and a lack of skills to organise finances and consequently maintain a tenancy.

Lack of independent living skills

Furthermore, the research found people serving short sentences who reported that they did not have the skills to budget, to keep accommodation clean and tidy and to shop and cook meals.

Being released to inappropriate accommodation

Certain types or locations of accommodation were found by the research to be problematic for people leaving prison, these included, places where they might be influenced by former criminal associates from their time previous to custody, and bed and breakfast or hostel accommodation in which they would find it hard to avoid the risks of exposure to drugs or there was extensive alcohol abuse.

Other policy areas

The final difficulty is the impact that other policies, that are not within the scope of the Scottish Government or the SPS or local government. The obvious example is welfare policy and the impact this has on people's ability to maintain a tenancy whilst they are in custody. Further there is potential for sentencing practice to take account of benefit eligibility.

Potential next steps suggested by the findings

Analysis of the research findings has led to seven suggested next steps.

1: The Scottish Government, the SPS, social housing providers and community justice partners should give consideration to how best to ensure comprehensive services are provided in prison to give advice and support with housing issues to those who serve short sentences. Any resulting plans for action should be in keeping with other Government justice strategies (including Justice Strategy for Scotland, National Strategy for Community Justice).

2: The SPS and social housing providers should give consideration to setting out a consistent standard for providing services in all prisons to give advice and support with housing issues to those who serve short sentences, and on release into the community including adoption of a Housing Options approach.

3: Consideration should be given to Community Justice Scotland having national leadership of housing and reoffending, overseeing the development of improved local support through monitoring of the new national strategy for community justice and the national performance framework with local partners.

4: The Scottish Government, the SPS and social housing providers should give consideration to facilitating information-sharing on housing problems (including for example arrears) between their services, at national and local levels. The aim of this would be more joined-up service delivery and avoiding duplication.

5: The Scottish Government, the SPS and social housing providers should give consideration to how housing outcomes for those who serve short sentences can be recorded, making best use of existing data sources. The aim of this would be to record the scale and nature of any issues and identify any improvements.

6: The SPS should give consideration to ensuring that relevant staff receive basic Housing Options and advice training to ensure that clear information on housing is given to individuals who serve short sentences.

7: The Scottish Government and the SPS should give consideration to providing information to policy makers and professionals in other areas (for example, sentencing, health, social security) about how they could contribute to achieving positive outcomes for people who serve short sentences through consideration of housing issues.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route <specify or delete this text>
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact julie.guy@gov.scot for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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