

The Griffins Society Visiting Research Fellowship Programme

Life on a Life Licence

A follow-up to 2002/01:
Resettlement issues facing female lifers

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The Griffins Society

Working for female offenders

www.thegriffinsociety.org

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.

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1. Introduction

In 2000-2001 a Griffins Fellowship award enabled me to study the resettlement issues facing women lifers before release¹. In particular I was interested to explore whether the women were adequately prepared for release and whether their release plans were effective in assisting their reintegration into the community and whether they provided sufficient support. Lifers will be on life licence for the rest of their lives and there is always the possibility of recall. It is essential, therefore, that a supportive framework is in place and maintained on release. The main issues identified were: suitable accommodation; lack of support; reintegration into the family/community; and employment.

In the follow up research I hoped to focus on the women's actual experience of release and resettlement into the community; and whether the reality corresponded with their expectations prior to release. In particular, I hoped to ascertain whether the women felt that they had sufficient support to assist their reintegration and whether they had been adequately prepared for living in the community.

Research Sample

When I originally conducted the research, in September 2002 there were 17 women lifers in open/semi-open conditions allocated to three prisons. From this original sample of women lifers 15 have now been released and two have been transferred back to closed conditions. From the fifteen that have been released one licensee has been recalled to prison and one has sadly died. There are therefore 13 licensees from the original sample currently being supervised in the community. In November 2003 there were a total of 1386 life licensees of which 68 were women under active supervision by the Probation Service.

Prison	Lifers Sept 02	Release figures from original sample	Recall	Death	On licence July 04
Askham Grange	12	11 released 1 back staged	1	0	10
Drake Hall	3	3 released	0	1	2
East Sutton Park	2	1 released 1 backstaged	0	0	1
Total	17	15	1	1	13

This study is drawn from the experiences of a total of 12 women on life licence. I have had the opportunity to interview nine women on life licence from the original sample. I had previously interviewed eight of these women whilst in custody in the original research. I have also considered the case files of three women whom I was unable to interview. I also had the opportunity to interview the supervising probation officer of one of the licensees and the mentor of another licensee.

The time served in custody ranged from 8 to 21 years. The majority had served over their recommended tariff (period of time in custody recommended by the judge to satisfy retribution and deterrence), only three women had been released on tariff expiry. The period of time served in custody beyond the recommended tariff ranged from six months to seven years and six months.

Time in custody (years)	8-9	12-13	14-15	16-17	17-18	20 +
Interviewees		1	3	2	2	1
Case studies	1	1			1	

The period of time the licensees had been on licence ranged from one month to 18 months

The Life Licence²

When a lifer is released from custody she becomes subject to a life licence and may be recalled to prison if her behaviour gives cause for concern. The licence remains in force for the individual's lifetime and may be revoked and the lifer returned to prison at any time.

The licence contains six standard conditions. These include:

- She shall place herself under the supervision of whichever probation officer is nominated for this purpose.
- She shall on release report to the nominated probation officer, and shall keep in touch with that officer in accordance with instructions.
- She shall if required receive visits from the nominated probation officer.
- She shall reside only where approved by her probation officer.
- She shall work only where approved by her probation officer and shall inform her at once if she loses her job.
- She shall not travel outside Great Britain without the prior permission of her probation officer.

The licence may also include additional conditions in line with the Parole Board's release direction.

The conditions are designed to ensure the continued safety of the public by providing a continuous assessment of the risk the licensee presents and to help the licensee reintegrate into the community as a law abiding citizen. The conditions can be varied or cancelled or further conditions added by the Secretary of State.

In the cases considered, four of the licensees had a standard life licence with no additional conditions. In six of the cases there was an additional condition; '*not to seek to approach or communicate with the victim's immediate family*'. In four cases there was an additional condition stipulating an exclusion zone; '*she shall not*

enter the areas of... without her supervising officer's prior permission'. The exact boundaries were marked on a map and explained to the licensee. In two cases it was stated that 'she shall comply with any requirements imposed by her supervising officer for the purpose of addressing her outstanding offending behaviour.' In one case it was also stated for the licensee to; *'attend and accept treatments as may be reasonably prescribed from time to time by her General Practitioner and Consultant Psychiatrist.'*

Consideration may be given to cancelling the supervision element of the life licence after a minimum of four years trouble free existence in the community. An application is submitted by the probation service to the lifer review and recall section at the home office. The records must be retained until the death of the licensee. Once the conditions are cancelled, if an incident comes to the notice of the probation service or the lifer unit, consideration will be given to re-impose the conditions and/or recall. This would usually arise as a result of a further conviction or information from the police.

