



# **An Evaluation of 'Through the Gate Plus' in the North East of England**

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## Through the Gate Plus Evaluation: Executive Summary

In September 2013, the Department of Social Sciences and Languages at Northumbria University was commissioned by the North East Regional Homelessness Group to provide an evaluation of Through the Gate Plus (TTGP) in the North East of England. The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Assess the effectiveness of the TTGP Service delivery model;
- Understand the specific approaches to service delivery of Shelter and Foundation;
- Assess the distance-travelled by service users in respect of housing, offending and key risk factors;
- Identify gaps in service provision for offenders with housing needs; and
- Identify key learning points for future support services.

The evaluation process involved:

- Two semi-structured interviews with Shelter staff'
- Three focus groups with Foundation staff'
- Analysis of statistical data provided by Foundation;
- Analysis of 44 service user questionnaires (12.5% of the total number of clients supported in the first 20 months of the project); and,
- Two semi-structured interviews with service users in prison, fourteen with service users in the community and one with a service user's partner.

The findings of the evaluation indicate that:

- The TTGP service provided by Foundation offers opportunities for continuity of work with service users that Shelter are unable to offer because of the limitation that their advice and support can only be offered while a service users is in prison.
- Foundation and Shelter are now working with each other to identify and support service users as appropriate. A more effective information sharing relationship has developed, but there are still issues about the extent of information provided on referral.
- Timescales for referrals are problematic for both Foundation and Shelter; these difficulties are largely brought about by a number of factors beyond the control of either organisation. In particular, the high number of short term prisoners in many of the prisons that they work with is problematic; often the most chaotic offenders in the greatest need of support are sentenced to less than 28 days imprisonment. Foundation discovering that a prisoner needs their support too close to the end of a sentence reduces the benefits of a TTGP service, because there is not the opportunity to build a relationship with the prisoner or to arrange the best quality accommodation for them on their release.

- There are limitations to the roles that volunteers can play for Foundation, particularly in light of shortage of experience and their aspirations to find paid work. However, simply 'keeping in touch' was a form of support that was valued by some service users and a role that volunteers could continue beyond the 13 week post-custody period.
- The provision of the TTGP service is very time intensive particularly for front line staff. This is due to factors such as the geographical scope of the project, timing issues when dealing with prisons (time to get into the prison, get around the prison and waiting for prisoner release), and time spent waiting for housing appointments with service users.
- The service users supported by Foundation often had chaotic childhoods, with long histories of unstable housing and frequent prison sentences, which were frequently followed by periods of homelessness. A history of addictions represented a barrier to obtaining suitable housing for a large number.
- Of those service users who had been in a stable housing situation prior to their current prison sentence, few were able to return to this situation on release: in particular, relationships with partners or family were unlikely to survive a period in prison.
- The first housing situation that service users moved to after their release from prison was often temporary and unsatisfactory.
- However, there was substantial success in moving respondents to more stable housing situations by the end of Foundation's work with a service user – usually in supported housing or the private rented sector. Of 32 service users who, without any intervention, would have had no long term housing situation to go to on release, 18 were supported to access independent accommodation and eight to move to supported housing.
- The previous point should be qualified by noting that some of the private rented sector properties were in quite poor condition, as evidenced by the opinions of service users and the observations of interviewers.
- Supported housing was a popular option with workers, despite some service users having reservations about this form of accommodation. One reason for its popularity appeared to be that continuing support is guaranteed, in the face of limited resources for floating support and Foundation's own work ending 13 weeks after a service user is released from custody (unless there are exceptional circumstances).
- Self-contained social housing played virtually no part in the re-housing of service users taking part in the research; a picture that was reinforced by Foundation's own data. Identifying staff of local authorities who will work closely and effectively with TTG has been time-consuming and not always fruitful. Service users often perceived that social rented housing was not an option that was open to them.
- In addition to assistance to find housing, material forms of support were particularly valued by service users, with positive comments about help to find

furniture, for example. The personalisation fund had played an important role in this support.

- Emotional support was also valued, with a number of service users concerned that they would like support from Foundation to extend beyond 13 weeks.
- Service users indicated that having suitable housing was a strong incentive not to re-offend. Although the data only referred to a short period after release from prison, re-conviction figures tentatively supported this positive view.
- Many service users were able to identify other positive changes to their lives, with a number expressing a determination to find work, although practical barriers existed to fulfilling this aspiration.

From 2015, it is expected that housing related support in prisons will be commissioned as part of a much broader package of offender management services arranged by Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs). This research has suggested that, in relation to the housing element of these services, there are three key lessons for commissioning:

- CRCs need to find a method by which discussion of housing options on release can occur earlier in a prisoner's sentence.
- CRCs need to encourage good practice among all local authorities and registered social landlords to ensure that social rented housing is a realistic option for ex-offenders who demonstrate that they are ready to fulfil tenancy obligations.
- CRCs need to have the capacity to provide effective housing support for as long as it is needed after release, to ensure that supported housing is only chosen where it is the most appropriate option, not because there is no other means of ensuring support.

# Through the Gate Plus Evaluation: Full Report

## Introduction

In September 2013, the Department of Social Sciences and Languages at Northumbria University was contracted by the North East Regional Homelessness Group to conduct an evaluation of the Through the Gate Plus (TTGP) service provided by Foundation in the North East of England. Specifically, the aims were to:

- Assess the effectiveness of the TTGP Service delivery model;
- Understand the specific approaches to service delivery of Shelter and Foundation;
- Assess the distance-travelled by service users in respect of housing, offending and key risk factors;
- Identify gaps in service provision for offenders with housing needs; and
- Identify key learning points for future support services.

It was hoped that the evaluation would provide a greater understanding of the value of the support provided by Foundation and help identify lessons for the future delivery of housing support to offenders.

## Context

The housing difficulties experienced by people released from prison are a longstanding policy concern, with research demonstrating that many prisoners have come from an unstable housing background, an even greater number have no housing to go to on release and a lack of suitable housing increases the risk of re-offending (see, for example, Harding and Harding, 2006). Under the Labour governments, third sector organisations were encouraged to become involved in partnership working – for example, by providing housing advisors to help offenders to keep their accommodation while in prison or assist them to secure housing on their release (Gokjovic et al, 2012, p.3). In the North East region, Shelter are contracted by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) to provide this service in prisons. However, the role of third sector organisations in the future is unclear, as the 2014 Offender Rehabilitation Act has specified that services to low risk and short sentence prisoners will be the responsibility of community rehabilitation companies (CRCs). One responsibility of CRCs will be creating resettlement plans with prisoners while in custody, which will include plans to help find accommodation (Ministry of Justice, 2014).

The funding for the Through the Gate Plus service is provided partly by NOMS and partly by the Regional Homelessness Group (RHG). The RHG was allocated funding by the Department of Communities and Local Government to develop services that will reduce single homelessness and rough sleeping across the region, and assist service users who experience chronic social exclusion.

