

The Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme



The Griffins Society

Working for female offenders

www.thegriffinsociety.org

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Resettlement Issues Facing Female Lifers

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1. Introduction

The aim of resettlement is the effective reintegration of imprisoned offenders back into the community. It has been acknowledged that the system impacts differently on women and men and warrants a distinct response. It has also been recognised that women offenders face particular challenges on resettlement into the community.

It became apparent, through my work, that women lifers present distinct issues in the area of resettlement and they tend to be overlooked: as offenders, as lifers and as women. This is invariably because of the small number of women lifers: in the lifer population (3.3%) and in the female population (3.8%). I decided to focus on women lifers as a specific group because, although some of the resettlement needs apply to all women offenders, there are distinct issues. First of all, they invariably will have been in prison for a significant period of time, usually 12-14 years prior to release, and they may therefore face the additional problem of being institutionalised. Secondly, a lifer has to satisfy the parole board that she presents a sufficiently low risk to be released; a key factor considered by the parole board is whether the lifer has an appropriate release plan, which should be structured to assist resettlement/rehabilitation. Thirdly, a lifer will be on life licence for the rest of their life and there is always the potential of the licence being revoked and the lifer being recalled to prison. Thus, the intention of my study was to research the range of resettlement issues facing women lifers from a legal perspective.

Framework

There are three main types of life sentence: mandatory, discretionary and automatic. There are also the equivalent age related sentences; detention during her majesty's pleasure (HMP), custody for life and detention for life.

A minimum term is set (tariff) which is the period of time that must be served in prison to satisfy the requirements of retribution and deterrence.

A period of time in open conditions is a prerequisite for release for most female lifers. The purpose of open

conditions is to prepare lifers for release. A lifer can only be transferred to open prison following a positive decision by the parole board and ministerial approval a lifer can only be released on life licence with a positive recommendation of the Parole Board.

When the Parole Board consider a lifer's suitability for release they have regard to the degree of risk involved of the lifer committing further imprisonable offences after release - since the case of Stafford, a mandatory lifer can no longer be kept in custody due to the risk of committing future non-violent offending unrelated to the original conviction. The life licence will remain in force for the individual's life.

Women Lifers

In September 2002 there were 167 women lifers in custody; 17 in open/semi-open conditions allocated to three prisons:

- Askham Grange (York) Open 12;
- Drake Hall (Stafford) Semi-Open 3;
- East Sutton Park (Kent) Open 2.

I considered 22 cases from my client base, 13 of these were in open conditions. I also conducted 9 interviews of women lifers in open conditions. The majority of interviewees were mandatory lifers and had no previous convictions.

2. Findings

General

The majority of those interviewed felt that a period of time in open conditions was necessary to allow for a gradual reintegration into the community. This would seem to concur with the current policy that a period of time in open conditions is generally a pre-requisite for release.

The majority felt that the length of time served in open conditions could be reduced and should depend on the individual, 12 months was generally regarded as a sufficient length of time in their individual circumstances. The Parole Board/Secretary of State generally recommends a period of 18 months in open conditions and this was indeed the case for the majority of those interviewed.

The availability of open places is limited to three establishments; this often results in a woman being located far from her proposed release area. This can present particular difficulties for a lifer when reintegrating back into the community and establishing a release plan.

Main Concerns

The purpose of the interviews was to establish how the women themselves perceive their resettlement needs and whether these are being catered for in current policy and the release process. The main concerns identified fall under four broad headings:

- suitable & safe accommodation;
- support on release - including the relationship with SPO;
- reintegration into the family/community;
- employment.

Accommodation

The accommodation proposed is a crucial factor of the release plan and indeed the parole board are only likely to recommend release if suitable accommodation has been identified.

One problem facing lifers is the uncertainty of the release date. The Parole Board need to be assured of suitable accommodation but housing authorities will, generally, only offer housing if a release date is known.

The exclusion zone is a particular concern for lifers because of the nature of the life licence. It can mean that a life is unable to return to a family address because it is in the excluded area.

The majority of lifers will be released to hostel accommodation or a family address. Some of the interviewees expressed concern regarding the suitability of hostel accommodation. In particular, there are a limited amount of female only hostels and even these do not always cater for children. If an individual is to be released to a family address there can be concerns regarding reintegration into the family unit and the lack of space.

Support

Supervising Probation Officer

A lifer has to be allocated a supervising probation officer (SPO) who will supervise her on life licence when released. The SPO is required to submit a report to the Parole Board which should include a proposed structured release plan. The SPO is then responsible for supervising the life licence.

It is of concern that there is such variation in the provision of service between areas and probation officers.

The majority of interviewees had not had the opportunity to build up a relationship with the probation officer who would be supervising their life licence on release.

The probation officers role now focuses on risk and protection of the public; this can result in the lifer being afraid to express any concerns due to fear of recall.

External

The majority of lifers will be released into the community with very little support. The length of time in prison can result in an individual being very isolated from external contacts, friends and family. For some lifers their only contacts will be ex-inmates, however, prison policy does not generally support such ties.

The majority recognised that they would need support on release with practical and emotional matters.

A minority benefited from supportive families but the majority would have very little support on release.

It was suggested by the majority that a mentor could offer appropriate support tailored to the individual.

