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Running a resettlement project for young offenders

Key findings from Nacro's On-Side project



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Written by **Anstey Leigh**

Evaluation of the On-Side project

This report uses findings and quotes from an evaluation of 62 juveniles (aged 15-17) participating on the On-Side project between April 1999 and May 2002. The research was carried out by Aikta-Reena Solanki of Nacro's Research and Evaluation Section, with additional support from both Dr Alison Liebling from the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge, and the On-Side steering group, chaired by Sir John Cassels. For further details of the research undertaken, please contact: Aikta-Reena Solanki, Senior Research and Evaluation Officer, email Aikta-Reena.Solanki@nacrocsp.org.uk or tel 020 7501 0561 or researchinfo@nacrocsp.org.uk

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Contents

- Page 3 **Case study:** a brief history of Jon, an On-Side participant who benefited from intensive resettlement support.
- Page 4 **Introduction:** showing how intensive resettlement work with juveniles significantly reduces crime and improves their prospects.
- Page 5 **The project:** outlining the specific aims of the On-Side project and the work that was involved to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable offenders in the prison were responded to effectively.
- Page 7 **The results:** explaining the effectiveness of the project in enabling young people to access all the services they needed to help them to lead crime-free lives in the future.
- Page 9 **Conclusion:** concluding that those who participated in the project were all less likely to be reconvicted than those who did not, benefiting the individual, the wider community and the criminal justice system.

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Photos: Paul Doyle

Nacro is very grateful to everyone who appears in the photos.

Please note, it should not be assumed that any individuals depicted have any association with the stories or activities described in the text.



Jon frequently says that without On-Side he would have served more time in prison, returned to his home town with no stable address and started re-offending.

This is a real-life case study of Jon*, a participant on Nacro's On-Side project at Portland Young Offender Institution (YOI).

Like many young people at On-Side, Jon has come from a chaotic background, which has contributed to his offending behaviour. His story shows the many difficulties that he faced on release and emphasises how his involvement in the project has been crucial in helping him address these problems so he can make a fresh start.

Jon came to Portland YOI to serve a short sentence. He had committed several offences in the past, but this was his first time in prison. He has a long history of alcohol abuse and violent behaviour.

Jon's childhood was troubled: he was placed in care at the age of 10 and then went to live with his father, who has a criminal record himself and also a history of alcohol and drug abuse. When Jon came into prison, he had nowhere to return to on release: he had been evicted from his supported accommodation, and his relationship with his father had broken down.

At the time Jon came to On-Side, he was also due to appear in court for other offences and another six-month sentence was expected. The keyworker responsible for Jon contacted his solicitor, wrote a report for the court – where he gave details of a proposed action plan for Jon to follow which was felt would benefit him – and also attended and spoke at the court hearing. Jon's case was subsequently adjourned and he was released from prison after serving two months, to return to court a month later to see whether he had followed the action plan and was committed to staying out of trouble. Jon followed the action plan, and the further charges and supervision order which he was under were dropped.

The On-Side project identified a number of factors which put Jon at risk of re-offending, including returning to his peer group and lack of occupation. His keyworker managed to relocate him, and also suggested he attend a motivational course and a Prince's Trust project, both of which he completed. Furthermore, On-Side established links with a New Deal advisor, who gave Jon tremendous support in finding work.

Jon has experienced some difficulties following his release. At one point he was put on a work placement where he had a personality clash with the manager, was sacked, and his benefit was consequently stopped for four weeks. This made him especially vulnerable but his keyworker visited him regularly to ensure that he was able to manage financially. Another time he went on a drinking binge and nearly lost his housing as a result. Staff at On-Side managed to secure his home by mediating between him and the housing provider.

Jon has been out of prison for a year now and is gradually making the transition to living independently, but there is currently nowhere for him to live on his own, which is something that he needs. Furthermore, he desperately wants a job, but if he finds one then he loses his housing benefit. The rent at the supported housing where he currently lives is £289 a week. Fortunately, he has now been accepted on a training course with the hope of a job at the end. This would pay enough for him to get a flat.