The RHG recognised that a significant proportion of rough sleepers across the region, and those users of multiple services, have previously been in custody and have a history of inappropriate, temporary accommodation. There is a core of offenders for who failed accommodation options often result in a return to offending and a cycle of homelessness and social exclusion, which imposes a significant strain on limited accommodation options, the criminal justice system and the National Offender Management Service. The RHG recognised that there was a need to retain good practice that has been developed as a result of the Preventing Offender Accommodation Loss demonstrator project, which worked with Tees Valley housing authorities, HMP Low Newton and HMP Holme House. This project embedded local systems and liaison routes between prisons and housing providers to ensure a comprehensive homeless prevention / tenancy preservation / tenancy closure service for offenders.

The TTGP contract was awarded to Foundation, a North East based charity working with socially excluded people to help them gain full independence in the community, in autumn 2012. TTGP is based predominantly in HMP Holme House and HMP Durham, with outreach services to the other prisons in the North of England (HMP/YOI Low Newton, HMP Kirklevington Grange and HMP Northumberland).

The primary aims and objectives of TTGP are to:

- Provide a flexible person centred support service that identifies and assesses the accommodation and support needs of individuals who are chronically socially excluded and who have a history of re-offending, insecure housing and homelessness.
- Provide tailored support to sustain an individual's tenancy throughout the period of custody, or to complete a controlled closure of the tenancy through proactive liaison with landlords, benefit teams and families.
- Provide tailored support to individuals leading up to release to ensure accommodation is accessed and appropriate local support services are engaged.
- Provide added value which addresses the broader needs of the individual to prevent future homelessness, maximise life opportunities, reduce social isolation and exclusion and promote improved health and wellbeing.
- Further reduce unplanned presentations to Local Authority Housing Options Services and increase tenancy sustainment and engagement.
- Reduce re-offending.

## Methodology

The sources of data used to complete the evaluation were:

- Semi-structured interviews with two members of staff of Shelter;
- Statistical data provided by Foundation;

- Two focus groups of Foundation staff conducted in the autumn of 2013
- A follow-up focus group of Foundation staff conducted in the summer of 2014;
- 44 questionnaires completed by Foundation staff in respect of service users; and
- Two interviews with service users in prison, fourteen with service users in the community and one with a service user's partner.

It is important to stress that, although the research involved a comparison of the work of Foundation and Shelter, only the services of Foundation were evaluated. The research team would ideally have liked to discuss the TTGP service with a wider range of stakeholders, but resources did not allow for this.

The data collection from Foundation and Shelter involved asking participants to explain their working practices and relationships with both colleagues and service users; the processes followed in helping service users to find suitable accommodation and relationships with housing providers. In all of the interviews, the discussions ranged more widely than the core questions. There was also discussion about the way in which central government policies and practices have an impact on work at a local level, and how professionals try to maintain their personal values alongside their professional persona. All staff commented on the chaotic lifestyles of the service users and the impact that this has on the likelihood of reaching successful, stable, longer-term housing outcomes.

The collection of data from and about service users was dependent on their consent, which was negotiated through Foundation staff. The data only covers a small part of the service user group, when bearing in mind that Foundation received 651 referrals between November 2012 and June 2014 and supported a total of 352 clients in this period.

The fourteen interviews with service users in the community, and the one with a service user's partner, were concentrated in Teesside. It should be noted that not all service users discussed every aspect of the topic guide due to the limited time they had available for the interview, problems of memory recall, the sensitivity of the topics covered and the complexity of some of the discussions.

The level of information available from the questionnaires also varied for a number of reasons: most obviously, some service users refused services on their release from custody so their post-custody housing situations were unknown. Percentages provided are for the number of cases where the information was given, rather than for all 44 service users for who a questionnaire was completed. Where more than one answer could be given - for example the landlords who service users had applied to - percentages may total more than 100.

One weakness of the research was that it was dependent on information provided by Foundation in a number of areas: there was no external validation of the number of service users who had re-offended, for example. However, on some topics it was

possible to examine the consistency between the questionnaire data, the interview data and the quarterly statistics provided by Foundation. These statistics cover topics such as referral sources, age and gender of people referred, number of people refusing services and accommodation secured. The data relating to housing outcomes was consistent with the material collected by the research team: for example, it showed that, for the first quarter of 2014-15, 45% of accommodation secured was in the private rented sector and 39% was in supported housing.

If time allowed, it would be particularly useful to develop this data to demonstrate the difference between the initial housing situation of a service users on release from prison and (where applicable) the housing situation at the point where Foundation finishes working with them. The reason for this is that the data collected for this evaluation suggested that the differences between situations at these two points in time could be substantial; demonstrating the more stable housing options that could be achieved when housing support was extended into the community. Another area where more detailed data collection, although time consuming, would be useful, is responses by specific landlords and local authority housing options services to applications, e.g. interview arranged, offers of accommodation made, etcetera. This would provide more information about the response of the social rented sector in particular to service users.

## **A Comparison of the Services of Shelter and Foundation**

Interviews with staff of Foundation and Shelter demonstrated a number of differences between the work of the two agencies in relation to prisoners:

- Shelter provides a housing assessment at the start of sentence for all prisoners in the prisons where they work; Foundation work with prisoners who are referred to them by Shelter because they are chaotic and/or high risk.
- Shelter work throughout a sentence, usually with work concentrated at the start and the end, although they can accept referrals at any point. All Foundation's work in prisons takes place close to the point of release.
- The work of Shelter stops at the gate of the prison – work can sometimes be taken up by a member of the Shelter team in the community, but only if the service user is assessed as being high priority by a probation service with which there is a contract. In contrast, the Foundation service continues into the community.
- Shelter has peers and mentors involved in their services in prison, while Foundation's work is conducted entirely by staff and volunteers. It was agreed that Foundation would not use mentors as this would duplicate the work of Shelter.
- Shelter regards their strongest links as being with Newcastle and Sunderland, while Foundation has longer established relationships in County Durham and Tees Valley.

Staff of both agencies believes that a judicial review case – where Shelter and Foundation worked together to challenge one local authority's refusal to accept a homelessness application from a service user – had strengthened co-operative working. Sharing an office, as is the case in Holme House, was also seen as creating stronger relationships, although the relationship was suggested to be weaker in prisons where Foundation only had a visiting presence.

## **Foundation Working Practices**

The data collected from Foundation workers suggested that, over the time period of the research, there was a change in perceptions of clarity about working practices, with roles becoming much clearer and staff settling into them. However, it was also apparent that TTGP team members, like many of those working in the public/voluntary sector, were still carrying out some tasks which fitted more with their personal and professional values than with the parameters of the project.

There were some concerns expressed by Foundation staff about the roles of volunteers and their retention rates. Volunteers work alongside the support workers, but do not always have the necessary experience to attend housing meetings with clients, for example. One staff member had concerns that it was difficult to retain

volunteers after they had received training and had had some experience, which often facilitated them moving on into paid employment. Others questioned whether funding should instead be used to train more paid staff, which would then mean a continuity of support. Despite these concerns, staff expressed mainly positive views about volunteers and their work, suggesting that they could be particularly helpful when 'popping in' on service users or offering support that extended beyond the thirteen weeks post-release period.