Life Licence in Practice

In two cases the probation officer had fully explained the operation of the life licence to the licensee. In the remaining seven cases only aspects of the licence had been explained. In the advice received there were discrepancies in the advice provided and the interpretation of the life licence; for example, two licensees were advised that they could apply for a passport and in fact one of the licensee had travelled abroad after 10 months on licence. However, two licensees had been told they could not apply for a passport. The position as stated in the lifer manual is that the decision rests with the probation officer, who must be satisfied that the licensee may be trusted to return and resume the supervisory period³. They would then need to report within 24 hours of return to the UK. However, any licensee requesting to live permanently abroad will only receive approval after a thorough risk assessment and agreement of a senior manager in the probation service and lifer unit⁴. It was the view of the Probation Officer that the supervising officer would benefit from specific training on the life licence:

I think the other thing that is important that we can get lifer training, and can go on courses. It's very rare now and it is all focused on risk and the quality of the letter that you can send to somebody that you have not seen for four years, that's how ridiculous it feels. We used to have training with the police and with prison staff and that has stopped now.

2. Supervision and Support on a Life Licence

Supervising Probation Officer

A lifer has to be allocated a supervising probation officer who will supervise her on release. The original research found a huge variance in the supervision and the support offered depending on the area and the assigned individual. Some lifers had very little opportunity to build the relationship with their supervising officer before release. Three of the licensees had met their probation officer for the first time on release.

Rachel explains:

I had as many probation officers as I had had years in prison. She was another new one and I had never met her before. I just got a letter to say that she would be my new probation officer on release.

There was only one licensee who had had the same allocated probation officer throughout her time in custody:

My rapport with him is fantastic and it always has been. I have had him since I was in Durham. I have had him a long time although we have had breaks in between, we have a good relationship and he is a nice guy.

It was the view of all the licensees that it would be beneficial to be able to establish the relationship prior to release. Chris states:

I think that it is best, if you can, to build up a relationship before you get released and hopefully you will continue when you do get released and go on from there. It is important because in a way, your probation officer is your life line really for freedom ... It is important with your PO because you need that support but in a sense, your PO is standing in the middle of you and freedom.

This view was supported by the Probation Officer:

I think that the ground work should be done before people come out. It's that link sinking in because people must be anxious.

He was also concerned about the lack of consistency:

If I left the office then somebody else would take the case, even if I went to the office around the corner. That is what is different now so that consistency level is reduced.

In practice, probation officers are, generally, unable to see lifers on a regular basis whilst in custody due to the resource implications:

The reality is that if someone is a long way away, there are no resources to see them. We write a letter but it is not the same.

The transition between living in custody and the community could be eased if the relationship between the lifer and her supervising probation officer was established before release.

Contact with Supervising Officer

The supervising officer must ensure that⁵ a first appointment is arranged for the day of release (or next working day). In practice, the majority of the interviewees had no problem with reporting on the day of their release. In two cases, however, there were unexpected difficulties.

In Rachel's case she received a letter from her probation officer advising her that she should meet her on the day of release at the hostel at 3.30pm:

I got to the hostel I think about 3.15 because it was a long journey...When I got there, I had a phone call to say why hadn't I reported to probation... I had to rush to get to probation... I was panicking then because I thought I have just got out and they will be taking me back.

In Rebecca's case her allocated probation officer was on holiday, so on the first two occasions she went to the probation office and there was no one to see her:

The lady behind the counter said to just ring in a fortnight's time and make an appointment then. I just panicked and said that I couldn't do that because I have to see him every week.

It is stated in the Lifer Manual that the supervising probation officer has to ensure that arrangements are made for weekly contact for the first four weeks following release. In addition one contact has to be a visit to the home address within 10 days of release. Contact should comprise a minimum of fortnightly for the second and third months following release and thereafter monthly.

