

Reducing reoffending in the North East: improving joint working between prisons and local authorities

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Executive Summary

This project has been initiated by the Association of North East Councils (ANEC) and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Directorate of Public Sector Prisons in the North East. The aim was to identify opportunities for joint work between prisons and local authorities in the North East to reduce reoffending and the associated harm to communities.

The project has been conducted at a time when public sector organisations are facing considerable financial challenges and organisational change. At the same time, the Government's plans to transform rehabilitation will have huge implications for existing partnerships, bringing competition into services for offenders, with new commissioners and providers.

There are approximately 4419 adults in custody in North East prisons. 63% of these prisoners came from within the North East and are likely to return to North East communities when they are released.¹ Reoffending rates for those who have served custodial sentences are high and this comes at great cost to the public purse and to local communities.

Through Community Safety Partnerships, Health and Wellbeing Boards, their duties and their general power of competence, local authorities have a vital leadership role to play in reducing reoffending. To work together effectively, prisons and local authorities require a good understanding of each others business, consistency in approach, shared priorities and outcomes, effective communication links at both strategic and operational level and the sharing of information in a timely manner. There is evidence of effective joint working, but these elements are not consistently in place throughout the North East.

We recommend a strong joint commitment to action which aims to maintain and build upon successful integrated approaches to reducing reoffending. We propose the creation of a North East reducing reoffending forum to aid this, to improve communication and to consider opportunities for greater collaboration between local authorities, prisons and other key partners in all sectors.

We suggest that the North East should act promptly to seek to influence future 'through the gate' and offender management services, which will be contracted at the national level, using evidence of local priorities, needs and successful approaches. We also recommend that prisons and local authorities work collaboratively, with other key partners, to improve pathways for offenders in relation to housing, social care and children and families.

We have identified actions for local authorities in their role as service providers and commissioners. We also suggest steps local authorities can take with their partners, including housing providers and Health and Wellbeing Boards, to improve pathways between prison and the community in relation to accommodation (including accommodation for women offenders), financial inclusion and the mental and physical health of offenders.

¹ This data represents an average of part of the prison population, is approximate and should be treated as such. It has been produced for the purposes of this report and should not be reproduced or used for another purpose without the permission of NOMS. As it is approximated over time, it will not match official statistics.

In prisons we have identified opportunities to strengthen the 'whole prison' approach to release planning, build on the positive work of Integrated Offender Management (IOM) prison officers, support prisoners with finances and benefits, work with voluntary and community sector partners and increase the use of release on temporary licence (ROTL) to support resettlement.

Summary of key findings

- Prisons and local authorities appreciate the benefits of joint working but there is not a consistent approach to this across the North East.
- There is support for establishing a North East reducing reoffending forum to improve information sharing, consistency of approach and to progress specific issues where a shared approach would be beneficial.
- At an operational level there are some examples of strong working relationships between staff in prisons and in community-based services. However, some prison and local authority officers are unclear how they should work with one another and this task is complicated by geographical boundaries.
- Integrated Offender Management (IOM) models have demonstrated the value of a holistic approach and of joint working between police, probation, prisons and local authorities. They have also demonstrated the benefits of co-locating staff from different agencies. In response to government consultation, ANEC and the two local Probation Trusts have expressed concern that forthcoming changes to offender management could lead to the fragmentation of integrated approaches that have developed locally.
- The dedicated IOM prison officer role is highly valued by IOM and local authority partners. The key to this role is timely information sharing and enabling access to offenders in custody.
- Prison staff told us that planning for the release of short sentence prisoners can be fragmented. There is sometimes a lack of communication between different teams within the prison, which can result in duplicated work. These offenders often have multiple needs which necessitate early planning for release with a coordinated approach between community-based and prison-based services.
- As more agencies become involved in the delivery of offender management and 'through the gate' resettlement services, a key challenge will be to ensure services are coordinated and communication between agencies is strong.