### **The Referral Process**

Only three questionnaires showed that respondents were known to have been provided with housing assistance in the early part of their sentence. In 33 of 42 cases where the source of referral to Foundation was known (78.6%), it had come from Shelter, with four referrals coming from the DART team, three from OMU, one from probation and one from the police.

Staff interviews confirmed that referrals to Foundation are now made almost exclusively by Shelter. This highlights the importance of not duplicating work between the organisations, and ensuring that services users do not fall through the gaps between agencies. It was noted that referrals may originate from other teams in the prisons, for example DART or, less frequently, the wing officers, but again these referrals go to Shelter for triage. This has prevented organisations from using Foundation as a second option if a referral to Shelter does not produce the response that is wanted.

The referral process is clear to staff of Foundation and Shelter, with the difficulties of some inappropriate referrals in the early stage of the project now having been overcome. However, there remain some problems over information exchange and the completion of the TTGP assessment tool.

A further continuing difficulty is the timescale in which work with a prisoner can be undertaken. Staff of both Shelter and Foundation noted that in some cases the time between being made aware of a housing need and a prisoner being released is very short, with referrals occasionally being made after the offender has left prison. Difficulties are largely brought about by a number of factors beyond the control of either organisation. In particular, the high number of short term prisoners in many of the prisons that they work with is problematic; often the most chaotic offenders in the greatest need of support are sentenced to less than 28 days imprisonment:

*'The main thing they say it's if someone's maybe on a short sentence, so Durham get a lot of 28 days sentences so therefore they're like two weeks, they don't actually have the notice themselves and I think at Holme House they just had a massive backlog, it's such a busy prison that they just had months' worth of releases and they kind of work month to month so...'* [Foundation]

*'... some of the clients that are probably more chaotic are your ones that come in on very short sentences and have a very quick turnaround, which are the*

*ones that probably need that targeted support, but the timescales make it extremely challenging for us to see them, then to do the referral, then for them to come in and see. You're doing it in a very tight timeframe.' [Shelter]*

Timescales were particularly problematic for Foundation because they made it very difficult to undertake pre-tenancy work and to hit targets for doing this, in addition to making it more difficult to find satisfactory housing options immediately on release from prison (see later section). A resolution to this problem is only likely to be found through more effective information sharing within the prison system, and may be reliant on vigilant wing officers, or peer support workers, identifying those in need at an earlier stage.

The difficulties with timescales were reflected in the questionnaire data. In the large majority of cases – 38 of 43 or 88.4% – Foundation's work with the service user began while they were in custody. However, in 19 of 36 cases where the timescale was indicated (52.8%), this work had begun with a week or less of the sentence to complete. The advantages of referrals being made some time before the point of release were illustrated by one service users saying that they had no longer felt anxious at the thought of leaving prison once they had met with Foundation. In contrast, another said:

*'I didn't hear nowt. It's when I got out of prison a couple of days later [FOUNDATION WORKER] came to see me'. [Service user]*

Some frustration was expressed by Foundation staff about some potential service users choosing not to access the services that were available, with consequences in terms of re-offending:

*'Yes, some will have nowhere to go at all, some may have family that will say 'well I'll put you up for a couple of nights' and some will still choose to say 'well I don't want to go into anything that's temporary, I'd rather find somewhere to stay', even if they can't name where they're going to stay or what they're going to do, they'll say they're going to find something and that tends to be when we lose them really because then if they go and stay with friends or get back involved in whatever it was before they got locked up...'*  
*[Foundation]*

One likely reason for the refusal of services, identified by Foundation staff, was that offenders are not able to accept support from organisations that they perceive to be part of a system which has incarcerated them. Some are not yet in a position to make positive changes leading to primary and secondary desistance. Staff suggested that, in order to try and support lifestyle changes, they needed longer relationships before offenders were released. Yet, as noted above, this is not always possible in some of the region's prisons, which have transient populations, including high numbers of people on short sentences:

*'We see it as key that in an ideal world get into prisons a lot earlier to build that relationship because at the end of the day we're going in at the very end you know, they're about to be released and like all they can say is they just want to be released. But you know they don't want to involve themselves with us but that's mainly because there's no relationship there, so sometimes it's really good to get in a little bit earlier to then start building the relationship, so on release it's a very planned release.'* [Foundation]

### Characteristics and Background of Service Users

Questionnaires were completed in respect of 42 male service users and two females. The mean age was 37, with six being under 25 and six over 50. The prisons where the service users had served their sentence are shown in the table below (in one case this was not stated):

<b>Prison</b>	<b>Number of service users</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Holme House	16	37.2%
Northumberland	14	32.6%
Durham	8	18.6%
Low Newton	2	4.7%
Deerbolt	2	4.7%
Kirklevington	1	2.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sentence lengths ranged from one month to five years, with the mean being 14 months.

Seven interview respondents reported chaotic life histories, starting in childhood. Seven spent their formative years in local authority care, including five who grew up in children's homes and reported unhappy childhoods and negative experiences. Going into care was linked to familial addiction, physical abuse and the loss of a parent. However, the experience of childhood was not universally unhappy - two service users reported positive upbringings and good relationships with family.

Eleven interviewees discussed their education and, of these, seven left school without any qualifications. Their attendance was in some cases intermittent and their ability to succeed was undermined by familial problems.

By their mid-teens, the varied lifestyle of service users began to converge. Most began living independently during this time and to engage in anti-social behaviour (drug use, drinking alcohol excessively and low level criminality), if this had not already begun. One service user reported offending from the age of 11. For the more chaotic, the teenage years represented the start of a long cycle of offending, addiction (as a coping mechanism for life events), negative social networks, unstable housing and homelessness, mental health difficulties and unemployment (one service user in his 30s had never worked). Service users reported up to 20 prison

stays and a revolving door of prison and exclusion that spanned up to 15 years, for example:

*'I was always in trouble with the Police. I was always shoplifting, getting into trouble' [Service user]*

*'I was in prison just before school finished' [Service user]*

*'I went to prison when I was 15...car thieving. I've been taking drugs since I was about 16, when my mam and da split up.' [Service user]*

However, a minority of service users began to achieve some stability in their lives during the latter part of their teenage years; securing a social or private tenancy, furthering their qualifications record, gaining employment (albeit low paid in some cases) and entering into relationships, leading to marriage and children. The lives of these service users were nonetheless plagued by underlying problems of addictions (with drug use beginning as a social activity and becoming out of control), mental health difficulties and (drug-related) engagement with the criminal justice system. In several cases, relationship breakdown (or bereavement in one case) had resulted in vulnerable housing situations, more pronounced mental health difficulties and substance misuse. Across all interviewees, problems of drug abuse were compounded by negative social networks.

Relationships with family, friends and partners had intersected with the lives of interview respondents in multiple and varied ways; sometimes representing a source of support and stability, but at other times being a de-stabilising factor. Most interview respondents were in contact with their families, but some were unable to ask them for help at times of difficulty (or concerned about doing so); particularly asking to stay with them for a period of time. Nine had children and all but two reported seeing them regularly.