Despite the difficulties that Jon has experienced, or even caused, following his release, credit must go to him for having the determination to succeed. In turn, Jon frequently says that without On-Side he would have served more time in prison, returned to his home town with no stable address and started re-offending.

* Neither the photo or name belong to the participant.

Introduction

Many young people who have experienced imprisonment are determined to stay out of trouble on their release. Despite this, the rate of reoffending among those who have previously been inside is alarmingly high. Reasons for this are complex, but it is largely accepted that if a young person has not been able to identify and address the factors which may have contributed to their offending in the first instance, then the likelihood of them slipping back into the same behavioural pattern is very strong. In this respect, holistic resettlement support can significantly improve a person's chances of making a fresh start.

For most young people in prison, intensive resettlement support is absolutely essential. Current statistics¹ indicate that 84% of 15-17 year olds discharged from custody in 1997 were reconvicted within two years and 60% of those were recommitted to prison. These figures cause particular concern: the more a young person comes into contact with the law, the more they are perceived to be a risk to themselves and to others, and the less hope they have of taking advantage of the services that can keep them out of trouble. Unfortunately, the stigma of a prison sentence can last much longer than the sentence itself, and without the right understanding, help and support, a troubled youth can rapidly develop into a wasted life.

Nacro's On-Side project at HMYOI Portland was established to ensure that the most vulnerable juvenile offenders (aged 15-17 years) received information, help and support to identify and tackle the range of difficulties they were likely to face on release. A steering group, made of up senior personnel from relevant agencies and service providers, and chaired by Sir John Cassels, contributed to the strategy, development, practice and progress of the project. The pilot was evaluated over a three-year period.

The evaluation report highlights the main findings of On-Side, including a discussion of the programme's impact on re-offending². One major finding from the evaluation was that the reconviction rate among On-Side participants was far lower than for young people in the general juvenile prison population (58% and 84%, respectively). This was significant, given that the people targeted by the project were not simply from a cross-section of the prison population, but those considered to be among the most vulnerable and therefore most likely to re-offend on release. The research findings concluded that the intensive resettlement work with the young people has been a vital factor in reducing reconvictions and breaking the cycle of crime. This was a view echoed by the then Chief Inspector of Prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham who, in 2002, commended On-Side, remarking that it was 'an excellent project which, if found suitable, should be expanded'.

There are now no juveniles placed at HMYOI Portland but the project continues – with the financial support of HMYOI Portland, the Monument Trust and Comic Relief – to work in the prison with 18-21 year-olds, who have similar needs to those of juveniles.

This report discusses the strengths of the On-Side project in working with juvenile offenders. It looks at the people involved, the approaches taken to reduce reoffending, and the benefits that were gained. It stresses the importance of seeing young people as part of the solution to reducing crime and disorder, not just as part of the problem. We hope that the positive outcomes of the project will result in the establishment of similar resettlement projects for young people at other prisons throughout England and Wales.

1 *Prison Statistics: England and Wales 2000* London: Home Office, 2001

2 For further details, please contact Aitka-Reena Solanki, author of the report, email aikta-reena.solanki@nacrocsp.org.uk or telephone 020 7501 0561 or researchinfo@nacrocsp.org.uk

The findings

Keys to On-Side's success

Nacro has over 30 years' experience of resettling prisoners into the community. Over this time we have piloted several models for effective resettlement – both inside and outside prison – for people of all ages and with all kind of needs. A number of our projects deal exclusively with young people, such as our resettlement work in Brinsford and Onley YOIs, and the advice and resettlement project run in Feltham YOI and Remand Centre in the 1990s – one of the first of its kind to be based inside a prison establishment.

