

PREVENTING REOFFENDING AND ENDING HOMELESSNESS

WHAT WORKS?



About 1 in 5 clients using homelessness services are in contact with probation. Almost a third have been in prison at some point in their lives. But do these clients get the help they need so they can leave offending and homelessness behind? Homeless Link has done a project to find out how housing and criminal justice agencies can work better together to support their clients.

We spoke to 76 clients across England who had used these services to find out. We asked people what helped them the most, and what the problems are. This is a summary of the things people shared.

WHAT ISN'T WORKING?

Nowhere to go

'They [housing advisers in prison] read the script, ticked boxes, and that's it. You're not allowed to bring it up again. Before you know it, you're released with nowhere to go'

Many clients had come out of prison with nowhere to go at some point in their lives. Good advice was not always available, particularly for short term sentences. Clients described the anxiety of having nowhere to go, or having to return to areas where it can be hard to escape past offences.

Upfront support

'They ask you a lot about offending and stuff when you arrive, but that's about it really'

Sometimes clients felt staff do not have the right knowledge to help, or that they don't always discuss things openly. Clients said some staff only focus on single support needs and don't mention other issues which might be important.

Not joined up

'I feel pulled in different directions by all these keyworkers and probation'

Some clients had a positive experience of joint support. But others felt they were left on their own to cope, or that services were actually making it harder to make progress. This was due to poor communication between workers, or having support plans which contradicted each other.

A fresh start

'You can't be expected to change your life if people won't let you.'

Many clients felt that having an offending history can make it harder to access housing and employment, because they discriminate against people with a criminal record. At the same time, clients felt a lack of housing and a job were major triggers to re-offending.

WHAT WORKS?

Everybody's experience and individual journey is different. But these were common principles which clients felt were important to help leave offending and homelessness behind.

A roof of one's own: accommodation

'Now I've got something I don't want to lose. In jail or be homeless, the less of two evils. Having a flat that's fitted out, that's a lot to lose.'

Clients said homelessness in itself had a major impact on the chances of re-offending. Finding the right accommodation provides stability, the space to address other needs and importantly gives motivation to succeed.

But moving into housing can be stressful. Clients said how important it was to have financial and practical assistance to help arrange a new tenancy and cope with the realities of day to day life.

Not a number: an individualised approach

'Finding someone I can trust, then I open up a bit more. Once you can trust someone with everything, life gets a bit better.'

A good support worker makes a real difference – someone who is committed, persistent and who believes that change is possible. Clients said what mattered is having someone who listens, who has "been there" or "knows where you're coming from". It didn't matter which sector they were in – it was their attitude and motivation which made the real difference.

Better in myself: self-esteem building

'Some workers [at probation] say hello, that they're proud of us. It's nice to hear you're doing alright, you're doing well.'

Offending has a clear link to a person's expectations and goals in life. Clients described self-esteem as a motivating force for wanting to change and being able to reduce offending behaviour. Having the trust and belief of workers was central to this.

At the intersection: cross sector support

'I meet every few weeks with probation, my drugs worker and my keyworker at the hostel. Everyone knows what's planned and what the other one is doing'.

We were told about good joined up working between agencies, whether this is between a probation and housing worker, or a drug or alcohol support worker. What mattered was having workers who talked to each other and shared information. Having joint support sessions was one way where this was put into practice.

Work works: employment

'Being able to have a job makes a big difference. You sort your benefits, get a home, then get a job and that's when you're totally sorted.'

Clients said that moving towards work can make a big difference and gives a lot in return: confidence, 'a reason to get up', self-respect, and something 'to keep your mind active'. But the distance to employment can be huge, so it is important to have the right support around training and employment, whatever somebody's goals may be.

Clear headed: drugs and alcohol

'Sorting out a script has helped cut a lot of crime out, so has getting reduced and a detox.'

Clients with substance use needs felt this linked to their offending. The type of support can be very personal, for some it was rehab, day programmes or having other activities to take their mind off things.

Keeping busy: structure in daily life

'This place has an allotment programme, I'm a landscaper and this programme has really helped to keep me occupied. It gets me out of my head and stops me thinking about drugs all the time.'

Clients said boredom is highly destructive, and can be a trigger to offending. Structure and regular activity - whether this was volunteering, training, or getting involved in activities at your project - helps build confidence, and gives distance away from previous associates and places which can trigger old behaviours.

All about me: personal responsibility

'When I was in prison they put me through the victim awareness course, I was really gutted seeing what they had gone through'

Being able to move forwards depends on the willingness and ability of an individual to make that move. Sometimes this can take time.

However, the right type support can really help somebody identify past behaviours, how they want to change and importantly help them to act on it when they are ready.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

As part of the project we also spoke to staff working in criminal justice agencies – such as police or probation - and homelessness services. Many of the issues they shared were similar to those raised by clients in our focus groups and interviews. These included the need for better communication between services, a stronger focus on partnerships, and improving housing options for people with offending backgrounds

Homeless Link has published a report combining all of these findings and we are using this to tell providers, government and other agencies how improvements can be made. These include:

- Better partnership working between agencies.
- Closer working between prisons and housing providers so everybody has somewhere to go when they are released
- More staff training so they can better support clients around their housing and offending
- More help for ex-offenders wanting to get into employment
- Making sure housing providers do not unfairly discriminate against ex-offenders

If you took part in this research, we would like to thank you for sharing your experiences and views with us.

If you'd like to find out more, please visit our website <http://www.homeless.org.uk/criminal-justice-project>

Homeless Link is the national membership organisation for agencies working with people who are homeless. As the collaborative hub for information and debate on homelessness, we seek to improve services for homeless people and to advocate for policy change. Through this work, we aim to end homelessness in England.