The offending histories of interview respondents were primarily drug-related in six cases. A number also related their offending to their unstable housing history, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

*'Going everywhere, begging people, what you can to stay there. Just doing what you can to survive, isn't it?' [Service user]*

*'I believe that my crimes were all down to being homeless...I've never even had a house before' [Service user]*

*'Prison, on and off, since 2000. I would say probably a quarter of my life I've been homeless.' [Service user]*

Questionnaire data further highlighted the unstable housing situation that typically preceded custody. The housing situation of service users before their sentence (where known) is shown below:

<b>Housing situation</b>	<b>Number of service users</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Living with partner	13	36.1%
Living alone	9	25.0%
Living with parent or parents	7	19.4%
Homeless	3	8.3%
Staying with friends	2	5.6%
Supported housing	1	2.8%
Sharing with friends	1	2.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100%</b>

Of the 35 cases where the information was known, in 13 (37.1%) the service user had been a single or joint tenant or home owner, in 17 (48.6%) they had not and in five (14.3%) their partner had held the tenancy. The tenure of the property was known in 21 cases: in the large majority (15) it was private rented. In addition, four service users had been owner occupiers, one had been living in social rented housing and one had been housed with Norcare.

The likely housing situations of the service users on release without intervention, as judged by the Foundation staff who completed the questionnaires, were as follows:

<b>Likely Housing Situation</b>	<b>Number of service users</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Homeless	23	53.5%
Sofa surfing	10	23.3%
Staying with friends	3	7.0%
Staying with family long term	3	7.0%
Staying with family short term	2	4.7%
Possibly staying with partner	2	4.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>100%</b>

These likely scenarios demonstrated further the instability of the pre-custody housing situations that respondents had been in. For example, of the 13 who had been living with a partner prior to going into custody, none were expected to return to the partner: six were expected to have become homeless without Foundation support on their release, three to have been sofa surfing, three to have been staying with family (in two cases temporarily) and one to have been staying with friends. Of the seven who had been staying with a parent or parents prior to their sentence, only one was judged likely to have returned there and the rest were predicted to have been in less stable housing situations without Foundation support.

This picture was reinforced by the interview data, with a number of service users reporting that, following relationship breakdown with a partner or family difficulties, they were unable or reluctant to return to housing situations which at one point might

have been suitable. Service users who were interviewed typically did not want to live with parents or relatives following prison due to turbulent relationships, not wanting to burden people and/or wanting their own independence.

### **Experience of Prison Including Housing Support**

Few interview respondents described prison as a negative experience. One described it as 'home, in a way'. Several improved their qualifications while in prison and three were given counselling to help them to cope with significant life events. In addition, three were given drug treatment and one was offered treatment but did not accept it as they said they were not 'ready to change' at that time. One interview respondent said they had worked hard in prison to change their life, fearing that they would not live much longer if this did not happen. The main problem associated with prison, identified by three service users, was the loss of housing, leaving them with nowhere to go on release.

All but two of the interview respondents reported receiving no housing support upon being released from custody on previous occasions (where applicable). One had been in touch with Shelter during his penultimate sentence. They had provided him with a letter to give to the Council but this did not turn out to be sufficient for him to be allocated a tenancy in social rented housing.

Another interview respondent had been offered the support of Foundation during a previous sentence but this was almost at the point of release so there was no time for Foundation to meet or work with him to secure housing. When he left prison, he found accommodation in a guest house in a neighbouring local authority area, but he did not like the shared living environment because several residents had problems of addiction. Nor did he like living away from his family. Foundation worked with him, paying the costs of his hotel, trying to source accommodation for him and supporting him to access emergency food parcels as there were delays to the processing of his benefit claim. The service user said he 'couldn't handle' the situation, however, and returned to prison three weeks later. Service users frequently reported becoming homeless (including a mix of sofa-surfing or rough sleeping) upon release from previous sentences, with one saying he had become homeless every time he had left prison in the past. However, some had had partners, friends or family who could support them on release.

During their most recent stay in prison, interview respondents reported feeling anxious about their release because of their housing needs. Some feared going back to a situation of homelessness or unsuitable housing, and subsequently returning to prison. For example:

*'When I was getting out of prison, I was thinking it would snowball again. I would end up back in prison...'* [Service user]

*'I was shitting myself because my time was coming to end and that, you know what I mean, it was like six weeks before I was getting out'* [Service user]

*'I was, yeah, because I thought I was just gonna go in some rubbish place. I just thought I was gonna be brushed aside and put wherever' [Service user]*

*'I knew if I didn't get somewhere, I'd be going, I'd end up back inside.'* [Service user]

Similarly, most interview respondents reported having little idea of where they were going to live following release and others had low expectations about the options available to them. One said:

*'I didn't know, really. I mean, I thought I was just gonna be in a hostel.'* [Service user]

So the case for support to pro-actively assist prisoners to access housing – beyond advice and signposting – was clear.

### Applying for Housing on Release

In 31 cases, questionnaires recorded that service users had applied to one or more landlords for housing. There was some confusion between applying to the local authority itself and the housing options team, but it was clear that the local authority was the organisation that was most likely to be approached for housing:

<b>Organisation applied to</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Local authority / local authority housing options	25 (80.6%)
Supported housing	15 (48.4%)
Private landlords	9 (29.0%)
Housing association	3 (9.7%)

Despite the frequency with which applications were made to supported housing, many interview respondents expressed critical views about this option and other shared living arrangements such as private hostels: several had had negative experiences of such accommodation in the past, often due to the behaviours of other residents. In contrast, interviewees were particularly open-minded about the idea of a private tenancy; many had had positive experiences of living in this sector previously.

Interview respondents usually had preferences about the locations in which they were to live following release; either wanting to return to their local area to ensure that they were near to their children or wanting to move away from a particular location due to issues such as difficulties with past associates, for example. One service user was prohibited from returning to the area in which they were living prior to going into custody because of their offence.

In 17 of 29 cases where the question was relevant and answered (58.6%), Foundation had assisted questionnaire respondents with applications. Shelter had

assisted in other cases. A series of questions were answered about possible barriers to housing, in addition to a criminal record, with information being provided in 42 cases. As the table below shows, most service users faced barriers due to addictions with other factors being identified as difficulties less frequently:

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Addictions	25 (59.5%)
Mental health problems	11 (26.2%)
Rent arrears	6 (14.3%)
Anti-social behaviour	5 (11.9%)
Physical disabilities / physical health problems	4 (9.5%)
Public hostility	3 (7.1%)
Other	5 (11.9%)

Despite these barriers, in only 10 of 41 cases where the question was answered (24.4%), had a landlord refused to consider a respondent for housing. However, most of those interviewed suspected that they would not be offered social rented housing (still widely perceived as 'council housing') due to their convictions, based on previous experiences of unsuccessful applications. Comments here included:

*'Getting knock back after knock back after knock back' [Service user]*

*'I didn't, I knew I wouldn't get a council place because of my conviction of the drugs, you know, and I tried putting in for a council place but they wanted to know all my convictions and that, so...'Cause when you get done for drugs, it's more or less a no-no with the council, you know what I mean.'* [Service user]

Other service users reported completing applications for social housing, but not receiving responses to them.

