

Case study 145

What Works in Tackling Poverty

Routes out of Prison – RooP Project

What are case studies?

Case studies share what people and organisations have learned from delivering or developing a project or programme. They can help you to see what has worked on the ground and can give you ideas about how to tackle problems. They can also signpost you to people and organisations you may want to talk to.

Routes out of Prison

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In a nutshell

The Wise Group's Routes out of Prison (RooP) project is a partnership approach to working with prisoners before they are released from prison, and for a number of weeks after to help prisoners acquire the life, social and employment skills they need to re-join society. The project employ Life Coaches, many of whom themselves have a background of offending or recovery from addiction, who then use their own experience in turning their life around to help ex-offenders. Life Coaches work with prisoners serving sentences between three months and four years prior to release to:

- Provide a confidential support service
- Prepare an action plan for release, including arranging assistance with housing, debt, money and benefits advice, health and addiction, training, education and work experience
- Continue to provide one to one support post-release from prison.



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The issues

Prisoners are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Scotland. Like prisoners everywhere they are poor. The poverty, social exclusion and inequality, from which nearly all suffer and, will almost invariably experience upon release, are some of the most powerful factors in inhibiting transformation. Figures from the Social Exclusion Unit and Scottish Prisons Commission shows:

- 72% of prisoners were in receipt of benefits immediately before entering prison
- 49% male and 33% female were excluded from school
- Prisoners are 13 times more likely to have been in care as a child
- Are 13 times more likely to be unemployed
- Are 2.5 times more likely to have a family member who has been convicted of a criminal offence
- Around one in three prisoners were not living in permanent accommodation prior to imprisonment.¹

RooP Client Group

RooP works with adult males, women and young offenders who are serving short-term sentences of less than four years (many serving short terms of between three months and one year) who are returning to the poorest communities in 13 Local Authority areas. These clients have served sentences in HM Prison's Barlinnie, Cornton Vale (Female Offenders), Polmont (Young Offenders), Greenock, Dumfries, Kilmarnock and Addiewell.

Prisoners face multiple barriers re-integrating into society. The RooP project has found that their clients are more likely to:

- Lose their accommodation
- Lose their jobs
- Suffer increased financial problems
- Have fractured family relationships and lose contact with family and external supports
- Suffer deteriorating mental and physical health and anger management issues
- Be involved with the drug culture
- Become de-skilled through eroding thinking and life skills.

The approach to the issues

The Wise Group and the Scottish Prison Service developed the RooP pilot project in 2006 funded through the Scottish Government Multiple and Complex Needs Fund. The project now works in partnership with the Scottish Prison Service, Families Outside and Apex Scotland with funding from the BIG Lottery Scotland Fund, European Social Fund and Glasgow City Council.

Essentially the project developed and shaped to help ex-offender's to deal more effectively with the problems they face on release from prison. A mentoring model was used to work with short term prisoners on release to reconnect them with their families and help connect them with the local services they needed to re-integrate with their communities. Training and employment was identified as a way of helping to reduce re-offending.

Life Coach

One of RooP's primary aims is to recruit ex-offenders as peer support Life Coaches. This one to one person centred support from workers with valuable and varied life experience, most ex-offenders themselves, is key to the success of the project.

In prison

- Eligible prisoners are interviewed 4-6 weeks before release to sign up for support
- Life Coaches visit with prisoners once or twice to develop an action plan to identify needs and barriers to employment and stability, ie suitable accommodation, transition to welfare benefits, access to health care, training and education.

In the community

- Life Coach can meet clients at the gate if required
- Signpost clients to services / agencies
- Accompany clients to meetings and advocate on their behalf
- Help address problems as they arise by being on call to give advice, information and support.

¹ HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland: Annual Report 2007-2008 and Scottish Prisons Commission 2008



Employment Consultants

One of RooP's aims is to help increase the number of offenders accessing employment opportunities on release from prison. Ex offenders face stigma and increased barriers to employment, hence the need for more intensive support. All community-based participants have access to an experienced Employment Consultant. The consultant works with the offender to establish a proactive approach to developing the offender's skills and employability levels. For those who are job-ready, full job search and application support and advice on sustaining work is available.

Family Support Co-ordinator

Seconded through Families Outside, an outreach service helps families of offenders with issues like breakdown of relationships, risks to housing, financial pressures, caring responsibilities, anxiety, stress and stigma in their community.

Service Co-ordination

The Life Coaches provide a holistic service but not on their own. They take people to services and advocate for them and support them to negotiate the system to make informed choices, helping them build the perseverance and knowledge needed to get the best end result. The RooP partnership therefore works closely with a whole range of other agencies and service providers; ie agencies working to prevent homelessness, benefits / debt and money advice services, addictions programmes, health management, Women's Aid, literacy and education services, advocacy and bereavement / counselling support.

Evidence of success

- In 2009, the project signed up 1670 clients in prison of whom 728 continued engagement on release. There were 42 job outcomes, 19 education and 89 training for ex-offenders
- In 2010, the project signed up 1820 clients in prison of whom 795 continued to engage. 37 job outcomes and 106 training and education outcomes were achieved

- Around half of ex-offenders who engaged with their Life Coach in the community required and received financial support, ie help to claim welfare and housing benefits or assistance with debt issues
- More than a third of ex-offenders were homeless on release. Life Coaches assisted these clients in presenting as homeless and in obtaining temporary accommodation.

