

# A YEAR IN PRISON

## What are St Mungo's recommendations?

St Mungo's believes four improvements need to be made to reduce the number of ex-prisoners leaving prison with nowhere to live. The Housing Advice Centre at Pentonville forms an important part of St Mungo's work to prevent homelessness. We believe changes are needed in the following areas:

- **More HACs inside prisons** – St Mungo's research shows that clear advice on housing and keeping tenancies helps prevent people becoming homeless and subsequently helps reduce re-offending
- The system of **discharge grants needs reviewing**. The SEU made specific recommendations in their draft report that were subsequently removed
- **Better understanding** of short-term and remand prisoners' entitlements by Housing Benefit and rents staff – and a greater recognition of the impact of a lack of identification when applying for welfare benefits
- Local authorities need to provide **suitable accommodation** with **appropriate professional support** for people leaving prison. Our research has found lack of suitable accommodation is a major cause of re-offending – and a prime cause of homelessness.

## The future

St Mungo's hopes to have a tenancy rescue service for short-term prisoners in Brixton Prison within a few months. We are also planning to expand the service, with a focus on tenancy rescue to other prisons. A third worker will join the HAC team with Pentonville providing administration support.

<sup>1-3</sup> Social Exclusion Unit, 'Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners', (Published July 2002)

## St Mungo's – leading London's services for people who are homeless and vulnerable

We are best known for our outreach street work and hostels for rough sleepers. But hostels are just 6 of our 60 housing projects and we do much more than simply provide shelter!

Each night over 1200 people sleep in safety under a St Mungo's roof in our high support projects and semi-independent housing or our short stay hostels. Our specialist workers meet a variety of needs, from help with mental health problems to drug abuse to support in setting up in a new home. We run two day centres and also provide London's largest directly delivered activity, training and employment programmes - giving 2000 homeless people a year a chance to improve their lives.

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## A Pioneering Venture in Homelessness Prevention

It's an oft-stated fact that crime costs Britain dearly. Current estimates place this cost at around £60 billion each year and about 3% of this is spent on the prison service. Of this 3% only a fraction is spent on rehabilitative work to prevent re-offending. Research by St Mungo's has found that 30% of offenders lose their home while in prison.

Two years ago St Mungo's proposed that a housing advice centre be established in Pentonville Prison in London to help the large numbers of short-term and remand prisoners being released. Evaluation of the pilot project is now complete.

- St Mungo's believes the Housing Advice Centre (HAC) at Pentonville is an innovative and effective approach to homelessness prevention and reducing reoffending. Prisoners released without a home to go to are 2.5 times more likely to reoffend.<sup>1</sup>
- In the first 18 months of operation the St Mungo's HAC has helped over 250 clients find or keep accommodation and helped a further 1,000 people with advice on a range of other issues. It has had notable success in safeguarding existing tenancies and resolving complex housing benefit issues.
- Compared to the cost of housing a prisoner who has re-offended – averaging at £37,000 per year<sup>2</sup> – the cost of running an advice centre such as the HAC is small. The St Mungo's HAC at Pentonville has a team of two people who can draw on St Mungo's community support and tenancy support teams
- By accompanying prisoners on the day of release, the HAC team has a take-up rate of 98% for referrals to accommodation

St Mungo's has made four key recommendations as a result of the pilot, detailed on the back page of this briefing.

## St Mungo's Housing Advice Centre (HAC)

The large number of people being released with nowhere to live prompted the Homelessness Directorate's Special Innovation Fund to support St Mungo's in setting up the HAC. In November 2000 Dominic Raffo was appointed as St Mungo's Homelessness Prevention Co-ordinator, with the HAC team expanding since the centre was launched. The HAC operates within Pentonville, a large local prison on the Caledonian Road, North London with over 1,100 male prisoners.

The HAC operates with the full backing of Pentonville and has a wide degree of support from prison staff.

## Who does the HAC help?

One in three offenders lose their home while in prison. During 2000 around 1,400 people were released from Pentonville or the courts servicing the Pentonville population who had nowhere to live. The HAC's clients come from this group and are short-term prisoners serving sentences of less than a year or prisoners on remand.

This group is referred to as STR's (Short Term and Remand prisoners). They either receive no assistance from the Probation Service or have violated the conditions of their license and don't have a probation officer.