Nacro's On-side project was an intensive resettlement service for juveniles, targeted specifically at those who were considered to be extremely vulnerable upon release. The project delivered a deeper level of support than is usually available to young people with such needs. It achieved this by:

- developing tailor-made programmes in consultation with the young person so that many of their needs could be addressed
- appointing a specific keyworker, based within the prison, to oversee the young person's specific resettlement programme
- continuing a high level of support (provided by the same keyworker), not only while the young person was in prison, but also after release
- forging links with outside agencies which could provide help. (At the time of On-Side's implementation – before the introduction of new youth justice legislation – no one agency had responsibility for co-ordinating resettlement services for juvenile offenders, and despite the wealth of agency provision

that was available, young people were often unsure of how to access it)

- responding to needs immediately so that young people are given the best possible opportunity to make a fresh start from their first day of release. (Prior to On-Side's intervention, accessing relevant services had been a notoriously lengthy process, and this time could be critical, especially if the young person was vulnerable.)

Responding to resettlement needs

Nacro recognises that a large proportion of people in prison are likely to have been disadvantaged; many will have experienced social or economic deprivation, such as poor, inadequate housing, low income and lack of training or job opportunities. They are likely to be disaffected and unsure of what they want to do upon their release. Without the right guidance, their chances of making a fresh start are limited.

The On-Side project was developed for juveniles who were familiar with such disadvantage. Many participants had multiple needs: for example, where it was known, 45% of the entire sample had been excluded from school; 74% were considered to have poor employment prospects; 84% had problematic drug use; and 50% had real problems with finding accommodation. A large number of respondents had multiple risk factors considered to make them vulnerable to committing crime: 31 of the 62 participants had more than five vulnerability factors, and one young person had 11 out of the 12 vulnerability factors³.

³ Risk factors, as defined by the On-Side team, were: poor housing on release, drug and alcohol use, poor employment/education prospects, weak family relationships, peer group involved in offending, persistent offending, poor communication skills, offending peer group, mental health problems, problems related to violence, anger.

In order for the On-Side project to have any impact, staff had to develop a strong understanding of, and relationship with, the young person.

The right approach

Dealing with people who are so vulnerable extends way beyond providing practical help. On-Side's success is as much down to the approach taken by the staff as the advice and information that they give.

Building relationships in prison

In order for the On-Side project to have any impact, staff had to develop a strong understanding of, and relationship with, the young person. Each young person on the project was assigned a keyworker who had sole responsibility for supporting them. The keyworker's role stretched beyond that of an adviser: they also acted as a mentors and advocates. Frequent meetings between the keyworker and the young person allowed the young person to talk in detail about any practical needs they might have, and the keyworker to lead discussions on other important topics such as offending behaviour, family networks, peer groups, and drug and alcohol awareness.

As On-Side staff were based in the prison, the young men were able to observe and interact with the project staff on an informal basis. This staff presence was deemed crucial in terms of encouraging young people to engage in the project, and indeed as a result some young people referred themselves. Staff were able to consult with participants regularly about the progress being made with their resettlement plans, and the next steps to be taken.

Following on from meetings, an action plan, developed in consultation with the young person, was agreed. Although actions would vary according to the needs of the individual, a typical plan would include:

- finding somewhere to live and maintaining a tenancy
- finding employment or making plans for education or training provision
- addressing financial issues (for example, claiming benefits, budgeting)
- addressing issues about general health and wellbeing (for example, drugs and alcohol misuse, registering with a doctor and dentist)
- offering support to young people who are experiencing difficult family relationships
- discussing past offending behaviour.

Staff indicated which part of the plan they would carry out, and which part of the plan the young person was responsible for. Although project staff were in charge of most practical matters, they considered it essential to give the young person as much autonomy as possible: firstly so that the young participants were fully aware of the resettlement process; and secondly, to help them improve their ability to make decisions and feel in control of their lives.

Connecting with the outside world

An essential feature of On-Side was the interaction of project staff with those from external agencies (for example, housing and training providers). Furthermore, Nacro has been able to capitalise on networking with other voluntary sector organisations and has enabled young people to take advantages of the services that they provide. The Prince's Trust, Fairbridge, and Nacro projects in the community have provided young offenders with the opportunity to develop personal, social and practical skills.