In practice the majority of the licensees had weekly contact for the first three months and fortnightly for the first twelve months. At the time of the interviews the majority of the interviewees still had contact with probation on a fortnightly basis. There was only one licensee who had monthly contact. The average time for the contact varied from 10 mins- 1 hour. The content of the contact itself also varied from a way of catching up with the licensee to a full risk assessment.

Chris explains:

I just go there to catch up or if I have got any problems or queries. She has to see me because she has to write her reports so we spend that time catching up on whatever needs to be talked about. We will go over what I have done, any changes, so we just talk in general really.

The majority of the interviewees (seven) felt that they had a positive relationship with their supervising officer and could be open with them.

The most important thing I like about her is that she gives me the right to talk to her without bias or judgmental views and if I do something wrong, she will tell me that I have done something wrong and that is different altogether but she allows me to speak my mind and say how I feel and what I am doing. She understands when things can be up and down. Understand that I can have my stresses and strains like anybody else in life. Knows in her heart from what I say that I am speaking honestly and that I am coping okay. (Alice)

Unfortunately, in two cases the licensees had a strained relationship with their supervising officer. Jade states:

I can't communicate with her. I can't get on with her at all. I tolerate her because I have to.

All the interviewees cited trust as the most important factor in the relationship.

Trust is the biggest thing. I had a problem with trust with different people. With my PO you have got to understand that I went to one conference and another lifer on licence said that a probation officer got him recalled for no apparent reason and he hated Probation Officers. So he didn't have a good relationship with that particular PO but they can have people recalled. But then again, if you can build up a good relationship with them and you have no problems, I think that they can help you with your problems. (Chris)

In Alice's case she has learned to trust her probation officer but she also appreciates the fact that her probation officer trusts her.

I think the most important thing I found is having a Probation Officer that you can work with as well as her doing her job, but also to sit and talk to and see and let you do you're achieving. I've been fortunate that my second one has been very supportive but not too supportive in the sense that she hasn't taken anything away from me. She has let me be independent; she has let me do my thing. I ask her if this is okay and what I am doing and she tells me of course it is but I know that if I needed anything I know that she wouldn't condemn me. She plays an official role but still gives me the beauty of being a person to talk to and get advice from. She gives me honest answers to all my questions. They are all important issues. (Alice)

Two of the interviewees also mentioned age as an important factor in the relationship.

We are all of the same age bracket which is good but not always is it good to have someone the same age because some of them can be very more wise and very stern and strict and you don't feel comfortable and vice versa if you get someone young, they have not got a clue. (Nicky)

Professional Support

The role of the supervising probation officer used to be to advise, assist and befriend offenders. It has now been redefined with the focus on protection of the public and risk management. In some cases the licensee felt reluctant to express any concerns with their probation officer because they were afraid that they would be perceived as not coping.

The change in the supervising probation officer's role has also resulted in a gap in provision and the licensee can be left with very limited support beyond risk management, the probation officer states:

You have to stick to your requirement about the risk assessment. The social aspects get overlooked... I can remember years ago going with people to sign on and things like that but if I said that now I would be looking at me like I was from another planet.

In three cases their probation officer had assisted with housing applications. In Nicky's case this included supplying a reference. Chris's probation officer had helped her identify suitable alternative accommodation and referred her to additional support:

The hostel which was her idea because she knew that hostel. She also got me to see a psychologist.

It was recognized in the original research that the length of time served in prison can result in the individual being very isolated from external contacts, friends and family. The majority of the interviewees felt that they needed additional support and could not rely exclusively on their probation officer.

I could not phone them at 5.05pm could I? If I am having a bad day and at 5.05pm I think I want to talk to them, I cant, he finished at 5pm hasn't he? (Sue)

If you have just been released from a long sentence and you have no friends and no family, you will find it hard. Sometimes you need somebody to talk to, someone to sit with. I am grateful that I have got support there. I try to do a lot of things by myself but the support is there and it is nice to know that. (Chris)

There is a gap there - I think they think they can cope but it doesn't hit them until they get out. The key issue is how isolated they are. (Mentor)

In four of the cases the licensees did have the support of a key worker, usually from the hostel or supported housing. In Rachel's case this involved,

doing a report on you every week. You have to see them every week and go over any problems and just sit with them and have a chat really.