Working with Foundation and trying to secure housing prior to release was an emotional process for some service users. In one case, Foundation organised a series of day releases, where they would support the service user to visit housing providers/landlords and view properties. Their support worker recalled a time when she had to cancel one of the planned day releases and how upset the service user was about this.

Interview respondents reported that Foundation workers were highly proactive in their approach to supporting them to secure housing; helping them to fill out application forms, making appointments for them with housing providers, picking them up and taking them to interviews with landlords or to view properties, and organising bonds for them. Finding bonds for private rented property could be a particularly difficult part of the process.

The help offered by Foundation was valued by service users; they felt that they did not have the knowledge or skills needed to identify properties and negotiate a tenancy, thus the support of Foundation was critical in this respect. Comments included:

*'She's got me a place here which is brilliant, 'cause I don't think I would have got nowhere without them...and like, things with like funding and stuff, I wouldn't know where to start, and [Foundation worker]'s been ringing about everywhere... I didn't know, like, none of the places where she's been ringing' [Service user]*

*'She's kept in touch with us, you know what I mean? She's kept me on the ball and that.' [Service user]*

### Initial Housing Situation After Release

Staff completing the questionnaire were asked to identify and evaluate the housing situations that service users had gone through since their release from custody. In 21 of 33 cases where a judgment was made (63.6%), the service users' first housing situation after their release from prison was considered unsatisfactory. These first housing situations are shown below, together with the worker's opinion of them:

First housing situation	Times considered satisfactory	Times considered unsatisfactory	Times no opinion expressed	Total
Private rented property	7	0	2	<b>9 (23.7%)</b>
Bed and breakfast hotel or guest house	0	7	0	<b>7 (18.4%)</b>
Staying with family or friends	1	5	0	<b>6 (15.7%)</b>
Supported accommodation	3	0	1	<b>4 (10.5%)</b>
Shared accommodation	2	2	0	<b>4 (10.5%)</b>
Living with partner	0	2	0	<b>2 (5.3%)</b>
Sofa surfing	0	2	0	<b>2 (5.3%)</b>
Hostel	0	2	0	<b>2 (5.3%)</b>
Own flat (tenure unspecified)	0	0	1	<b>1 (2.6%)</b>
*Slept rough	0	1	0	<b>1 (2.6%)</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>13 (34.2%)</b>	<b>21 (55.3%)</b>	<b>4 (10.5%)</b>	<b>38 (100%)</b>

*\*The person who slept rough had refused the support of Foundation.*

The most common reason for judging a housing situation to be unsatisfactory was that it was a short term measure (in five cases). Other reasons were that the option

was not suitable due to the service user's disabilities, that the service user had a history of domestic disputes with their partner, that the accommodation was overcrowded, that the property was too far from their family and that the service user was chaotic and needed supported housing. The most common reason for judging accommodation to be satisfactory was that there was appropriate support available; other reasons were that the service user was pleased with it, that it was their own tenancy and that sharing meant that they could avoid benefit restrictions.

None of those interviewed reported moving immediately into a long term housing option; instead they reported short stays with family or in temporary accommodation, until more permanent accommodation had been organised. However, many expressed reservations about these short term options: for example, one expressed fears about the hostel he had moved to: 'there I get straight back on to the drugs lifestyle'.

### **Changes to Housing Situations**

Of the 21 questionnaire service users whose initial housing situation was unsatisfactory; in six cases no change to this housing situation was reported. In seven cases respondents were helped to move to a satisfactory housing situation at their next move: supported housing in four cases, a private tenancy in two and staying with parents in one. Four moved on to a housing situation that was still judged unsatisfactory: sofa surfing in one case and a bed and breakfast hotel in three. In four cases it was not stated whether the second housing situation was satisfactory – these situations were independent accommodation, a shared house, emergency housing and a bed and breakfast hotel. There was only one case of a service user moving to a less satisfactory housing situation: they were evicted from supported housing and went to live in a hostel.

The final housing situation of service users reported on the questionnaires, and the worker's judgement as to whether this situation was satisfactory, are shown in the table below:

<b>Final housing situation</b>	<b>Number of times satisfactory</b>	<b>Number of times unsatisfactory</b>	<b>Times no opinion expressed</b>	<b>Total</b>
Private rented property	13	0	2	<b>15 (39.5%)</b>
Supported accommodation	9	0	0	<b>9 (23.7%)</b>
Own flat (tenure unspecified)	1	1	3	<b>5 (13.2%)</b>
Staying with family	2	3	0	<b>5 (13.2%)</b>
Hostel	0	2	0	<b>2 (5.3%)</b>
Shared accommodation	0	1	0	<b>1 (2.6%)</b>
Living with partner	0	1	0	<b>1 (2.6%)</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>25 (65.6%)</b>	<b>8 (21.1%)</b>	<b>5 (13.2%)</b>	<b>38 (100%)</b>

Particular attention was given to the 33 cases where service users were judged to have been likely to move to a temporary housing situation without Foundation support (homeless, sofa surfing, with family for short time, staying with friends), as it was here that the potential for support to make a difference was the greatest. Information was available about the final housing situation of 32 of these service users:

<b>Final housing situation</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Private rented property	13	40.6%
Supported accommodation	8	25.0%
Own flat (tenure unspecified)	5	15.6%
Staying with family	3	9.4%
Shared accommodation	1	3.1%
Living with partner	1	3.1%
Hostel	1	3.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100%</b>

So 26 service users (a majority of those for who questionnaires were completed), who would otherwise have been in a temporary housing situation, had been supported to find a long term one. Of course, this finding depends on the judgement of the Foundation worker as to the likely housing situation without support. It is also possible that some service users would have moved from a temporary housing situation to a more stable one without any assistance. However, the finding that

81.2% of those who would otherwise have been in an unsatisfactory housing situation on their release were helped to find their own accommodation or supported housing by Foundation is a key success of the project.

Consideration was given to whether the questionnaire data showed any differences between prisons in terms of final housing situation:

<b>Final housing situation</b>	<b>Prison released from</b>						<b>Total</b>
	<b>Holme House</b>	<b>Northumberland</b>	<b>Durham</b>	<b>Low Newton</b>	<b>Deerbolt</b>	<b>Kirklevington</b>	
Private rented property	6	4	3	0	2	0	<b>15</b>
Supported accommodation	2	3	1	2	0	0	<b>8</b>
Own flat (tenure unspecified)	4	1	0	0	0	0	<b>5</b>
Staying with family	2	2	1	0	0	0	<b>5</b>
Hostel	1	0	1	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
Living with partner	0	0	1	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
Shared accommodation	0	0	0	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>37</b>

It appeared that positive outcomes were particularly likely to be achieved for those released from HMP Northumberland, although caution should be expressed about drawing conclusions about differences based on such small numbers:

<b>Prison</b>	<b>Final situation satisfactory</b>	<b>Final situation unsatisfactory</b>	<b>No opinion expressed</b>	<b>Total</b>
Holme House	9	3	3	<b>15</b>
Northumberland	8	1	1	<b>10</b>
Durham	3	3	1	<b>7</b>
Low Newton	2	0	0	<b>2</b>
Deerbolt	2	0	0	<b>2</b>
Kirklevington	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>37</b>