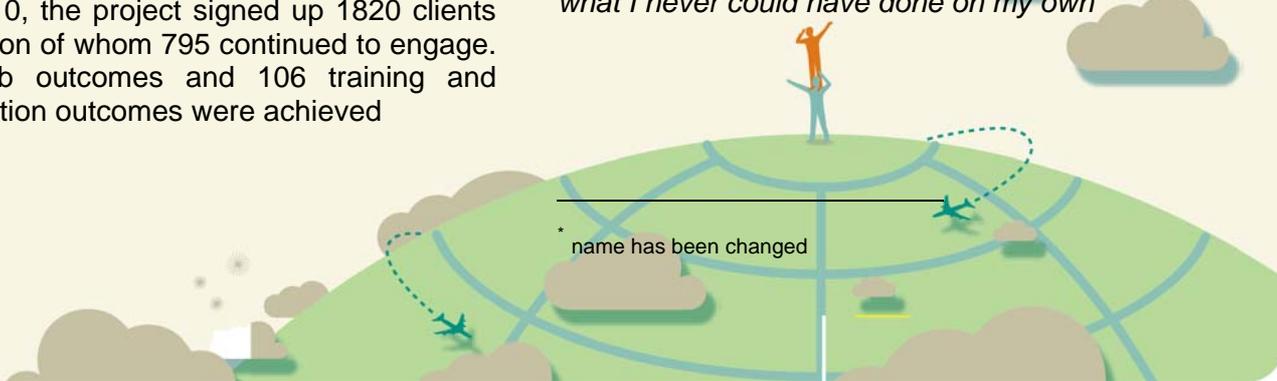
David's* Story – turning my life around

David initially refused the offer of contact from RooP prior to release but once liberated changed his mind and got in touch with the team for community support. He had a number of issues that needed addressed; homelessness, previous drug misuse and mental health issues as well as an outstanding offence. David was allocated a temporary furnished flat and with support from his Life Coach and local Tenancy Support team he was offered a permanent flat. His Life Coach encouraged him to seek recovery support for his drug misuse and after working with Turning Point as the first recovery stage he was referred to Addaction's Smart Recovery Programme. David's Life Coach suggested he join a local gym and with his health and wellbeing improving every day he began working with a RooP Employment Consultant to discuss training options and employability.

When an outstanding charge re-surfaced, David's Life Coach and Employment consultant wrote a letter of support to the court detailing his progress and determination in turning his life around from which he was granted three months probation. David was then helped to apply to university where he began to study modules on drug and alcohol studies. He is now in employment and is enjoying earning some money.

"The best move I've ever made. I am now stable with a house, have a fresh outlook on life and good people around me. With Routes out of Prison's help I've had the chance to do what I never could have done on my own"

* name has been changed



Lessons learnt

1. Clients often feel positive in the weeks before release. Closer to the time negativity and apprehension sets in and once released over half of those signed up fail to re-engage. It is essential for Life Coaches to have at least one visit prior to release to ground the relationship and preferably a second visit to allow for early progress / developments to be shared and trust to be established
2. Arranging a meeting with clients on day one of release, at the prison gates is preferable if there is a risk of homelessness, and engaging them with services at the earliest opportunity is crucial to developing the relationship in the community
3. Most prisoners have a history of feeling let down by agencies and are disillusioned. It is crucial to *deliver* and be *consistent* when it comes to agreements / decisions made. This is essential in order to build on trust. Similarly, there needs to be parameters in place to prevent false expectations. Life Coaches need to be open, honest and realistic in terms of the support they, and other agencies, are able to offer
4. The most salient aspect of support for many service users is the quality of the relationship with their Life Coach. Showing a real interest and commitment to the client, ie by making regular contact, means they are more likely to open up re: needs making it easier to develop appropriate support
5. Life coaching has evolved to more than just a mentoring / signposting role. Developing robust local service knowledge and developing relationships with key support functions within local agencies has allowed for holistic service delivery and helped gain wider credibility for the project
6. When working with some ex-offenders it's important to help them focus on small achievements. Elongating periods of liberty for some clients is enough initially to make a real difference in their journey to transformation
7. Women offenders often have deep-seated emotional and personal needs. Owing to this and women's childcare responsibilities it can be difficult to engage with them on release. Female Life Coaches acting as an initial listening point is crucial prior to trying to engage re: full sign-up for support.

One great thing

Many of the Life Coaches (around 70%) working at RooP are ex-offenders themselves. Being able to identify with life experience is central to the mentoring journey. In this respect, the RooP model is unique. The Wise Group embrace the value they can bring to the service. Their belief is that there is no such thing as a negative life experience; all experience is there to be harnessed. There has been a lot of work put in to promoting the model as best practice with a massive leap of faith by the Scottish Prison Service in allowing ex offenders to work with prisoners. The hope that this instils is invaluable.

What next?

The Wise Group is seeking a more secure base of funding to allow the service to continue in the longer term. With a long-term commitment to the service's future, RooP would seek to operate throughout Scotland with all prisoners serving less than four years.

With considerable interest in the RooP model of peer support / mentoring, it is hoped a similar approach could be used to help other vulnerable groups (such as those with mental health problems) to flourish in the community.



Scottish Centre for Regeneration

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- creating and managing mixed and sustainable communities
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