

CASE STUDY: Partners work together to make advice work for people impacted by the justice system in West Lothian.

The [national strategy for community justice](#) provides a shared vision to help partners and communities work together effectively to improve community justice outcomes, while retaining the flexibility to adapt to local needs and circumstances.

The strategy states that “to improve financial inclusion, community justice partners should work together to improve access to financial and welfare and advice services for people who have committed offences, families and victims of crime”.

This example shows how advice workers in West Lothian work alongside justice colleagues and others to prevent and reduce reoffending through financial inclusion.

[Addiewell prison](#) opened in 2008 and houses all offender types except for females and convicted young offenders. It is situated in the village of Addiewell, West Lothian. Addiewell is designed as a ‘learning’ prison, where offenders can address their offending behaviour and the circumstances which led to their imprisonment. The learning aspect aims to improve their employability prospects, their wellbeing and community support networks, leading to a reduction in reoffending.

West Lothian Council [Advice Shop](#) receives funding through the [European Social Fund](#) as part of the [One2One project](#) to deliver targeted support to ex-offenders. It was first established in 2014 and is part of a wider campaign to help people affected by substance misuse, long term mental health problems and kinship care. It is focused on helping some of the most vulnerable, socially and financially excluded clients who can be hard to engage and often live very chaotic lifestyles.

The adviser engages with the residents at Addiewell through weekly sessions in the [Librite Centre](#); face-to-face interviews take place regardless of whether the resident is on remand, awaiting trial or sentenced.

The project is now well established with offenders and partners engaging on regular basis. The project covers one full-time adviser whose time is spread between HMP Addiewell, the Advice Shop, home or outreach visits.

[West Lothian Citizens Advice Bureau](#) (CAB) provides an advice worker who works in the prison also and this project is jointly match funded through [The Robertson Trust](#) and [Sodexo](#). It pays for a part-time worker who spends one day per week working in prison and one day per week at the CAB.

Craig Coupar, CAB worker says, “Advice workers help to prevent debt increasing for people whilst in prison. Overpayment of benefit and housing rent arrears are common problem debts to deal with but things like mobile phone contracts, Sky packages and other



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debt commitments may need to be cancelled or put on hold to prevent debts escalating and incurring further charges.”

Both projects complement each other and avoid duplication. The project advisers in the Advice Shop and CAB have a good working relationship and an agreement on how they deal with referrals.

West Lothian CAB also hosts the [Armed Services Advice Project](#) (ASAP). The advice worker deals with veterans in custody mainly in HMP Addiewell and HMP Edinburgh and covers Edinburgh, East Lothian, Midlothian and West Lothian. Alan Hamilton of ASAP says, “It can be difficult for some people to declare that they are a veteran for personal reasons, which can sometimes mean that the person may lose out on vital service”. Alan tries to overcome this issue by engaging with the prison service veterans in custody liaison officer and prisoners at the coffee mornings to encourage others to come forward for support and raise awareness of the services on offer.

Community partner meetings take place weekly inside the prison and both the CAB and the Advice Shop staff members participate in these meetings along with other partners including [Job Centre Plus](#), [Cyrenians](#), [housing](#), [Circle](#), [NHS](#) and more.

‘[Integrated Case Management](#)’ (ICM) meetings which involve the prison officers take place separate to this. ICM is a process where Scottish Prison Service (SPS) work with other agencies to provide support to prisoners throughout their sentence. This is focused on reducing re-offending by ensuring, where possible, risks are identified and a plan is put in place to reduce those risks. Prisoners are encouraged to think about the areas of their life that they need to change and areas where they would like to engage in support. Plans are then made for their release to decide what prison supports and activities will help them to make a successful return to their community.

This approach brings together the prisoner, key internal staff, external staff, and, where appropriate, the family to support the prisoner through this process. Partners are given the opportunity to discuss referrals between agencies and how best to work together to support people.

The person in custody must give permission to invite the money adviser to their ICM meeting. An automatic referral is made six weeks prior to the prisoner’s release. Self-referrals can be made to agencies through a kiosk in the prison at any time.

The advisor provides a good link between prison and the community by working in partnership with other agencies to offer advice on benefits, housing, debt and energy issues. They assist with application forms, medical assessments, challenging unfair decisions up to appeals process and stabilising the person’s financial situation to ultimately help prevent reoffending.

