

Briefing Paper 61

Offender engagement with third sector organisations: a national prison-based survey

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Introduction

This paper explores prisoners' experiences of third sector organisations (TSOs) involved in offender resettlement, as part of a wider research project into the role and involvement of TSOs in work with offenders. It builds on a previous paper (WP 57) which presented secondary analysis of information on some 167,000 charities and 47,000 TSOs.

The role of the third sector in the resettlement of offenders has become a prominent one (Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 2010a), with the provision of, for example, employment and housing services, and drug and alcohol treatment (MoJ, 2008, MoJ/National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2008). In 2002, the landmark report, 'Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002) concluded that prisons were failing to turn offenders away from crime, with 58% being reconvicted within two years, costing the state at least £11 billion per annum (for recorded crime alone). Following on from the conclusions of the report, the Ministry of Justice and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) published the 'Reducing Re-Offending National Action Plan', which stipulated that services be provided to offenders through seven reducing re-offending pathways and co-ordinated by offender managers (Home Office, 2004).

The seven resettlement pathways are:

1. Accommodation
2. Education, employment and training
3. Health
4. Drugs and alcohol
5. Finance, benefit and debt
6. Children and families
7. Attitudes, thinking and behaviour

This paper presents the key findings of an all-prisoner short survey distributed in eight prisons nationally. The survey was administered prison-wide in order to obtain data on the extent and nature of inmates' involvement with, and awareness of, TSOs in each of the resettlement pathways in each prison.

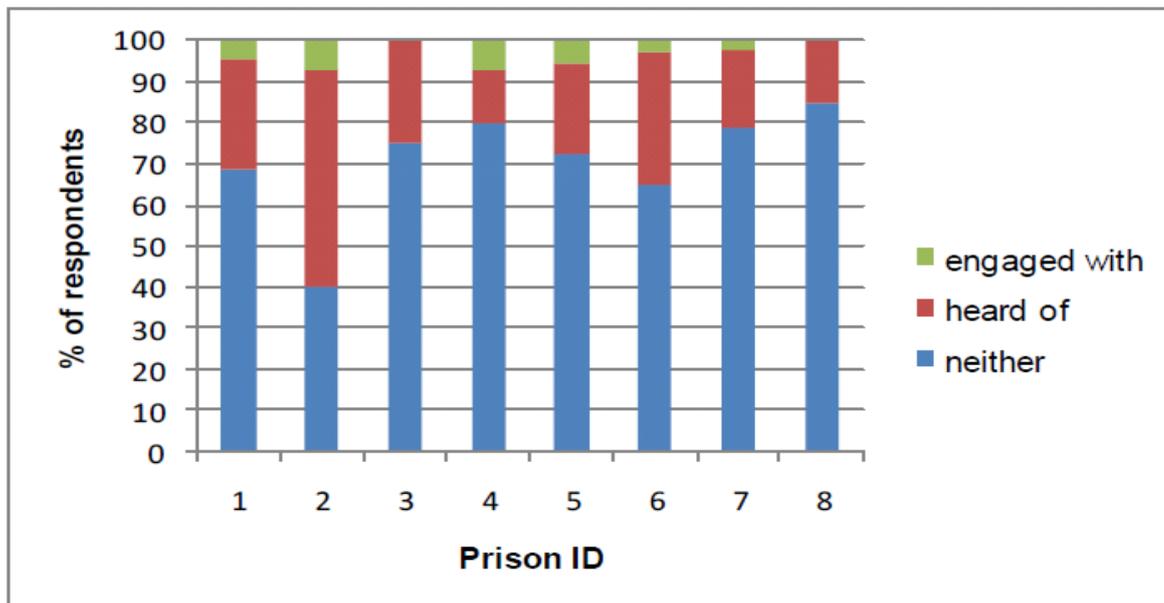
The eight prisons were chosen to represent the diversity of the prison estate, in terms of the population held, the function of the prison, geographical location and the prison providers. Approximately 12% of the questionnaires were returned to us completed (680 in total), and compared to customary return rates for self-completed prisoner surveys (Fazel and Danesh, 2002), we consider this response rate to be typical.

Results

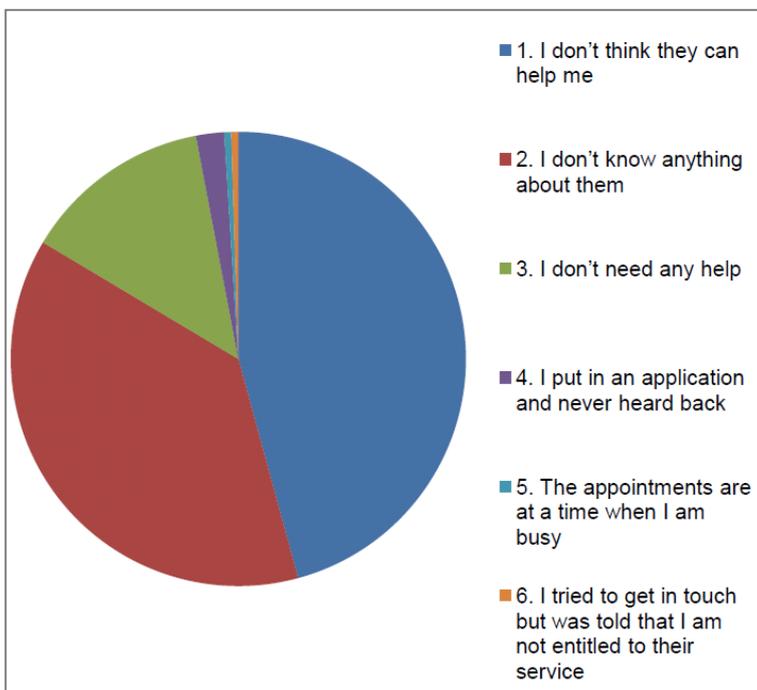
The number of TSOs that each prison claimed were active in their establishment at the time of data collection ranged from 15 to 31. However, the respondents reported having heard of, on average, just four of these named organisations, and had engaged with an average of one.