- There is an opportunity and some support for increasing the provision of peer mentoring services across the North East to aid resettlement, but there is a risk of duplication and confusion as there is no central coordination of these services.
- Accommodation is widely felt to be the most important and most challenging resettlement pathway. There is an active Regional Homelessness Group which has taken forward projects to address the housing needs of offenders. However, some tensions remain around the way homeless applications for prisoners are dealt with by local authorities and with how emergency accommodation is accessed. There is scope to strengthen working links between prisons and local authorities in relation to this.
- The 'settled accommodation' indicator used by NOMS is not a reliable measure of true housing outcomes. Early intervention, timely referrals and preventing accommodation loss are key elements of joint working.
- Some good work is carried out in prisons under the children and families pathway but it is not underpinned by a multi-agency outcome-focused strategy across the North East. This work could be strengthened, and resources targeted more effectively, if prisons and children's services departments took a shared 'whole family' approach to this pathway.
- The finance, benefits and debt pathway is one of the least developed. Recent welfare reform is likely to have a negative impact on offenders but there is currently no joined-up approach to advising prisoners and preparing them for this.
- There are some good examples of relationships between prisons and local employers which can provide alternative pathways into employment for offenders. Increasingly prisons are considering social enterprise as a means of providing training and work experience for offenders.
- Stakeholders are concerned that many offenders lack the skills and means to access the on-line services which will be increasingly important for finding work and accessing benefits.
- There is evidence of regular liaison between healthcare staff in prisons and community-based services. However, within prisons there can be a lack of communication between healthcare staff and the Offender Management Unit in relation to release planning.
- The healthcare pathways for offenders with learning disabilities and those with 'lower level' mental health problems could be strengthened. There are also gaps in relation to referrals for social care assessments for offenders whilst in custody and on release.

- The pathways for offenders requiring drug treatment are generally good, although there is still scope to improve information sharing both into and out of prisons. Pathways for those requiring alcohol treatment and those in recovery are less well established. There has been a positive move towards a recovery agenda in prisons, and to integrated drug and alcohol treatment services in prisons and the community.
- There are examples of good practice in relation to holistic, women-specific support services for female offenders. However, the availability of these women-specific services varies across the North East. There are concerns about gaps in relation to in-reach and out-reach work to engage women with the most complex needs.
- There is a shortage of supported women-only accommodation suitable for female offenders with complex needs in most local authority areas and this limits the ability of support agencies to work effectively with complex women offenders.
- It is timely for prisons to consider how they can progress reducing reoffending work with local authorities, and gain a more consistent approach across the North East, through their developing Mobilisation, Transition and Transformation (MTT)² arrangements.

Joint Working

Recommendations for joint action

1. NOMS and local authorities should work together with other key partners via a North East reducing reoffending forum. The remit of the forum should be to strengthen communication, create a framework for information sharing, consider opportunities for joined-up approaches, joint-funding or co-commissioning of services and to respond to the opportunities, issues and risks presented by the planned reforms of offender management and 'through the gate' services.
2. In advance of the competition for rehabilitation services, ANEC and NOMS should work with partners (including local Police and Crime Commissioners) to articulate local priorities (including the particular needs of women offenders) to the commissioners of future rehabilitation service and to potential providers.

Recommendations to local authorities

3. Local authorities participating in pilot work with adults with multiple complex needs, including the forthcoming 'Making Every Adult Matter' pilots, should ensure the criminal justice sector is actively engaged in this work.

Recommendations to NOMS / North East prisons

4. North East prisons should agree a process to strengthen information sharing between Heads of Reducing Reoffending in relation to reducing reoffending approaches in their own establishments and their engagement with partners.

5. NOMS and North East prisons should maintain and build on the role of the IOM prison officer which is highly regarded by partners. Consideration should be given to mainstreaming aspects of this role within the role of Offender Supervisors.
6. Prisons should seek opportunities to co-locate some Offender Supervisors with DART (Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team), housing workers and family support workers within the prison to strengthen the 'whole prison' approach to release planning for short sentence offenders and to strengthen expertise and links with community-based services. Attention should be given to early joint release-planning for those with complex needs and the highest risk of reoffending.
7. Prisons should seek to have a consistent approach to partner agencies visiting prisoners for resettlement purposes and should consider developing a framework for all North East establishments covering external agencies engaged in resettlement work.