Those service users who were interviewed expressed a range of opinions about the longer term housing options that were found for them. One said:

*'It's put a smile on my face, you know what I mean, so I can go to my sister's and say, "I know it's a bit of a shit street, it's getting regenerated, but . . . I love the place, you know what I mean?" It's a cracking little - well, it's not at all little. It's got a nice kitchen, back yard, you know what I mean.'* [Service user]

Others expressed happiness about being in a different location to the one that they had lived in the past:

*'I'd have gone anywhere but coming to Darlington, it's out the way, it's a fresh start and I love it here. Really, really like it here'* [Service user]

*'No-one knows where we live so it's lush.'* [Service user]

However, there were also concerns about the quality of some of the long term housing options. One service user terminated a tenancy that had been organised for him due to the quality of the accommodation and moved into a supported housing project. Another reported that their property was not in good condition at first. It had been unoccupied for six months so was damp and had pests (slugs). Since then, the service user had been supported by his new partner and family to clean the property and make it more habitable. However, the property remained cold and damp which was problematic both for the service user and his teenage daughter who lives with him. Concerns about the quality of accommodation that was available to former prisoners echo the findings of previous studies (e.g. Cooper, 2013, p.28).

Two of the interview respondents had a shared tenancy. They described this as 'spot on', reporting good relations with one another. Sharing a tenancy meant they could provide each other with both practical and emotional support. However, both said that, in the long term, they would like their own independent accommodation.

## Relationships Between Foundation and Social Landlords

The very limited role of the social rented sector revealed in the interviews and questionnaires was reflected in statistics provided by Foundation for the 2013-2014 financial year. In this period there were 92 referrals to housing options services (in three of these cases the local authority was found to have a statutory duty to the service user) but only two cases where a service user was found accommodation in the social rented sector, compared to 98 in supported accommodation and 44 in the private rented sector. While it is likely that some service users were helped to access these options by the housing options service, the very small number being re-housed by social landlords was explored further through the professional interviews.

Foundation and Shelter staff agreed that there was a variable response from local authorities to prisoners. Although Foundation had worked with the twelve local authorities to highlight their role, to attract referrals where released prisoners had approached the local authority without support and to secure offers of accommodation, there was a feeling among staff that this work had not been as fruitful as anticipated.

Both Foundation and Shelter noted that identifying a key person in a local authority could be problematic and that some local authorities made a more positive response than others. This was often down to perceptions of whether or not they had a large resettlement population and the extent to which the role of Foundation was understood:

*'If they don't see it as their problem they're not really interested in finding out about the service, whereas the bigger ones that do have more returning prisoners want a service there that's going to be proactive and stop them from turning up on their doorstep if possible.'* [Foundation]

*'It was never set up to take away the local authority's duty and I think sometimes that's the confusion that is that I think some local authorities maybe think well we're paying this money towards it, we don't want them turning up at our doorstep when it should be about prevention and working with them to prevent it in line with what they've got to do and not just taking the problem away.'* [Foundation]

Another key difference between authorities was that some had considerably more floating support available than others. One worker hinted that moving into supported accommodation might be a popular option simply because it was the only way that support could be guaranteed beyond the period when Foundation was working with a service user:

*'In addition the floating support that has been massively reduced in areas and so on the back of all that... a lot of people do not want to go into supported*

*accommodation, maybe at the beginning but I think longer term it just gives them that time...’ [Foundation]*

Staff of Foundation and Shelter agreed that it could be more fruitful to work with private landlords, particularly when they had property that was difficult to let, although of course this raised difficulties about the quality of the property.

However, there were a number of difficulties that existed across tenures, with some organisations continuing to insist on post-release interviews. Whichever landlord was involved, there was usually a difficulty with a mismatch between the date when a property became available and the one when a prisoner was due to be released. Benefit restrictions now mean that accessing self-contained property can be problematic both in the social rented sector (if there is more than one bedroom) and in the private rented sector (if the service user is under the age of 35):

*‘ ... now it’s the under 35’s so that assumption that you could walk out of prison, get privately rented because housing benefit would pay the under 35 forget(?) about it, it’s going to be shared, that’s as much as you’re going to get...’ [Foundation]*

So finding suitable housing options was challenging in any sector, but there appeared to be some specific difficulties with local authorities that may have explained the very limited access to social rented housing.

### **Other Forms of Support**

The targets which Foundation has for services on release are for pick-ups from the gate, accommodation accessed, registering for benefits and registering with employment agencies. However, data collected in relation to service users suggested that there were other areas that were important but that were not reflected in these targets. On 32 questionnaires, Foundation was recorded as providing at least one form of support beyond help with finding housing. The most common types of additional support are shown below:

<b>Form of support</b>	<b>Number of service users</b>
Collecting from prison	10 (31.3%)
Ensuring attended appointments	7 (21.9%)
Helping with benefits (including Housing Benefit)	7 (21.9%)
Supplying food	6 (18.8%)
Liaising with/referring to other agencies	6 (18.8%)
Helping to find furniture	5 (15.6%)
Regular visits and calls	4 (12.5%)
Helping to obtain bond for private tenancy	4 (12.5%)
Pre-tenancy work	3 (9.4%)
Helping to register with GP and dentist	3 (9.4%)

Of the interview respondents who were picked up by Foundation at the prison gate, all said that this was comforting and helpful. Others were met by friends or family.

However, the forms of support that were most often discussed by service users in interviews were financial/material, including helping to make applications for furniture, collecting food parcels, signposting to foodbanks, arranging for their rent to be paid direct to landlords and assisting them with budgeting (although this remained difficult for some due to loan repayments, on top of household bills and living costs). Service users discussed appreciatively the range of material benefits that Foundation had been able to access for them:

*'I've got a washer. I've got a fridge and freezer through [Foundation worker] and she's helped me get furniture. She's got me drawers, beds' [Service user]*

*'Aye, they got the settee, the fridge freezer, the cooker, the two single beds and the kettle.' [Service user]*

However, finding furniture could be problematic due to the nature of some local Welfare Assistance schemes and some service users being in receipt of Disability Living Allowance.

The level of support provided was in sharp contrast to the expectations of one service user:

*'I mean I had nowt...to help me get furniture and food and stuff like that. It was a surprise actually because I didn't think I'd get any.' [Service user]*

Another linked re-offending after a previous sentence to difficulties that they had experienced with the benefits system:

*"well, when I didn't get no dole money for a month it was a fact of like having to keep on at the dole, trying to get money out of the dole, and then basically just started shoplifting and stuff, just to survive....And then like you'd end up, you're back in court and you're a no hoper.' [Service user]*

Staff discussed the challenges presented by prisoners being released without suitable clothing, hygiene products or the necessary equipment to settle into new accommodation. They demonstrated that they knew the opening times of foodbanks and charity shops where clothes and household items could be purchased. The personalisation fund has been particularly useful:

*'We've used it to kind of, if there's been items missing that would help someone settle in to accommodation and the idea that if you can make it a bit more homely and feel like they've got something to go back to, it's better than going back to an empty shell and thinking I've got nothing to lose. We've bought phones for people so they can keep in contact; we've bought practical things like food and clothing.' [Foundation]*

By the end of June 2014, £2023.32 had been spent from the personalisation fund – this appeared to represent a high level of value for money.