The most common reasons stated for not engaging with TSOs were that they did not know anything about the service or felt that the service could not help them. There were no significant variations in answers between the seven resettlement pathways.

Percent of respondents in each prison that heard of/engaged with TSOs



Reasons for not engaging with TSOs



Engagement with TSOs according to pathway

A total of 116 TSOs were operating across the eight prison sites at the time of data collection, with many working in more than one establishment. The TSOs were classified by the authors according to their remit into the seven resettlement pathways. **Some pathways (such as Health) appear to have virtually no TSO representation in prisons whereas the Drugs and Alcohol pathway has the most consistent representation**

and use by prisoners. This is not a surprising finding and is likely to be due to the involvement of a high number of TSOs in providing CARAT (Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare) services.

Five of the prisons had two or more TSOs that none of the respondents reported having worked with or had heard of. These TSOs were most likely to be operating within the Accommodation pathway. Thus, despite the high number of TSOs who claim to work with offenders (see WP 57) a large proportion of the surveyed prisoners had not heard of – or engaged with – the majority of these. A similar problem was noted in relation to Pathway 2, Education, employment and training and Pathway 5, Finance, benefit and debt. These are explored in more detail below.

Accommodation

A lack of TSOs specialising in accommodation was identified by nearly 10% of our respondents as a key area for improvement. It was found that each prison already had a number of organisations which provided advice and assistance with housing, such as housing providers and housing advice agencies, yet awareness of these was low. An average of between 20% and 25% of our respondents claimed to have heard of accommodation organisations operating in the prison they were held in. Women respondents and those from non-British Black, Asian and mixed ethnic backgrounds reported significantly less engagement with accommodation TSOs, despite being equally aware of them. In addition, young and juvenile respondents reported less awareness of and less involvement with accommodation TSOs. This is in line with the conclusions from our previous research which noted the under-representation of organisations offering housing to some of the most vulnerable sub-populations of

prisoners, such as female offenders, young people and offenders from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.

Education, employment and training

Of the survey respondents, 25% reported that more organisations and services were needed that specialise in providing employment, training and voluntary and paid work placements for prisoners in the community, as these were deemed an important step towards resettlement into the community. This was chiefly the case in the juvenile and young offender establishments. The importance of these placements was also emphasised in open prisons where the number of TSOs which provide services in this pathway was found to be very low.

Finance, benefit and debt

Eight per cent of our respondents, particularly those in closed establishments, emphasised the need for more organisations that specialise in debt and benefits advice. This issue had been dealt with in some prisons by employing a dedicated Finance and Benefits Manager/Officer or contracting the services of co-operative banks, credit unions and/or financial groups. It was found however that the financial concerns of short-sentence prisoners and non-sentenced prisoners were often unmet compared to other groups of prisoners.

Conclusions

Our findings indicate that awareness of resettlement-focused TSOs in prisons remains low. **The average number of TSOs per prison was approximately 20, yet our findings showed that, on average, respondents were aware of only four of these organisations, and had engaged with an average of no more than one.** The survey findings indicate that there is an established need for access to services provided within the seven resettlement

pathways, but that they are often under-publicised. No more than 25% of respondents reported awareness of at least one TSO per resettlement pathway. The reasons for this are currently unclear and worthy of further study. For example, prison staff may not be aware of TSOs and their services and thus may be unable to refer prisoners to them, or TSOs may be over-reliant on written material to publicise their services in a population which has low levels of literacy.

It appears that it would be useful to promote TSO services more widely in the prison and improve communication between offenders, staff and TSOs. This should fall within the remit of a third sector co-ordinator's duties (or 'VCS co-ordinator', as they are referred to in policy), as stipulated by Prison Service Order 4190 (HM Prison Service, 2002). Yet this Order has not been implemented in a standardised manner across the prison estate. Many prisons still lack a third sector co-ordinator (Clinks, 2010) and others have co-ordinators who also fulfil other duties in prison, which may lead to role conflict, ambiguity in the extent of their authority and unclear links with senior staff and managers. It would be helpful for the implementation and operation of this role to be reviewed on a national level, especially in terms of its potentially valuable strategic position in building cross-sector alliances. This could be an important stepping stone in ensuring greater awareness of and access to TSOs for prisoners.

It should of course be recognised that there are differences in how TSOs approach engagement with prisoners. Some TSOs will only offer services to those who fit their

selection criteria, often stipulated by their funding criteria, for example if they reside in a particular area. For these TSOs, lack of awareness among general prisoner population may be less of an issue than for organisations which aim to provide services to a broader offender population.

The findings identified significant differences in access to organisations, with particular groups being less likely to access certain pathways than others, particularly BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and foreign nationals, short-sentenced prisoners, non-sentenced prisoners and women and young people.

The survey also indicated low levels of engagement with services provided by TSOs, with on average only 5% of prisoners reporting that they had engaged with at least one of the TSOs named as operating in the prison in which they were held. A number of TSOs had no or very few users among our respondents, though this may be due to their narrow focus on particular groups of prisoners or services. Low engagement may be explained by the lack of awareness of third sector services highlighted in this paper, but also by the high levels of need within the prison population and the consequent high demand for some services, particularly in relation to accommodation; education, employment and training; and finance, debt and benefit. TSOs are likely to have only limited resources to meet such demand, and thus the proportion of prisoners that they are able to help will remain low; a situation which is at risk of being exacerbated by expected budget cuts (Clinks, 2011).



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