St Mungo's HAC has had notable success in safeguarding existing tenancies and resolving complex housing benefit issues. As well, the HAC helps prevent rough sleeping amongst ex-offenders by:

- saving tenancies
- finding hostel places
- advocating on behalf of clients at Homeless Persons Units
- obtaining direct placements into semi-independent housing
- offering released clients with an existing council tenancy the backup and help of St Mungo's Community Support Team
- obtaining assistance from the Benefits Agency Homelessness Team
- accompanying ex-offenders on the day of release to ensure they arrive safely at their accommodation

## How the HAC works

The HAC receives referrals and requests for help from over 30 sources within and outside the prison. To make itself known to prisoners the HAC advertises its services in each wing of Pentonville and has arranged for the prison's induction booklet to contain information about St Mungo's and the HAC. The majority of referrals come from the prison's induction scheme.

## Objectives

The HAC tries to ensure that:

- those who had accommodation upon entering prison do not lose it unnecessarily
- those of 'no fixed abode' (NFA) may be found somewhere to stay

## First year achievements

In the 18 months of operation the HAC helped more than 250 clients find or keep accommodation through a variety of actions including saving tenancies, finding hostel places, advocating on behalf of clients at Homeless Persons Units and obtaining direct placements into semi-independent housing. Over 1,000 clients received advice and guidance on a range of other issues.

## Why does the HAC work with STRs?

The Probation Service does not work with released remand prisoners or people sentenced to less than 12 months.

Without support many of this group leave prison with the same, or even greater, difficulties they had on entering custody. **This is a major factor in the high re-offending rates by short-term and remand prisoners.**<sup>3</sup> Compounding the problem is the fact STR prisoners have no referral rights to specialist accommodation providers working with ex-offenders. The Probation Service funds these providers, so if a prisoner does not have a Probation Officer he will **not be considered**.

## What are the most common problems?

The HAC's clients have a wide variety of needs:

- Over 40% have mental health issues,
- 35% have poor literacy
- 50% have a serious debt

These problems are further complicated by drug and alcohol addiction – 85% have a drug problem and half have a drinking problem. Around one in five clients have their own tenancy and 30% were living with a partner, their family or acquaintances. However half were already classified as having no fixed abode upon entering prison.

## What are the background issues?

### Inadequate discharge grants

In 2001 around 1,100 released Pentonville prisoners were categorised as being 'NFA' upon release. When released, these prisoners are given an NFA Discharge Grant of £94.40 paid for by the prison. This is expected to last them for 17 days between discharge and the time relevant benefits are paid, including accommodation costs.

For the further 300 prisoners released from the courts serving the Pentonville prison population and classified as NFA, the problem is worse. They receive no discharge grant at all and no help.

### Housing Benefit entitlement

A prisoner on **remand** – whether convicted or not – is entitled to continue receiving housing benefit for up to **52 weeks**. A **sentenced** prisoner is entitled to continue receiving housing benefit provided that not more than **13 weeks** is spent in custody.

This means that someone sentenced to **six months** or less is eligible for housing benefit as only half of a short sentence is served in custody. However, a prisoner sentenced to **seven months** imprisonment (or more) serves just over 15 weeks in custody and therefore is **not** entitled to any housing benefit at all. This places this group at greatly enhanced risk of losing their home.



St Mungo's Homelessness Prevention Co-ordinator  
Dominic Raffo at Pentonville

### From first offence to homelessness

*'Robert' is a first time offender and hasn't been in trouble before. He pleads guilty and receives a seven-month sentence. Because Robert spends over 13 weeks in custody he is not entitled to housing benefit. His property is repossessed and it's likely he loses all his possessions. On being discharged Robert has no clothes, no possessions, no home and perhaps a discharge grant of £94.40 which is expected to last him for 17 days. He drinks it away in two days.*

### Using the system

*'Peter' has been to prison before and knows the system. He pleads not guilty to his charges, and uses all manner of tactics to miss court appearances. His brief co-operates with his tactics. Peter is found guilty and sentenced to a two-year sentence. However he has already spent 12 months on remand. Because only half a short sentence is spent in custody, Peter is able to walk free. His housing benefit has been paid for the entire time so he keeps his tenancy. Does honesty really pay?*