On-Side staff also forged strong links with local youth offending teams by assisting in delivering

The results

parts of training plans. Project staff were invited to join the prison's working party on developing the juvenile induction programme. Soon after, On-Side staff were present at inductions to talk about the service they offered. In this way young people learned at the earliest opportunity about the benefits that On-Side could bring, should they be contacted by the project.

Prison staff were also able to take advantage of Nacro's expertise in resettling young offenders: they regularly consulted On-Side staff about a variety of resettlement issues for those who were not eligible for the project but still needed help (for example, at that stage⁴, young offenders aged 18 and over).

Keeping in touch

During post-release work, keyworkers maintained contact with the young person – if they wished to keep in touch – by telephone calls and/or face-to-face meetings. Project staff would make weekly telephone calls to the young person, and visit the young person within a week of their release if it was deemed necessary. In most cases the project worker would take the young person to their accommodation, set up meetings with agencies, and make contact with the supervising officer. As the young people become more settled with time, the contact with the worker would decrease.

Building relationships

'It's a relationship. It's a nice relationship, good friendship. [He] offered me something in the beginning which was fair enough, nobody else did, so I offered a little bit back and that is just the way it is. It's nice to stay in contact with him.'

Having a specific keyworker in the prison has enabled a lot of young people to build trust and be more open about their experiences and difficulties. The young people asserted that On-Side staff were flexible, helpful and non-judgemental, and as a result they could relax and chat: young people viewed meetings with keyworkers more positively than a reporting or supervising meeting with someone from a statutory agency.

Almost all of the participants at On-Side said that they wanted continued contact with their keyworker on release, even if they had no problems at that time. They explained that the relationship with the staff was a particularly important feature of the project, particularly if they should encounter difficulties in the future (see case study). The importance of building strong relationships is borne out in the evaluation of the project: young offenders who were in regular contact with their keyworker were less likely to be reconvicted than were those without such contact: 73% of those who did not receive or maintain any post-release contact were reconvicted, compared with 39% of those who did receive or maintain post-release support.

Young people with inadequate family support were more likely to be reconvicted than others, regardless of whether they received any help with this problem or not. (Although the project staff did not work specifically with young

⁴ The On-Side project, in its current phase, works with this age group (18-21).

The national reconviction rate for juvenile offenders is 84%. The reconviction rate for On-Side participants, at 58%, shows that the project has been a particular success

people's families, parents and carers were contacted and kept fully informed of the young person's progress. Staff commented that they were usually contacted by a family member in the first instance to learn about the well-being of their child, and were usually the first point of contact if their child reported any difficulties while in custody.)

Creating effective action plans

'[He] would give me advice and things. I asked him about getting a job. I probably wouldn't have had a job if it weren't for him. Because he's like talked to me for hours about how to go about it, how to fill in application forms, things like that. So he's done quite a lot.'

On assessment, many of the young people explained that they wanted to do something constructive with their lives immediately after release but did not know what opportunities were available to them and how to go about making preparations. On-Side's targeted action plans, drawn up by the keyworker and the young person, not only gave the young person a chance to do something constructive, but also put them in touch with the services they needed to make their transition from prison to the community much easier.

Staff found a general deficit in the services provided for young people, especially for vulnerable young people. However, staff did all that they possibly could to get agencies involved in supporting this group of young people. The main areas in which the young people benefited were:

Accommodation. As well as being one of the highest priorities, it also proved to be the greatest challenge as there was a lack of suitable

and safe housing in the areas to which these young people would want to return. Moreover several housing providers have been reluctant to accept ex-offenders. On-Side keyworkers consistently voiced their concerns to social services and youth offending teams, and directly approached and liaised with housing providers in order to establish a referral system. At times the project staff have needed to act as advocates for the young people to access and retain housing.

Getting benefits. Most young people said they wanted advice and assistance in accessing benefits and grants in order to survive financially on their release. On-Side staff not only helped the young people fill in forms and write letters to the relevant agencies, but also took the young people to any particular agencies they needed to visit in person.