Accommodation

Recommendations for joint action

8. NOMS and the Regional Homelessness Group should strengthen and formalise their relationship through a task group with a specific remit for housing and offenders. This group would consider and progress the issues raised in this report and a previous report by ANEC on offender accommodation in the North East and monitor the outcomes of current joint initiatives.

Recommendations to local authorities

9. Local authorities should work with their social housing providers to review allocations practices and ensure allocation decisions do not unreasonably restrict access to social housing for offenders.
10. Local authorities should work with their social housing providers to encourage proactive engagement with police, probation and prisons in order to preserve tenancies or end tenancies in a managed way where a tenant is in prison. Housing providers should be encouraged to reflect this in their policies, protocols and practices.
11. Local authorities should consider how the use of administration fees in the private sector affects tenants in their area and work with landlords to ensure it is not a barrier to accessing private rented accommodation.
12. Local authorities should consider applications to prison governors for community discharge discretionary grants. This could help to secure accommodation prior to a prisoner's release where a 'through the gate' worker is supporting the prisoner and there is a risk of homelessness.

Recommendations to NOMS / North East prisons

13. Prisons should ensure Offender Supervisors are briefed to tackle the housing myths which circulate amongst prisoners. This would support the prisons' Every Contact Matters agenda.

14. NOMS North East should work with its housing contract providers to review activities to prevent offender accommodation loss and put monitoring of outcomes in place to identify any gaps in provision.

Finance, Benefits and Debt

Recommendations to local authorities

15. Local authorities should work with prisons to raise awareness of welfare reform and financial inclusion support available to families. For example, local authorities and their partners could supply information and displays or consider running surgeries through prison visitor centres.
16. Local authorities should consider how welfare rights services and local advice agencies are represented on local reducing reoffending strategic groups and whether these agencies are able to provide evidence of unmet need amongst prisoners and their families to support the local authorities' financial inclusion work.

Recommendations to NOMS / North East prisons

17. Prisons should ensure Offender Supervisors and prisoners are aware of the local schemes which have replaced Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans and ensure there is a process for supporting prisoners to access them where eligible.

Mental and Physical Health

Recommendations for joint action

18. NOMS, prisons and local authorities should work together to develop a social care screening tool for prison staff and a clear social care pathway including a discharge planning process for prisoners with identified social care needs.
19. Local authorities, prisons and NOMS should work with other health and wellbeing partners to strengthen healthcare pathways for offenders with 'lower level' mental health problems and those not previously known to community mental health services.

Recommendations to local authorities

20. Health and Wellbeing Boards should ensure the health needs of offenders, including mental health, are fully reflected in local Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNAs) and strategies.
21. Health and Wellbeing Boards should encourage GP practices to identify a lead GP for patients who have had contact with the criminal justice system.
22. Local reducing reoffending strategic groups should seek to engage mental health and learning disability services in order to consider and address identified gaps.

23. In their public health role, local authorities should consider how preventative work aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles and addressing mental health problems can be continued in prisons.

Recommendations to NOMS / North East prisons

24. Prisons should share the findings of prisoner health needs assessments with local authorities in the North East to inform JSNAs and commissioning of services in the community.

Drugs and Alcohol

Recommendations to local authorities

25. As community-based drug and alcohol services are being re-designed and commissioned, commissioners should ensure there is a clear, single referral route from prison to the community.
26. Commissioners should give attention to pathways for alcohol treatment and recovery and to the 'recovery to recovery' pathway, to ensure those who have recovered in prison have a clear pathway into community-based recovery and mutual aid. Criminal justice data could usefully inform JSNAs in this area.
27. Commissioners of drug and alcohol services should consider the evidence around the role of the family in an offender's recovery and how a 'whole family' approach could support their commissioning outcomes.

Recommendations to NOMS / North East prisons

28. NOMS should consider re-establishing regional meetings, bringing together prison DART staff with community-based service providers to share information and seek solutions to common problems. Engagement with drug and alcohol commissioners should be considered as part of this.