For Chris,

Some things she didn't know or things that she usually helped people with, I already knew it so when we used to have our little key sessions, it was just to pass time really because she couldn't help me more than I could help myself.

Nicky also had a key worker but she found that the help was intrusive:

There was support there, but, in a way, it was very intrusive as well and I thought that sometimes they were too intrusive when someone was supposed to have been coming out and being rehabilitated to lead a normal life, they are very intrusive of where have you been and wanting to know. After a time, they didn't come straight out with the questions, where have you been and what have you been doing, they put in roundabout ways, well what do you do all day and surely you cannot be walking the streets all day and everything else. So I found it quite intrusive really.

In Jade's case, she found the support workers at the refuge extremely helpful but there were problems with integration with probation:

The refuge was out to help me .. they were to give me help and support and Probation took a different view and thought that they were interfering and I was the piggy in the middle and I did not like it. And I still don't like it. I am still the piggy in the middle.

One of the interviewees was fortunate to have a mentor who has helped her with practical and emotional issues. The mentor had worked as a probation officer with Sue prior to her release and had volunteered to assist Sue on release:

I recognized particularly with lifers that because of their length of sentence, minimum of ten years, that they were going out to a very different life and didn't really know how to deal with it. Also I am aware of the change of the role of probation and I'd noticed the lack of support for them particularly women who have been institutionalized to some extent. They think they are going to cope but don't really know.... [Sue] was a very young immature woman when she went in and you know there still is a naivety about her to some extent. She has made significant strides since she came out. I thought no one is going to help her, she is just going to get the run of the mill and because probation are dealing with high case loads that unless you are a very high risk you are not going to get any meaningful help from anybody...she was moving into a very strange area, with one contact and a probation officer and that is all she had.

Sue was concerned before release that she would be isolated and unable to cope with practicalities:

I would not like to have thought that...its alright having Probation there but that's on a time limit isn't it? But to know that you have got someone there where you can just phone them at your leisure or when you are having a bad day'...She has found that, 'I get as much support as I need and I always know that if I need that bit more, I know it's there

The mentor explains how she helped Sue:

I helped her identify suitable accommodation, acted as a guarantor for her.. I helped her get things like a kettle, bedding things like that.

It has also involved emotional support,

She has come to me for emotional support.. there is an acknowledgement that she can come at anytime and that is what she needs.

The majority of the interviewees recognized that they would need additional support:

It would be a good idea to have somebody who is non- judgmental but a Samaritan or mentor to say that they know the pitfalls that will happen, not necessarily bad.

It helps to have someone to talk to who has been there and done it, I think you need a mentor to guide you a bit.

Only a minority of the interviewees benefited from additional support; only two had been referred by their probation officer to additional support; one to a psychologist and one had self-referred to an alcohol counselor. In the remaining cases, one licensee was in contact with a prison visitor she had known whilst in custody and her church community and one was in contact with the CAB and Samaritans.

Family Support

The majority, eight interviewees, had some family support. The extent of the support varied. In two cases the licensees had daily contact with their daughters.

Rachel has been fortunate:

My daughter has done a lot for me. Without Lucy I think being down there I would have been in a right state because she has always been there.

In some cases the support

is mutual support for both of us and I've got more time with the grandchildren as well as her which she needs. She has been on her own with the children all of this time. She has really had nobody close to go off with but I mean, we have already planned things, we go to bingo once a week which is something that a lot of people take for granted, going off with an outing daughter/mother. We have not done that as adults, on our own. (Nicky)

In the majority of the cases, reintegration into the family presented difficulties that had not been anticipated. In particular, the women had been in prison for a long period of time with limited family contact and when they are released:

You have changed and they have changed. It is not how you left it, you won't come back and find it the same.