Service users who were interviewed reported that Foundation had also helped them to maintain their health and wellbeing, by ensuring they had access to drug treatment and healthcare in the areas in which they were living, for example. The healthcare and drugs support arranged for service users while in custody did not always align with service users' housing situations following release. Some service users could not secure accommodation in the areas where their methadone script was administered, for example. This was particularly problematic where service users were released on Fridays. In some emergency cases, Foundation had picked service users up on a Saturday morning and driven to them to another local authority area to collect a script, then driven them back to their accommodation.

Although some service users were content just to receive material support from Foundation, others valued the regular contact and the emotional support that was available. One described the support of Foundation as 'a crutch to prevent [people] becoming depressed'. Others commented:

*'It was nice to have the support from Foundation when I initially got out, until you get your confidence back [Service user]*

*'It's been nice...someone to stand behind me, give me a chance' [Service user]*

*'She's kept in touch with us, you know what I mean? She's kept me on the ball and that.' [Service user]*

*'I'm well impressed. Really, really happy. And the fact that they are always at the end of the phone...cos it's just having someone there that you can just phone up really and ask questions, isn't it? Especially if it's a situation you've never been in before.' [Service user]*

Reflecting on the package of support received, service users and the partner interviewed spoke highly of Foundation support workers. Overall comments included:

*'I take my hat off to that lady, I do, 'cause she's done a lot for him' [Service user's partner]*

*'She's brilliant' [Service user]*

*'We can't fault her; she's helped as much as possible' [Service user]*

*'Can't knock her for a thing' [Service user]*

*'Everything that [Foundation worker]'s done for me has been useful to me and I really do appreciate that.' [Service user]*

Interview respondents said that they would feel comfortable asking Foundation for additional support if they required it, but that there was no support that they had needed that Foundation had been unable to offer. They also spoke positively about the voluntary nature of engagement with Foundation. However, one area of dissatisfaction was that support was generally time-limited to 13 weeks after release (although it was decided in the course of the project that support could be extended beyond the 13 week period in exceptional circumstances). Several interviewees pointed out that they did not secure a tenancy for several weeks following release and so were unlikely to be 'settled' within this time period.

*'The 13 weeks? I think it should be longer because I didn't really get this place until about 13 weeks, so 13 weeks is up and then they're just plonking you in a house, and then what do you do from there?' [Service user]*

*'Well, for me, the first time I've had my own house, I think it's a bit of a short time. You know, I would really appreciate a little bit more time' [Service user]*

*'It worries me a bit like, if after 13 weeks I'm still not sorted out, I'm not gonna have that back up there.' [Service user]*

One respondent expressed concern about the level of support that would be available once Foundation could no longer work with him:

*'See, me in the past, I've had like, I'm used to having support workers and things like that...I know I live in a hostel and that, and obviously I don't have to pay gas and all that, but it's still hard for me. My key worker, we only ever sit down, like, for a couple of minutes a day, like once a week and really that's no good.' [Service user]*

Staff shared some of these concerns about the 13 week limit, but there was also an acknowledgement that within the constraints of the scheme a cut-off point was not only necessary but helpful. There was a view that some service users would need much less post-release support (possibly as little as two weeks) but that for others, especially those with multiple needs, 13 weeks would not be enough:

*'Under the circumstances, because we haven't got enough staff, 13 weeks is probably about right but obviously if it was a bigger project, I think because a lot of it is confidence building, handholding, you know the struggle with welfare reform because no one seems to know a lot, it's getting through all of them like areas, then so I think if there was more staff, we would definitely benefit from longer term support' [Foundation]*

Concerns about the 13 week cut off point were another reason for favouring the option of supported housing:

*'I think we would to be honest, a lot of our ex-offenders or customers, I think we do feel happier about them going into supported accommodation initially*

*because we know that they're then going to get the support that they need, for more than 13 weeks and then you know longer term they can look at what is the best move for them and plan it, you know.' [Service user]*

The concerns expressed about the resources for the project were not confined to the 13 post-release weeks spent working with service users, but also about time spent on a day to day basis with some of them. For example, trips to HMP Northumberland were costly both in terms of time spent travelling and fuel. Throughout the research period additional staff members had been taken on to support the running of the scheme, although the workload of front line staff has remained difficult to manage.

### **Impact of Support Provided by Foundation**

On 31 of the questionnaires a worker was able to make an assessment as to how well the service user was maintaining their housing situation. These assessments are shown below:

<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Managing very well	13	41.9%
Managing well	7	22.6%
Managing with some difficulty	4	12.9%
Failed to manage	7	22.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100%</b>

This positive picture was confirmed by interview data, where service users were generally confident in their abilities to maintain a tenancy and gave themselves high scores, based on a scale of 1 to 10, across a range of independent living skills. Interviewees were able to identify the benefits of Foundation's help to secure housing; one service user said that without the support of Foundation following release they would have ended up 'in a cardboard box in the street'. Another said that this was the longest that they had ever kept their tenancy. One service user indicated that 'passing' the interview with his landlord gave him a confidence boost. He was surprised and excited at the thought that he 'must have made a good impression'.

Other interview comments showed that service users linked happiness with their housing situation to a reduced risk of reoffending. They indicated that appropriate housing was a key motivating factor for desistance, by giving them 'something to lose'. One service user said: 'Obviously, I'm delighted that I've got this place now...there's no way I want to jeopardise this'. Another said that having a home had made him 'proud'. When asked about their thoughts on returning to prison, one service user said adamantly: 'I'm not going back to prison. I'm not going to let that happen again'. Several suggested that without the support of Foundation, it is likely that they would have re-offended. Comments here included:

*'If it wasn't for her [Foundation worker], he'd have been back in jail by now'*  
*[Service user's partner]*

*'[Without the support of Foundation, it would] just be back the way it was'*  
*[Service user]*

*'The main thing was my housing. If I got my housing, then I'm laughing.'*  
*[Service user]*

Questionnaire data indicated that re-offending was known to have occurred in a minority of cases. Of 33 cases where the question was answered, in seven (21.2%) the service user was believed to have re-offended. In five of these cases, the offender had been returned to custody and another had been returned there for historic offences.

Beyond obtaining housing and avoiding reoffending, a number of service users were making positive changes to their lives at the point of interview. Some had managed to stay away from negative relationships and one was starting a new relationship, for example. Several reported rebuilding and maintaining relationships with children and family to be key motivating factors for change. For example, one service user said: 'I'd rather be out of my prison because of my kids and my dad. I've realised how much they mean to me since I've been out'. When asked how they felt about their life situation at present, one service user said 'Everything just seems to be starting to come together', while another said 'you get out of life what you put into it and I'm putting a lot more into it now'. He felt he had a purpose in life again and was confident that this would stop him from reoffending in the future.

