Housing circumstances of people leaving prison in Lothian

1 Introduction

Aid & Abet is a charity (SC046322) set up in association with Scottish Churches Housing Action, led by a group of people with lived experience of the criminal justice system, all of whom are in recovery from addiction. Its role is to provide a mentoring service to people leaving prison, particularly in the first few days following release.

The vision is that *Once someone has been in prison, they need never go back.* Key issues following release are to get someone into accommodation, ensure they have funds to live on, assist with addiction issues, and avoid a return to crime.

2 Recorded experience

Since taking its first referral Aid & Abet has worked with over 130 people. The majority of these people are homeless at the point of release back in to the community. A huge chunk of our referrals consist of picking the person up from the prison gate and aiding their travel back to the community and supporting the person during their homeless presentation which is a difficult and stressful situation to be in. The person usually already suffers from very low self-worth, and can feel persecuted and judged for having served a prison sentence.

Here are a few examples of how Aid & Abet have helped in the past.

a) CD suffers from PTSD and a painful back injury due to time served in the military. CD was homeless at his time of release from prison. CD had no local connection in Edinburgh area but wished to move to this area. An Aid & Abet peer mentor assessed CD needs through agent visits and was able to liaise with appropriate agencies while CD was still inside. The peer mentor contacted Veterans First Point, filled out the relevant paperwork, and arranged for an assessment to be done. This assessment had a successful outcome for CD and he secured a place at Whitefoord House Scottish Veterans Residence in Edinburgh. Aid & Abet helped minimise the stress factor for CD who potentially could have had a completely different outcome if Aid & Abet were not there to support with his initial housing concern.

b) VC was referred to Aid & Abet through his case worker in Addiewell prison. VC had his tenancy re-possessed due to rent arrears during his time in prison. Aid & Abet were able to assess VC’s housing situation by liaising with the Housing Needs Officer within Addiewell prison, who confirmed that VC had a live housing application on the system. Aid & Abet were then able to contact the Housing Officer and make him aware of VC’s release date and to highlight the fact he would be homeless on the day of release. Aid & Abet picked VC up from the gate and took him directly to make his homeless presentation, where he was then offered a bed and breakfast for
that night. Aid & Abet continued emotional and practical support over the next few weeks, made a lot of phone calls on behalf of VC as his English is very limited. Eventually a space became available at the local homeless unit. Although VC is now in his own tenancy this process was a very stressful time for VC, not knowing where he was going to be from one day to the next. Aid & Abet were able to assist emotionally through this process.

c) SR was homeless on his release from Glenochil Prison. SR was returning to West Lothian, and stated that he was very anxious about how he was going to get from Glenochil prison to the West Lothian area in time to be able to make a homeless presentation and secure a place for that night. Also SR had to register with a GP in order to receive his methadone prescription. The idea of being released with no support to address these issues was incredibly overwhelming. Aid & Abet reassured SR that they would be at the gate the morning of his release waiting with transport to get him back to his local area. SR was then able to make his homeless presentation. He was offered a B&B within the West Lothian area and Aid & Abet helped him register with a GP. This would never have been achieved if SR was left to his own devices on his day of release.

d) DC was released from HMP Addiewell in April 2016. Things started badly when he went to West Lothian Council’s homelessness service, and was told that no temporary accommodation was available, and he should return at the end of the working day. He did so, and was told there was no accommodation in West Lothian and he would have to go to Falkirk. DC refused this offer and left. He ended up drinking and in A&E that night. Aid & Abet mentors worked with him over the next year, helping with attending the recovery hub and mutual aid meetings, and through various court appearances and then further imprisonment. During this time, DC decided to seek recovery through LEAP (Lothian & Edinburgh Abstinence Programme), and the mentors kept in touch with him throughout this lengthy process. He went straight to LEAP on his second release from prison.

3 Background & Policy

Aid & Abet’s experience confirms wider evidence that homelessness is a major feature of life for recently-released prisoners\(^1\). In England, Home Office research in 2005 estimated that 30% of prisoners leave with nowhere to live\(^2\). The report of Glasgow City Mission’s nightshelter\(^3\) for 2016-17 shows that 49 individuals using the service between 1 December 2016 and 31 March 2017 gave ‘prison’ as their most recent accommodation.

Local authorities’ responsibility for homelessness clearly states that it applies if someone is homeless now, or at risk of homelessness within 2 months\(^4\). Since a sentenced prisoner’s release date is known, there should be no barrier to a homelessness assessment and/or a housing options interview being carried out within the two months prior to release.

\(^1\) eg [https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/prison-leavers-and-homelessness](https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/prison-leavers-and-homelessness)


However, we are told that if temporary accommodation is needed, this cannot be allocated in advance of need. The consequence is that the first step on release is a visit to the homelessness office. This is demoralising and can be frustrating, as D’s case above illustrates. If the Aid & Abet mentor could meet the person with convictions at the prison gate with a key to somewhere to stay, that would be a much better start to their life of freedom. This is within the homelessness law, but not, apparently, within the capacity of local authorities.

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