



## **The Departure Lounge in Doncaster**

In Doncaster in December 2020 a large number of releases were scheduled over the Christmas period. Nacro Justice and Health, who are the Commissioned Rehabilitation Service in the area, offered to deliver a couple of days of intensive support, providing food vouchers as well as signposting and advice. As a result, no one was released into homelessness during that period. The initiative was so successful that the prison operators, Serco, decided to commission the Departure Lounge on a more permanent basis. The service formally commenced in June 2021 and Nacro is now commissioned on an annual rolling basis with a target of meeting 90% of all releases in Doncaster.

The Departure Lounge is located in the visitors' centre just outside HMP Marshgate in Doncaster which is the local remand prison operated by Serco. There are two permanent members of staff employed by Nacro to deliver support and advice. HMP Marshgate also takes people on short sentences including recalls. As such there can be a large volume of releases, some of them at short notice. The service currently sees around 110-150 people per month.

The Departure Lounge is available Monday to Friday 8am -4pm. The majority of people are released in the morning. Staff can view a report to see who is being released. Once someone is sentenced the release date is added to the system so staff know what date they are coming out in advance. They can also check each morning on the system so they know who to expect, who is in court that day and if any release date has been altered. When there is notice, staff will set up pre-release meetings to prepare for release and attempts are made to create a seamless flow so that people don't have to repeat their history to new support services.

Most releases take place in the morning but there are often unplanned releases. As the service is open until 4pm they can be greeted in the same way as a release that is expected. If someone is released out of hours, after 4pm, the prison ask them for a contact number on release and Nacro make contact with them the next working day to offer support need.

The overall aim of the Departure Lounge is to make contact with people before they move on, making the most of the high levels of motivation on release and bridging the gap between custody and community. The service takes a person-led approach, considering what each person needs on release in order to stop reoffending. Staff then work to deliver that support. This can include practical items like food, SIM cards, toiletries and clothes. If people are travelling back to other areas, this can also involve communicating with agencies in other locations to ensure they are kept informed about timings and avoid any issues with late arrivals.

People being released can access different agencies to prevent them having to attend multiple appointments. Services that regularly attend the lounge include the Starting Point Team of specialist case workers who support people with complex needs in the Doncaster area, Aspire drug

and alcohol support, DWP and often Probation who may arrange to meet someone there on release. Employment support is offered by Novus Support who work within the prison as well as Working Wins who are part of the Shaw Trust.

Nacro also host the Prison Leaver meetings for Doncaster, Sheffield and Barnsley every month, involving probation, drug and alcohol agencies, DWP, the Council and other relevant agencies in Doncaster. Initially it was solely focused on men being released from HMP Doncaster. However it was then recognised that releases from other prisons would also return to the area so the remit was widened to check that everybody being released has some sort of accommodation plan in place and that nobody slips through the net.

Key to the success of the Departure Lounge is the approach taken by Nacro. The lounge is staffed by a regular team of 2 staff members who deliver a warm welcome to all those who attend. They develop relationships of trust with people and in particular those who may have been in prison on several occasions. The staff provide a friendly face which can help people to feel grounded after a period of challenge and trauma. People may feel overwhelmed on release and providing a comfortable, laid back and friendly environment can make a big difference to the experience of being released. Despite people facing considerable stress on release, the Lounge has very rarely experienced any challenging behaviour which is testament to the positive atmosphere and the support on offer.

The Departure Lounge also provides continuity of care. This enables people to come back for further support and signposting as needed and has proved invaluable to those who may otherwise lack support.

One success story concerned an individual that was in and out of prison constantly. His mental health was extremely poor and he didn't engage with any service. He didn't trust services or attend appointments. He was sleeping rough but wouldn't tell anybody where. After building a rapport with staff at the Departure Lounge, he came back daily to brush his teeth, to have something to eat, drink and wash. Staff liaised with his probation officer and he began engaging with them and also attending mental health appointments. In time he gained a tenancy which he managed to maintain. During a mental health relapse, he returned to prison but Departure Lounge staff were able to maintain his tenancy which he returned to on release. It has now been 18 months since he reoffended. He's looking into training and volunteering opportunities which is a real transformation and now lives in a single occupancy flat which he is managing well.