Reintegration Into Community

The purpose of open conditions is to allow the individual to experience a more realistic environment and to reintegrate into the community. When a lifer arrives in open conditions there is a settling in period, normally for 6 months, before the individual can be temporarily released into the community.

The majority felt that there should be more opportunity for temporary releases from closed conditions.

The settling in period should depend on the individual and could be reduced to 3 months.

The current policy of having to use a day's paid work to take a town visit was regarded as unfair.

Home Leave

A lifer without a provisional release date may apply for a resettlement license after 9 months in open conditions. A resettlement leave is stated to enable prisoners to maintain family ties and links with the community.

The majority of interviewees experienced delays with the first resettlement leave due to paperwork not being submitted on time/or a suitable release address not yet identified.

The majority felt that the resettlement leaves could start earlier and the frequency increased.

Those entitled to resettlement leaves recognised the benefits and necessity for reintegration. In some cases there were unanticipated challenges.

The policy of having to pay for resettlement leaves when in paid work was seen as against the objectives of resettlement.

Hostel

Generally, lifers are subject to a period in a PRES hostel prior to release. However, for women lifers, in practice there are limited hostel places in the female estate.

The lifers would benefit from the opportunity to reside in hostel accommodation prior to the parole board review and perhaps to coincide with paid work.

Employment

Community work

The majority of lifers will have the opportunity to engage in community work.

The interviewees would have liked more choice for community work placements. It was also suggested that the placements could be tailored to the individual and connected to employment on release. All those engaged in community work recognised clear benefits.

Paid Work

Lifers can look for paid work after a period of out working. There were barriers to finding paid work - in particular the limited time and the policy of being limited to 4 days. Once undertaking paid work there were clear benefits; in the skills gained and the possibility of employment on release.

3. Recommendations

When any lifer is considered for release, an integral aspect of the application will be her potential to successfully resettle in the community and the suitability of her release plan. The main concerns identified in the research were: identifying suitable accommodation; lack of support; reintegration into the family/community and employment. These factors, of course, also apply to women and non-lifers on release, however being a minority does not justify overlooking needs and it should be recognised that women lifers present distinct issues.

It should be acknowledged that there have been encouraging developments in terms of resettlement policy and this will provide an effective framework but it is important that each policy is applied appropriately to each individual.

The rhetoric on women and resettlement is very encouraging; however, it is essential that the policy is translated into effective practice. In the words of one lifer:

I do not feel I will have ever paid the price in people's eyes and it depends on who is examining me or scrutinising me.... At the same time there has got to be a time when they say enough is enough, she still grieves, she is still ashamed, she still goes through things but lets put networks there to help her out and move back into society.

To ensure the effective resettlement of women lifers and to help bridge the gap between custody and the community the following specific recommendations have been identified:

Recognise Individual Needs

Any blanket policy can become an obstacle if it is not applied in the context of individual circumstances. It is essential to recognise an individual's needs when applying policy. In the words of one interviewee:

There doesn't seem to be any logic to what the prison does. I think they should do things individually rather than collectively and they would get a lot further.

A Review of the Temporary Release Provisions

- to allow for increased temporary release in closed conditions;
- to reduce the settling in period to 3 months when transferred to open;
- increase resettlement leaves to every four weeks with discretion and costs to be met by prison;
- community work - increase range of placements and greater flexibility for the individual;
- paid work – cancel 4 day policy.

Increased Availability of Hostel Places

in order to allow lifers to reside on hostel with benefits prior to a Parole Board review and perhaps to coincide with paid work.

More Frequent Contact with Supervising Probation Officer

SPO to be allocated in closed conditions, victim issues to be identified prior to transfer to open, the requirement that SPOs must attend every internal review board from 4.5 years prior to tariff expiry.

Accommodation

Review of hostel and alternative accommodation, central database of all hostel accommodation, housing associations to review policy of only identifying place when release date is known.

Mentoring (Voluntary) Scheme to be Established

- with a central co-ordinator;
- identify individuals prior to transfer to open conditions;
- match by individual and release area;

- to provide positive role model;
- possibility of ex-prisoner;
- support continue after release.

Release Information Pack

for all lifers before release, with information on disclosing conviction, the life licence and helpful points of contact.

The Griffins Society

The Griffins Society is a voluntary organisation working for the care and resettlement of female offenders, including those with a history of mental illness and violent behaviour. The Society was set up in 1966. At that time there was little residential provision for women offenders and the Society concentrated its efforts on filling that gap by providing specialist hostel and move-on accommodation. Those residential projects were transferred to another voluntary organisation in 1997 and the Society decided to alter the focus of its activities. This change of emphasis included establishing the Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme in the Social Policy Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2001.

The Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme

The aim of the Fellowship Programme is to provide ‘thinking space’ for those working in the criminal justice system or allied fields who wish to study a particular aspect of the circumstances or treatment of women offenders. Applications are welcomed from anyone with an interest in female offenders, such as magistrates, probation officers, staff of supported accommodation, drug/alcohol counsellors. In keeping with its origins, the Griffins Society welcomes applications from the voluntary sector, as well as statutory organisations. Fellowships are not awarded to people in academic employment, or studying for a degree. Each Fellowship runs for one year and Fellows are awarded a grant. Academic support and supervision is provided by Dr Judith Rungay, Director of the Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme. Fellows have full access to all facilities at the London School of Economics.

The views expressed in this Research Paper are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect those of The Griffins Society or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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