

# Delivering better housing and employment outcomes for offenders on probation

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## Background

This report presents the key findings from a study that was focused on understanding how employment and accommodation outcomes for offenders on probation could be improved. The research was particularly concerned with exploring how strengths and weaknesses in information sharing influenced service delivery.

## Key findings

### *Successes in information sharing*

Good quality information sharing underpinned the delivery of housing and employment for offenders in two key ways. First, service delivery was enhanced by information sharing protocols that enabled good joint working between offender managers and other service providers. Second, careful management of the disclosure of offenders' criminal records helped enable access to work and housing. This was because when information on an offender was disclosed to landlords and employers within a trusted working relationship, there was a much better chance of the landlord or employer being willing to work with that offender.

### *Information sharing*

Where joint working was less developed, information sharing tended to be weaker. Information sharing between probation, specialist agencies working with offenders, prisons and Jobcentre Plus varied within and between probation areas.

Information sharing arrangements are not necessarily automatically generating the shared datasets that would enable easy generation of outcome monitoring data. In some cases, specific guidance may be necessary to ensure that a minimum dataset for outcome monitoring is available.

### *Access to housing and work*

Probation services and specialist agencies had often responded flexibly and imaginatively to meeting the housing needs of offenders. There was evidence of effective recruitment of private rented sector landlords to provide good housing outcomes for offenders. Some offenders were closer to being 'job ready' than others. There was evidence of effective joint working with mainstream employers by probation, specialist agencies and by Jobcentre Plus to provide access to paid work for offenders.

## Summary of research

### *About the research*

The research was focused on the delivery of Public Service Agreement 16 (PSA 16) for offenders. There is research evidence that when offenders are in settled and suitable accommodation and are in paid work they are significantly less likely to re-offend and PSA 16 is designed to deliver better accommodation and employment outcomes. The research was particularly focused on understanding the extent to which information sharing, including the role of the data protection legislation, influenced the delivery of accommodation and employment outcomes. The research involved

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interviews and focus groups with 95 service providers in six probation areas and a national conference with 97 participants from central government and local agencies. Interviews and focus groups were also conducted with 37 offenders.

The research was conducted by the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York. The project was jointly funded by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). A steering group for the research included representatives from Ministry of Justice, National Offender Management Service, Communities and Local Government and the Office of the Information Commissioner.

### *Information sharing for service delivery*

Information sharing is pivotal to the delivery of PSA 16 for offenders. The effectiveness of information sharing is highly dependent on trusted working relationships and is a part of good joint working.

There was strong evidence of effective information sharing for the purposes of frontline service delivery. This information sharing was happening as part of established, successful, joint working arrangements and was governed by information sharing protocols that drew free and informed consent for information sharing from offenders. The most developed joint working with protocols was found in urban areas and it tended to involve probation and specialist providers of housing support and education and training services.

Much of the information sharing that occurred involved the case-by-case sharing of 'working knowledge': a mixture of recorded information, perception and professional judgement. This 'working knowledge' was shared between frontline staff working for different organisations via telephone conversations, meetings and written communication. Working knowledge was often more highly valued than formal

records by frontline staff because it was both more focused on pertinent issues and nuanced.

One implication of information sharing often happening on a case-by-case basis between frontline staff was that agencies were not routinely combining datasets. Whilst the practice of sharing working knowledge about single cases was valuable in helping individual offenders, it meant that networked shared databases were not necessarily being developed to help with monitoring and evaluation.

Highly organised information sharing between probation and specialist housing and employment services for offenders could exist alongside more variable information sharing with other agencies. Information sharing with Jobcentre Plus was well developed in some areas, but was less well developed in some others. Effective information sharing was most common in areas in which Jobcentre Plus had developed a specialist, offender focused, staff resource.

There could be poor coordination and information sharing with prisons that were not within the area covered by a probation service as information sharing protocols were negotiated locally. Generally speaking, there was evidence that information sharing was less developed in some rural areas, in part because there were lower concentrations of offenders and fewer specialist services in these areas.

Failures in information sharing could result from confusion around the legislation, but they also appeared to be a 'litmus test' for poor joint working, i.e. when information sharing failures were occurring it was generally in the context of poor joint working.

### *Managing information on criminal records to overcome barriers to employment and housing*

Landlords and employers were viewed as likely to 'bin' applications from someone they knew to be an offender. Disclosure management

processes had been developed by probation and by some specialist agencies to counteract the tendency for offenders to be instantly rejected by employers and landlords. These processes built up working relationships with employers and landlords and provided trusted reassurances that offenders did not represent a risk. There was also an emphasis on providing information on offenders' positive achievements.