Prisoners on longer term sentences (more than four years) would be referred to the local authority Criminal Justice Social Work team. The West

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Lothian Advice worker supports work with ex-offenders outside of prison and a high volume of referrals are received via social work.

The Challenge

Romana Stelmach, is the West Lothian Advice Shop adviser on the prison project and says “trying to deal with people who don’t engage is one of the biggest challenges.

“You need a different attitude in dealing with this client group as people often do not come to appointments or remember what they have been advised to do, so you find that you can be dealing with a much more complex set of circumstances.

“You often find that other services can be judgemental of the person you are trying to help who has been caught in a circle of offending, substance misuse, alcohol misuse and mental health problems.”

People often face multiple barriers when released from prison around access to benefits, housing, homelessness, access to banking and registering at a GP, especially when they have no fixed address.

The advice workers continue to raise awareness of the work being done with offenders and attend various team meetings and provide talks to others.

Karen Nailen, Manager, West Lothian CAB is co-ordinating the delivery of an event at the prison in April 2018 with the aim of helping partners understand more about the holistic package of services provided at the CAB and to help raise awareness of the projects with all community partners. This learning event will be widened out to encourage advice workers outwith the West Lothian area who work with prisoners to participate and share their own knowledge and experience.

Example

An ex-offender who served five months in prison did not apply for benefit on release and instead moved in with a parent and managed to get help from friends to get by. This is despite having been seen by the advice worker pre-release and having worked on a plan to follow on release.

The person struggled with alcohol misuse and mental health problems and were just not able to deal with basic things. Eventually this person ended up back as a referral to the advice worker.

The advice worker visited the client at their parent’s home to help claim benefit they were entitled to. The feedback highlighted that the person would never have visited the advice office or made any homelessness presentation as they were too anxious and would never take that step on their own to deal with their benefit issues.

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The advice worker managed to get benefit payments in place and help the client to get their life back on track gaining confidence to then start to engage with their GP and 'detox' programme.

Romana said, "It becomes very difficult to trace someone on release from prison if no details are supplied at the time (e.g.; telephone or address). This often results in the person coming back into the advice service months later at crisis point or returning to reoffending and prison if their circumstances do not improve."

The procedure followed is that the housing co-ordinator in prison will make an appointment with the prisoner for when they are released with the local homelessness team; if that person fails to show for that appointment and can't be traced then that becomes a bigger challenge.

Intended Outcomes

This project is aimed at creating a dedicated link between prison and the community. It helps the person to achieve more stability and improves rehabilitation back and prevent reoffending.

Action/Approach Taken

Integrated Case Management falls into two main categories, Enhanced and Standard.

Enhanced ICM – Prisoners serving four years or more and all prisoners who are subject to post-release statutory supervision.

Standard ICM - Prisoners who are serving less than four years and not subject to post-release supervision (mainly short-term prisoners). Access to supports on a voluntary basis will be identified and offered.

Every prisoner is given an interview when they first go into prison. This interview will be carried out by a Prison Officer and is called a 'core screen' interview. This is used to find out as much information about the prisoner as possible. That allows everyone to put the appropriate supports in place and refer to other agencies.

Prisoners can either ask or be offered support for issues they may have with:

- alcohol or drug addiction
- reading, writing or working with numbers
- housing
- relationships
- violence
- mental illness
- training for work
- offending behaviour
- benefit/debt

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“We know that debt is really prevalent with our client group and that they need more intensive support to manage their tenancies and improve their money management skills. If the advice workers did not target support to this client group I dread to think what position these people would end up in.”

Romana says, “Although all the current referrals are either paper-based or email-based the process works well for the referrals through the prison services.” A prison appointment system exists and all waiting times for appointments are discussed at the partner meetings.

Obstacles and Issues

Housing

Keeping a tenancy and dealing with rent arrears when in prison is very challenging. The main reason for losing a tenancy is rent arrears, which cannot be covered by Housing Benefit.

In the case of a short sentence, the advice workers can assist with claiming Housing Benefit; any rent arrears accrued can be negotiated with housing officers, arranging repayment plans after release. Longer sentences cause larger rent arrears, resulting with evictions and debt still owed or giving up the tenancy to prevent rent arrears occurring due to lack of income and no entitlement to Housing Benefit.

It is anticipated that there will be more cases of rent arrears and potential homelessness due to lack of entitlement to housing costs of Universal Credit.