The majority of interviewees found that family were reluctant to discuss their time in prison which could make them feel isolated:

Sometimes I talk about prison with my sister, my family but its funny I tend not to use the word prison when I am talking to them. When I use to be in that place, remember when I was away- that's how I would talk. One, I didn't want to keep repeating that word and two, I didn't want to keep pushing it on them as in saying the word. I think that it is important that you can have someone to talk to. (Chris)

They have been fantastic, but they don't want to know about my past. They talk about the present and the future but they are very reluctant to talk about prison. (Tracey)

Ex-offenders

The majority of interviewees (eight) were still in contact with women they had met in prison, although these relationships are not generally encouraged:

I am very wary and you have to be very careful about where you live, who you associate with. I am taking a lot of precautions.

However, those who were in contact found it a valuable support: I am lucky, I feel lucky because I am still in touch with ex-offenders, all of us were released within a month or two. If I want a girly chat I can phone them.

The support provided by other women lifers on licence was particularly appreciated, because they had been through similar experiences and could therefore offer useful advice:

What I found useful, I actually spoke to another lifer, she gave me a lot of advice, she told me about the pre-payment cards and she gave me the numbers to set it up. It helped that she had done it before, I felt reassured by the fact she had done it before and been okay. (Jennifer)

In a minority of cases the licensees no longer had contact with other ex-offenders and wanted a fresh start: 'I did used to have contact with one but it comes to the point where I think I want to leave that'.

I think that they will die off in the end because the people that I know weren't proper buddies. We were friends but its like ships who passed in the night and in time, I would like a clean slate. (Nicky)

Isolation

When a woman lifer is released one of the most challenging aspects is the isolation. She has been in a regimented, female only, environment for 12-21 years and has had people around her at all times. The majority of interviewees had not anticipated the feeling of isolation:

In prison you are surrounded by people, it feels strange being alone.

Tracey explains,

I think that the other thing that I was surprised at in myself, there were occasions when I was lonely.

When I first moved here, I thought it was quiet, so quiet and I thought to myself, gosh, I am on my own now. I wondered if the neighbors could hear me because I talk too loud. It's nice because I am so happy when I am alone but sometimes I do feel a bit lonely. (Chris)

I could not believe it. My dad come and picked me up that morning and dropped me straight to the refuge and I just felt a bit...don't know....I'm not saying that I missed (prison) but it was just there was always people there and then I got to the refuge and I was a bit lost (Jade)

I think being 15 years being away and with the hostel and that, having all these women around and there is always someone there and before that having a big family and then all of a sudden coming out and you are on your own. I really thought if I was going to be able to handle it, how will I be and am I going to get depressed (Rachel)

The isolation can be hard to cope with because the women have been in a highly regimented and controlled environment where they have had only limited opportunity to think for themselves. For some of the interviewees the unstructured environment was overwhelming. One of the interviewees wondered how she would fill her time at first and resorted to making lists every day.

You have to all of a sudden think for yourself, even in open you are told what to do. At first I noticed that I still would wake up at 6, have lunch at 12, tea at 5 and bed at 8 because it's what I've been doing for years. (Jennifer)

However, once the interviewees found suitable housing they generally found the freedom liberating:

It's nice to have your own private space. You can get up when you want and cook anything, go shopping and buy anything that you want. I think that you should enjoy everyday because you don't know what will happen tomorrow. It's nice to have that choice and to be able to make choices. Its different when you are inside but here I can like run the bath and have a bath whenever and at whatever time I want. (Chris)

3. Suitability of Release Address

One of the most significant issues identified in the original research was the need to identify a suitable release address. Four of the interviewees had been released to supported accommodation; two to a hostel; one to supported housing; and one to a refuge. Five licensees were released to family homes; one was then moved within a short period of time to hostel accommodation. In the case studies; one was released to a drug rehabilitation unit; one to a medium secure unit; and one to a friend's address.

Hostel

In three cases the licensees were released directly to female only accommodation. In a fourth case the licensee was moved to a women only hostel five days after release. Two of the licensees were surprised that living in a hostel still felt like being in prison.