Employment, Training and Education

Recommendations to local authorities

29. Local authorities should ensure their work to promote digital inclusion addresses the barriers offenders face in accessing on-line employment and benefit services.
30. Local reducing reoffending strategic groups should review whether formal information sharing arrangements between probation and Jobcentre Plus staff are operating effectively and take action to address any weaknesses.

Recommendations to NOMS / North East prisons

31. Prisons should consider how they could work with VCS partners who are developing accredited peer mentoring programmes for offenders, ensuring the available evidence on peer mentoring is taken into account. It may be appropriate to consider this at the proposed North East reducing reoffending forum.

32. NOMS and North East prisons should explore the possibility of using Virtual Campus as a means of providing local information about housing, benefits and family services.
33. North East prisons should engage with local authorities about future opportunities to tender for local authority contracts.

Children and Families

Recommendations for joint action

34. NOMS, prisons and local authorities should work together with key partners to develop a shared, 'whole family' approach to the children and families pathway for the North East.
35. NOMS, North East prisons and local authorities should consider ways that families are currently engaged in the offenders' sentence and recovery plans and seek to strengthen engagement with families at all stages of the criminal justice process. A starting point would be working with prisoners' families where there is already a Team around the Family or Team around the Household in place.
36. Prisons and local authorities should pilot the Troubled Families 'common offer' as a first step to strengthening working relationships. NOMS should continue to facilitate a task and finish group to monitor the pilot.

Recommendations to local authorities

37. Local authorities should include evidence about the impact of imprisonment on children and families in their local needs assessments and strategies.

Recommendations to NOMS / North East prisons

38. NOMS and North East prisons should carry out a short review of the parenting programmes currently being delivered in North East prisons considering how they are resourced, who they have and have not reached, the impact they have had and what works best for different prisoners. This information should be used to inform future programmes and services for parents in custody and their families.
39. Prisons should consider alternative ways of enabling prisoners to access parenting support. For example greater consideration could be given to the use of ROTL (release on temporary licence) to enable some prisoners to access services for parents within the local community as part of resettlement plans.

Women Offenders

Recommendations for joint action

40. Prisons and local authorities should consider working with community-based services to provide awareness-raising sessions for staff to better understand the needs of sex workers.

41. Prisons, children's services departments and family support workers should consider opportunities to work together to improve the preparation for and management of last contact visits for women in custody.

Recommendations to local authorities

42. Commissioners should consider local evidence relating to the shortage of appropriate accommodation for women offenders in their area, including the current housing outcomes for women offenders with complex needs who present as homeless, to inform future service provision.
43. Local authorities should include evidence about the needs of sex workers in Joint Strategic Needs Assessments to inform the commissioning of services.

Next steps

Subject to approval by Leaders and Elected Mayors, NOMS will communicate this report to stakeholders, including relevant local authority officers and reducing reoffending strategic groups.

NOMS have committed resources for a further 12 months to support the implementation of the report's recommendations. This will enable NOMS to develop an action plan and to coordinate the proposed North East reducing reoffending forum to consider and progress the recommendations for joint action. This should include the establishment of a small number of time-limited task and finish groups. The forum and task groups will not have any specific authority to act on behalf of the North East so will need to progress issues on the basis of consensus. It is anticipated that, subject to agreeing the report's recommendations, local authorities will commit to supporting these task and finish groups with officer time and expertise.

We suggest that the forum continues to make use of the governance structures which have supported this project, by approaching the ANEC Assistant Chief Executive's group and the North East Prison's Governing Governors' Group where there is a need to formally consult local authorities and prisons or to seek agreement on specific issues.

It is expected that local authorities and their reducing reoffending strategic groups will consider and take forward the recommendations that relate to local authorities as appropriate. The proposed North East reducing reoffending forum should support and oversee this.

The Deputy Director Custody, Public Sector Prisons North East and prison governors will take forward the recommendations that relate to NOMS and North East prisons.