Education, training, employment. Finding an occupation was important for many young people in order to stop them from becoming bored and getting into trouble as a result. A particularly strong link was forged between On-Side staff and the local careers adviser responsible for providing comprehensive careers advice to those in Portland YOI. The project staff made numerous referrals to the careers officer who ensured the young people were given information about a range of training and services available to them. Project staff also helped young people to go about getting a job (for example, helping them to fill in forms, write a CV, and draft a letter of application).

General health and wellbeing. For 84% of On-Side participants, drug use was deemed to be a problem. Dealing with substance misuse presented the biggest difficulty for key workers and young people. Nevertheless, staff did all

Conclusion

they could to help the young people, including relocating young people so they were more likely to stay out of trouble, and referring them to drug support services such as the CARAT service (counselling assessment referral advice throughcare service), once it was established in the prison. Such intervention did make an impact: On-Side participants identified with problematic drug use were more likely to be reconvicted than those without a drug problem, even if they received some help from the project. However, those who did not receive any help to overcome their problems were much more likely to be reconvicted than those who did get help. This again highlights the importance of providing such support for the young person.

'Yes, it's helped me a lot really because if it wasn't for this, I would probably be going out and just be going back to the same old stuff, doing, just being nothing really.'

The national reconviction rate for juvenile offenders who have been detained is 84%. The reconviction rate for On-Side participants, at 58%, shows that the project has been a particular success – especially given that the young people with whom it has dealt are some of the most vulnerable in society.⁵ Those on the On-Side project who received help with employment and/or education, accommodation, mental health problems, and violence and anger management were all less likely to be reconvicted than those who did not get help with identified problems. It is imperative, therefore, that juvenile offenders are released from custody with comprehensive resettlement packages involving intensive, individualised support.

Given that On-Side has reduced re-offending rates among prolific offenders, it could be claimed that the project has brought about substantial savings to the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, On-Side has offered 'added value' to both HMYOI Portland and numerous statutory agencies, including social services, youth justice teams, the Probation Service, and more recently, area youth offending teams. Developing a joined-up approach, could not only create a greater understanding of the difficulties that these young people face, but also show that, with the right help, such problems can be overcome.

⁵ Please note that the full two-year reconviction rate is not yet available for all On-Side participants: at the time of evaluation, data on a two-year follow-up were only available for those who joined the project soon after it started. For these participants, the reconviction rate was 60%. More information on these figures is contained in the On-Side evaluation report (forthcoming, contact details on p.2).

About Nacro

Nacro, the crime reduction charity, is dedicated to making society safer. We have an unrivalled expertise in developing effective solutions to crime and stimulating fresh thinking on how best to reduce it, based on over 30 years of experience. Combining practical services to individuals, communities and organisations with pioneering campaigns, Nacro lobbies for better ways to reduce crime, while demonstrating how this might be done in practice.

Nacro's resettlement service

Nacro's resettlement service provides information and advice for prisoners, ex-offenders and people involved or working with them. If you want to find out more about Nacro's resettlement service, contact Nacro's Resettlement *Plus* Helpline, 169 Clapham Road, London, SW9 0PU, tel: 020 7840 6464.

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To find out about the research mailing, contact info@nacrocsp.org.uk or 020 7501 0551. For more information about the work of the Research and Evaluation Section, contact researchinfo@nacrocsp.org.uk





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Intensive resettlement work with the young people has been a vital factor in reducing reconvictions and breaking the cycle of crime. Nacro's On-Side project at HMYOI Portland was established to ensure that the most vulnerable juveniles in the prison received the information, help and support they need to identify and tackle the range of difficulties they are likely to face on release. This report discusses the strengths of the On-Side project in working with juvenile offenders and significantly reducing re-offending. It looks at the people involved, the approaches taken to reduce reoffending, and the benefits that were gained. It stresses the importance of seeing young people as part of the solution to reducing crime and disorder, not just as part of the problem.

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