There was strong evidence that disclosure management processes which built up trusted working relationships with employers and landlords had tangible positive impacts. Jobs and housing were being secured for offenders on probation using this approach.

Disclosure management processes can be used, alongside making a good 'business case', to persuade employers and landlords to work with offenders. Making a good business case meant that the advantages of offenders as employees and as tenants were clearly explained, emphasising, for example, evidence of an individual's personal reliability, qualifications and work experience obtained. There was strong evidence of success in using this approach to encourage mainstream employers and landlords to work with offenders.

### *Performance monitoring*

Some issues existed in respect of the availability, extent and quality of data that were available for outcome monitoring. Much of the local sharing of information happened on a case-by-case basis between workers and professionals, rather than by combining datasets. This meant that networked shared databases were not necessarily being developed at local level, even in situations in which the use of data sharing protocols and free and informed consent processes was widespread.

If richer data were to be required for monitoring performance in delivering housing and employment outcomes for offenders, it would be necessary to issue guidance on the data

required, as it would not necessarily exist or be systematically recorded at local level. There were significant logistical barriers to longitudinal tracking of offenders once they left probation.

### *Access to housing*

Offenders on probation were often in suitable accommodation. This was because some offenders serving Community Orders had settled housing and some of those leaving prison could return to their previous homes. However, offenders tended to be at heightened risk of homelessness because they often had needs, characteristics and experiences that are known to have a mutually reinforcing relationship with homelessness, such as mental health problems, substance misuse issues and support needs.

The responses to securing housing for offenders on probation in a context in which affordable housing was generally scarce were often highly flexible and imaginative. A key feature of the success of these responses was the ability to employ multiple routes when attempting to meet housing need.

There was very heavy reliance on the private rented sector (PRS) to provide housing for offenders on probation, particularly in London, as well in some rural areas. The PRS could deliver suitable housing very quickly, but the sector was limited in scale.

There was strong evidence of success in the recruitment of PRS landlords. By using disclosure management processes, which carefully managed a minimal sharing of information on risk and provided reassurance that an offender would be a 'good tenant', probation and specialist housing support services had arranged successful housing outcomes in the private rented sector.

Some forms of accommodation regarded as 'settled' under NI 143 were not regarded as settled and sustainable by some service providers.

## Access to employment

The path to employment for offenders on probation may be long and complex, or it may be short. Some offenders were regarded as 'job ready', others were regarded as very far from being employable.

Professionals reported that offenders often needed to develop low level 'soft skills', including 'learning how to learn', and the development of emotional literacy to allow an individual to better manage classroom environments, before progressing on to acquiring basic skills.

There was strong evidence of success in recruiting mainstream employers to employ offenders on probation. This involved the use of disclosure management processes, which released carefully controlled minimal summary information on an offender's criminal record and the risk they represented within a trusted working relationship. This also involved sharing positive information about the distance an offender had 'travelled' (i.e. become more employable), their achievements and generally presenting a 'business case' to employers. Probation, specialist services and offender dedicated Jobcentre Plus staff had all secured work for offenders using this model.

Professionals reported that there was a case for a more nuanced measure of 'distance travelled' towards employment for those instances in which an offender on probation has got a lot closer to being employable, even if they have not yet secured paid work. However, the statistical measurement of outcomes in areas such as acquisition of 'soft' skills is problematic.

## Key recommendations

Information sharing about offenders routinely occurs at the frontline level between organisations. However, there was evidence of failures of information sharing in some key areas. There is a case for considering the development of formal, accessible guidance for information sharing between prisons and probation, between probation and housing

support services and between probation, specialist education and training services and Jobcentre Plus. Such guidance would need to be produced through cooperation at national level.

The information sharing that does occur does not always produce detailed and consistent data that would enable more detailed outcome monitoring. There is a case for developing specific guidance on establishing a minimum outcome data set that would enrich the data available on housing and employment outcomes. This would again need to involve the key agencies at national level.

Any development of guidance on information sharing needs to involve the Information Commissioner's Office.

There is good practice in 'recruiting' mainstream landlords and employers to work with offenders on probation. Both jobs and housing for offenders are secured through this route. There is a case for developing specific, accessible guidance on how best to achieve this, as a criminal record is a major barrier to housing and employment.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 648 1. Research Report 610. October 2009).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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