The advice worker investigated how the project could address the barrier to support sex offenders who have a ban on access to the internet. They could confirm that access to the internet, or to devices that connect to the internet, although may be restricted, are not banned and that the person would still be able to meet requirements under supervision from Job Centre Plus staff.

Affordable Credit

Access to banking and affordable credit options was identified as a barrier for this client group. Steps were taken to build relationships with three banks in the area who will now accept a discharge letter from someone leaving prison as proof of ID.

Ex-offenders often have bad credit scores. The council wanted to overcome the challenge of access to affordable credit options for people and entered into a consortium agreement with Fife and Falkirk Councils and [Conduit Scotland](#). It now provides a shop where people can access more affordable loans on the high street and online.

John Robertson, [Change, grow, live](#) (CGL), is one of the community partners who works very closely with service users to help them change their lives for the better and achieve positive and life-affirming goals. John said, “We know that debt is really prevalent with our client group and that they need more intensive support to manage their tenancies and improve their money management skills. If the advice workers did not target support to this client group I dread to think what position these people would end up in.” John helps accompany people to visits with the advice workers and other agencies both in and outside of prison

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whilst supporting them through any anxiety and addiction issues whilst rehabilitating.

Results

The project helps to reduce and prevent reoffending. It improves access and support into employment and helps people gain financial stability.

Engagement and support is extended to wider families. Some prisoners have children who often end up in kinship care, which can have a financial impact on carers and families. The project helps identify these issues, ensures entitlement to benefits is maximised and provides information and support for people who need it most.

The links and joint working with criminal justice social work has improved dealings with people on community payback orders or those who have mental health problems and addiction issues.

Awareness talks get delivered when any change to prison staff to help with service continuity.

The DWP is one of the community partners and it sees the prisoner before liberation to discuss what types of benefits the person can claim once released. The DWP offers appointments to everyone who is sentenced and who will be released. It helps people to know about disability benefits and where to go for this and the advice worker will then check entitlement and help the person to claim the benefit.

In the first year of this arrangement the service saw a 60% increase in referrals to the project with enquires mainly relating to benefit health checks, assisting with benefit claims, rent arrears and homelessness.

Understand the client group and their needs. For this project, the client group were mainly single and male. Advisers had to take a different approach for this client group.

West Lothian Advice Shop



2016/17

106 customers seen in HMP Addiewell and referred through the Criminal Justice Social Work service

Client financial gain: £709,648 (welfare benefits)

2017/18

190 customers seen in HMP Addiewell and referred through the Criminal Justice Social Work service

Client financial gain: £900,000 (welfare benefits)

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West Lothian CAB



2016/17

239 clients seen in HMP Addiewell

Client financial gain: £4,928 (includes charitable grants, legal costs, debt write off, benefits and tax payments)

2017/18

221 customers seen in HMP Addiewell

Client financial gain: £6,388 (includes charitable grants, legal costs, debt write off, benefits and tax payments)

Lessons Learned

Partnership working is extremely important as it helps to encourage a more holistic service which achieves better outcomes for people. It's important to get that right from the start and establish the pathway for referrals.

It's about making it as smooth and simple as possible for others to refer as it's all about dealing with people in crisis situations. Do not overcomplicate the process as the most essential things like access to food, clothes and housing are all important issues.

Understand the client group and their needs. For this project, the client group were mainly single and male. Advisers had to take a different approach for this client group.

It's important that the adviser feels comfortable and has the right skill set to be able to deal with the range of complexities involved and be comfortable to provide a good quality advice service on a range of issues in a more challenging and different environment.

Next Steps

The next steps involve two further members of the Advice Shop undergoing prison training and procedures to allow continuity of service during staff leave periods and prevent any backlog of referrals.

To implement an early intervention and referral process at date of liberation. The advice worker will then assess the client need and any intensive support within a few days of liberation.

Improve recording of data of housing advice and homelessness prevention and record of tenancies being secured as well as level of rent and council tax reduced and housing options advice.

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To continue to improve on the actions and delivery of the [Community Justice Outcomes Improvement Plan](#).

Additional Information

- [Families Outside](#)
- The Improvement Service has published a [case study](#) highlighting how partners work together in West Lothian.
- [Community Justice Outcomes Performance and Improvement Framework](#)
- [National Strategy for Community Justice](#)
- [Community Justice Scotland](#)
- [Scottish Prison Service](#)
- [Prison-based Social Work at Addiewell Prison](#)
- [West Lothian CAB](#)
- [West Lothian Council Advice Shop](#)

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