A number of interview respondents also had a range of future aspirations, including acting as a mentor for people coming out of prison, gaining employment and rebuilding relationships with their children. One was very committed to finding work and to providing for his partner and three children:

*'Whether I've gotta knock on doors and hand CVs out, whatever it is I've gotta do, go and find out how to get someone to help me apply for these jobs online and stuff like that, I'm gonna do it...the underlying thing for me is my kids, my kids, my kids. They're the only thing what's keeping me going.'* *[Service user]*

Despite this positive picture, a number of interview respondents faced ongoing difficulties in their lives. For example, having held down a number of previous jobs, finding employment was proving difficult for some. One said: 'I sit in here sometimes and I think, 'I've got all these qualifications....and for what?'. In this case, being unemployed was placing stress on the service user's relationship with their partner. Another said: 'I wanna go back to work, yeah, but my convictions start like – I've had a lot of difficulties towards...' Financial difficulties were compounded by being unable to open a bank account in some cases, as one service user put it:

*'I've tried for years and years and years to get a bank account opened, I mean, in the past when I've worked I've had to use my cousin's bank account – like savings accounts to put my wages into. It's just crazy.'* [Service user]

Several service users were also battling on-going mental health problems; a situation sometimes compounded by the remnants of methadone dependency. One service user reported: 'I have had like suicidal thoughts and things like that since I've been out of prison, and I've never really had them before'. In his view, his continued reliance on methadone – though now modest – has prevented him from securing the medication with which to combat his depression and sleeplessness: 'they think just because I've been on drugs before, they think that I'm drug seeking....I'm not, I'm just asking for help'.

So the pattern revealed by the interviews was one of great appreciation of the support provided by Foundation – including support to access housing options that the service user would not otherwise have been aware of – and positive aspirations but a number of deeply entrenched ongoing difficulties with independent living.

### **Case Study**

The following case study has been provided by Foundation as an example of a service user who particularly benefitted from their services. A pseudonym is used.

Angela was referred to TTGP as she needed a high package of support upon release from HMP Low Newton. Angela had a history of chaotic behaviour, failed accommodation and offending and has previously received support from numerous services. She had been classified as MAPPA Level 3 due to the high level of risk she presented. An assessment was completed by Foundation to identify support needs and enable them to manage the risk.

Transport was not needed on the day of release, as this was provided by the probation service and the police. However, TTGP went to meet Angela at probation in order to start the package of support. At this initial meeting, Angela presented as distressed and anxious and received intensive support from probation, Foundation and her CPN.

A property had been identified for Angela, so TTG staff supported her to secure food and household goods, helped set up utilities and provided emotional support. Angela continued to receive support from TTG to help her maintain her accommodation and to avoid reoffending. Some of the support given included; supporting with benefits and payment collections, supervised spends and paying bills, registering with support services in relation to alcohol use and mental health, helping to report repairs relating to accommodation and promoting independence.

Angela demonstrated chaotic behaviour during the time TTG worked with her. This included being drunk when staff visited, spending time in police custody due to

behaviour when under influence of alcohol and making threats to harm herself, which resulted in hospital admission.

Angela identified her current accommodation as one of the main factors affecting her behaviour; due to this and a number of incidents which took place at the property, she refused to return. Foundation worked closely with Angela's CPN to look at other accommodation options that would meet her high support needs. Accommodation was then secured at a supported housing project.

This is now the longest period of time that Angela has remained out of prison. She has identified that she will require counselling for her alcohol use and feels that she is able manage her emotional wellbeing more appropriately, as she has access to 24 hour support. Foundation extended the time limit for support from TTGP in order to help Angela's transition into supported accommodation. Angela has expressed an interest in volunteering with Foundation and is very keen to become involved in a peer mentoring role.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

It should be borne in mind that the research team collected data about a small proportion of the prisoners who Foundation have worked with over the period of the project. Nonetheless, there are some clear trends in the data collected, which in some cases are supported by Foundation's own comprehensive statistics about its services.

Overcrowded prisons and the large number of short sentence prisoners are key difficulties when seeking to provide timely housing advice and support to prisoners. This was reflected in the large number of cases where Foundation had to begin their work with prisoners very close to their release date. Despite this difficulty, the TTGP project has achieved some important successes.

The interview data about the backgrounds of the service users, and the judgements about the likely housing situation of service users on release if they did not receive an intervention, suggest strongly that Foundation is fulfilling its brief to work with the most chaotic offenders who would be least likely to secure suitable housing on their own. Interviews with service users confirmed that most felt that they would have had little idea of how to find accommodation without support.

The first housing situation after release from prison was often an unsatisfactory one, including a number of short term options, which seems likely to be a reflection of the limited time available to work with prisoners before their release. However, there was substantial success in supporting service users to more suitable housing situations by the time that they finished working with Foundation. The finding that, of 32 service users who would have been expected to have no secure housing options on their release without an intervention, 26 were in a long term housing situation by the time Foundation finished working with them is possibly the most significant finding of the evaluation. Comparisons between the initial housing situation on

release and the final housing situation demonstrate the value of a service that continues beyond prison and into the community.

There are some minor qualifications to the very positive findings about securing long term accommodation. There were occasions when interviewers regarded private rented property as being in poor condition (despite the service users having a positive view of it) in addition to the cases where interviewees themselves were critical of conditions. In addition, supported housing appeared to sometimes be chosen as an option simply because it was a means of guaranteeing support to the service users, as so little was available in permanent accommodation. Both of these factors raise questions about the long term suitability of the housing chosen. They also highlight the very limited role of social landlords, despite local authority housing options teams usually being the first place that service users applied for accommodation. The perception of many service users that social rented housing was an option that was not available to them, due to their history of crime and difficulties with addictions, was one that echoes previous studies (e.g. Harding and Harding, 2006). The relationship between ex-prisoners and social landlords remains a topic of concern, despite good practice in seeking to facilitate access to this sector in some local authorities in the region.

The research could not provide a definitive answer to the question of whether the services provided by Foundation had contributed to reducing re-offending. However, interview data suggested that service users having housing that they were happy with produced a feeling that they had 'something to lose' by re-offending and provided a base for seeking to achieve positive change in their lives.

The process of moving into accommodation had been made smoother in many cases by the provision of support to meet basic material needs such as furniture. The personalisation fund appeared to have provided substantial benefits at very low cost. However, meeting these basic material needs is not the subject of a performance indicator for Foundation, highlighting the need for the commissioners of services to take a holistic view of the process of resettlement.

As noted earlier, the 2014 Offender Rehabilitation Act will result in major changes to the commissioning of housing related support. In addition to taking a holistic view of resettlement, this evaluation has suggested that three major features of commissioning should be that CRCs are required to:

- find a method by which discussion of housing options on release can occur earlier in a prisoner's sentence.
- encourage good practice among all local authorities and registered social landlords to ensure that social rented housing is a realistic option for ex-offenders who demonstrate that they are ready to fulfil tenancy obligations.
- have the capacity to provide effective housing support for as long as it is needed after release, to ensure that supported housing is only chosen where

it is the most appropriate option, not because there is no other means of ensuring support.

## References

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