

**Preventing Offender Accommodation Loss Project****Stockton Briefing**

1. The Tees Valley Preventing Offender Accommodation Loss (POAL) Project was established after a successful bid for funding from the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) and the Ministry of Justice. Funding was confirmed in July 2008 to set up a sub-regional partnership between Middlesbrough Council (lead organisation), Stockton Council, Redcar and Cleveland Council, Darlington Council and Hartlepool Council, their partner landlords and the Prison and Probation service. Funding was provided to establish a demonstrator project for female offenders and remand or serving a sentence at HMP/YOI Low Newton and returning to the Tees Valley area. The project became operational in February 2009, being extended to include HMP Holme House in March 2010.
2. The project seeks to demonstrate ways of working between Local Authorities, Housing Providers and local Prisons that can reduce the loss of settled accommodation where appropriate. The project seeks to prevent this by:
  - Maintaining tenancies, utilising housing benefit regulations or by the agreement with the housing provider
  - Terminating tenancies, where appropriate, effectively reducing unnecessary arrears and anxiety.
  - Development of local area agreements and systems for accessing new tenancies for discharge where a previous tenancy has been terminated.
3. Traditional based prison resettlement projects have generally concentrated on the back end; securing accommodation for release, as a result they are usually reactive services. The POAL Project seeks to address this by focusing on the front end preventative work; securing tenancies where possible or ensuring they are terminated if they cannot be preserved; carrying out work to address the barriers that will limit the clients access to accommodation on release.
4. The accommodation strategy for offenders under the Reducing Re-Offending National Plan recognised the importance of key tasks during and soon after the induction process in preserving, closing down or transferring existing tenancies. There was a recognition that this work was essential in securing improvements in the accommodation outcomes that are sustainable and contribute to reducing the risk of re-offending and harm to the public.
5. One of the reasons behind the success of the POAL Project has been the flexible approach taken to each case. Although there are a number of givens, such as having to work within the regulations governing Housing Benefit, we look at each case in turn and work for the best possible outcomes for the individual in terms of maintaining their accommodation or where necessary relinquishing it. We have tried to think creatively round problems and barriers and have succeeded in the majority of cases, even where there seemed little at the outset that could be done to protect the tenancy.
6. In relation to tenancy protection the POAL Project has developed a procedure which is broadly adopted in each case;
  - I. Check the clients eligibility for Housing Benefit

- II. Inform the relevant Housing Benefit Department, establish whether the claim is active, are there any gaps, if so prepare the backdating request.
  - III. Contact the Housing Provider/Landlord to explain the circumstances, explain housing benefit regulations, and establish if there are any issues with the tenancy with the aim of keeping the tenancy available and resolving the issues if possible, reminding Landlords of the legal process that must be followed if they feel the tenancy cannot be sustained, making it clear that while the tenant is in custody POAL will act as a point of contact for any queries.
  - IV. Liaise with other interested parties e.g. tenants family, support agencies, Offender Supervisors/Managers etc
7. While some prisons approach to tenancy sustainment may be a perfunctory check to see if the client is eligible for housing benefit before giving the offender a housing benefit form to complete and send off we believe that this is unsatisfactory. Each client has a face to face interview where they are assessed and the relevant documentation is completed and explained, explaining their responsibility as a tenant and the responsibilities of the landlord, offering to contact family/friends to explain the situation, reducing any anxiety they may have. This case management approach is adopted for each client.
8. Expertise in housing benefit regulations is not required. We have found that the common sense approach is more important than an in-depth knowledge of the system.
9. The key to protecting a tenancy is communication; establishing good relationships with key players in the whole tenancy protection process is vital, and, once done pays enormous dividends. Good links are needed with staff in the local housing benefit offices, social housing providers, rents departments and private landlords. It is important never to assume officers within the same organisation communicate; while it's time consuming it is important to contact each officer; this stops disasters occurring.
10. Where accommodation has to be relinquished, again, the POAL Project has endeavoured to adopt a common sense approach to the issues this raises. While it important to act quickly to ensure that unnecessary arrears are not accrued it is important to work at the client's pace, allowing them time to come to terms with the situation and the ramifications of a custodial sentence; offering support and advice through the process. A claim is made to housing benefit to cover the notice period and the landlord is informed of the situation. The project will act as an intermediary between the tenant and the landlord to ensure the tenancy is ended to the benefit of both parties. The project will liaise with other parties, for example the family, to ensure the process runs as smoothly as possible. The project has managed to resolve a major issue faced by clients when relinquishing the accommodation; the issue of storage. We have taken a unique approach to resolving this problem and have hired a garage, so that , in cases where there is no alternative, we have been able to store belongings to avoid the prisoner losing their belongings, for example treasured photographs, clothing and important documentation.
11. In a nutshell, common sense, communication and keeping the landlord and client central to the process.
12. In relation to performance, the project has exceeded expectations and provided a much needed link between prisons, probation and housing partners.

13. Over the past 2 years, the POAL officers have provided in excess of 132 assessments and positive interventions to offenders from Stockton who are on remand or sentenced at Holme House or Low Newton prisons. (Final figures are being calculated) Their activities have resulted in:
- over 47 tenancies being preserved for re-occupation upon release from prison, thus saving housing authorities and their stock transfer partners approximately £141,000 (based upon the costs associated, such as lost rent and repair charges, with abandoned tenancies currently estimated at around £3,000 per tenancy);
  - In excess of 39 tenancies of offenders on longer term sentences have been properly terminated (thus ensuring fraudulent and overpayment claims are prevented, loss of rent income to landlords is minimised, and that offenders do not accrue rent arrears or other tenancy charges); and,
  - Accommodation has been arranged for 6 female offenders ready for their release from prison ensuring a seamless 'through the gate' service.
14. In addition, the project officers have been recognised by numerous agencies for the considerable and invaluable support, advice and assistance that they have also provided to offenders through their work. It is acknowledged that this has also helped local authorities to reduce homelessness amongst offenders, and local crime and disorder partnerships to reduce reoffending.
15. The POAL officers have been invited to attend the North East Prison and After Care Service (NEPACS) awards ceremony which is to be held in the Barons' Hall of Lumley Castle, Chester-le-Street on 27 June, where they will be presented with a 'Highly Commended' certificate presented by Sir Peter Vardy of the Vardy Foundation.
16. There have been significant changes to the project over the past 3 months; Middlesbrough were concerned that they would feel a significant impact if the project were to finish. They took the decision to fund the Housing and Prison Liaison post. This worker now works with offenders returning to Middlesbrough only. This post is funded to August 2012 with a view to extending the funding. The Development Officers post is now funded up until March 2012. The Development Officer is then funded up until June 2012 to write an evaluation and business case for regional commissioning. (Brief is attached) The POAL project is not currently providing a service to offenders from Stockton; these cases are now being managed by Shelter.
17. Although NOMS have recently awarded the contract for Housing, Debt and Finance in the region to Shelter, we believe that the loss of the POAL project will be keenly felt by each local authority. We firmly believe that significant numbers of offenders will lose their accommodation unnecessarily, making them homeless. It has been acknowledged that securing accommodation for offenders is not the easiest tasks; this group is viewed as unpopular by both housing providers and neighbours. We believe that a project that has a proven track record of sustaining accommodation should be supported.
18. As beneficiaries of the project's activities, therefore, we would encourage you to consider making a contribution to enable the project to continue beyond March 2012. We believe that sub-regional co-commissioning would strengthen the project. NOMS have recently confirmed that they would co-commission with the sub-regional partners.