I was surprised that being in the hostel I was still like a prisoner. Although I went out all day, I still had to be in at certain times. The bad thing was that when I was in prison I was allowed my own medication, I took it at the time I should. I got myself into a routine with my tablets. In this hostel, you have to give your medication. You can't keep it. There were no locked cupboards in your room and sometime you did share...there was no locked cupboard where you could lock things away which I think is really bad. You should have at least one locked cupboard to lock personal things away. But it was having to get back at certain times at night to get the last medication or whatever. (Nicky)

Rachel felt that she,

had more freedom on the annexe (in prison) than I did in the hostel when released. Because of all the rules and regulations and I said don't get me wrong I know you have got to have them because it is Home Office rules, but you have to get up at a certain time in the morning, you have to attend morning meetings. If you are not doing voluntary work, you have to attend what they call projects which are classes and that is from 10.15am to 12.00pm. You then have your lunch at 12.00pm but you can go out from 12.00pm to 2.00pm but you have to be back at 2.00pm for afternoon projects which last till 4.00pm. Then you can go out from 4.00pm until 6.00pm and you have to be back at 6.00pm for tea and then you might be lucky and be allowed out from 7.00pm till 8.00pm and have to be back at 8.00pm to do your cleaning jobs. If you don't behave yourself and abide by those rules and regulations, you can't have your home leave. You can go Friday from 4.00pm night until Sunday at 10.00pm and that's providing that you can prove where you are going and provide a land line phone number.

One of the main concerns with hostel accommodation was the amount of drug use:

There are still drugs everywhere in the hostel even though they say there is not there is. (Rachel)

Alternative accommodation was obtained for Sue because of the concern regarding drug abuse. Her mentor was of the view that;

A probation hostel full of drug users, alcohol users, which would have meant that she would have done 10 years and gone back to the environment that she had come from really ..she is supposed to be rehabilitated and ideally be distanced from that.

Jennifer was released to supported housing; she shared the housing with two male residents. One of the other residents was still misusing drugs and stole her stereo. However, despite this she felt that the accommodation did cater for her needs and offered the appropriate level of support.

Jade was released to a refuge: she had her own flat within the accommodation, including her own bathroom, living room/kitchen. The accommodation was suitable for her needs and had the advantage of being able to be independent with support.

The interviewees felt that the crucial aspect of hostel accommodation was the level of independence and support available if required. The accommodation can then operate as a stepping stone and assist the licensee's gradual reintegration into the community.

Family

In five cases the interviewees were released to a family address; the family members include; brother, mother, sister, aunt and son. The majority of licensees had difficulties reintegrating into a family unit.

Sue was released to her sister's address with her sister's two children; she didn't want to settle there but the alternative was a hostel. She found it hard to integrate after being in prison for 12 years. In particular she had no experience of living with children, she found the set up too claustrophobic:

It was head blowing, two screaming kids and trying to fit into their lives when I was trying to make one of my own.

After a period of two- three weeks she found alternative accommodation with the assistance of her mentor. In fact, without her assistance, Sue acknowledges that she would probably still be living with her sister.

Alice was released to her son's address, a one bedroom flat. The accommodation, however, was too cramped for Alice and her three children. She requested a move to a different area where she had an offer of employment and suitable accommodation, but her supervising probation officer was reluctant to agree. She eventually relocated with legal assistance after seven months of living in inappropriate conditions.

I had to make myself homeless in order to get a place but I couldn't do that because I was breaking the rule of what was set out for me. I had to reside there and I went I tried to explain to it to my Probation Officer, she said that no I could make myself homeless because she said that all she could do for me was put me in a hostel. By this particular time, I had the children with me and I couldn't very well leave them, I had to look after them. (Alice)

Chris initially stayed at her aunt's address, but found the environment too stifling. She was moved after five

days with the help of her probation officer to a hostel:

I think that it is touch and go when you have spent such a long time in prison, and you come out, to a family,. Sometimes you have grown up, you have grown older and they have got older and sometimes like on home leaves you don't actually see that sort of restrictions that they are trying to put on you. Even like, I smoke and it wasn't really a problem before as such but when I came out it was like, you smoking again! I don't smoke in the house, I go outside. Bits and pieces like that, like I sleep with my light on and one time I wanted to plug the little lamp in and she was a bit funny about it and I couldn't handle it and I thought that I might as well be back in prison.

These cases also demonstrate the importance of the relationship with the supervising probation officer. Fortunately for Sue and Chris they had a positive relationship with their probation officers and a move could therefore be agreed and arranged quickly in the circumstances.

It can also be difficult for the licensees to slot back into a family that has become used to them being away. Alice was separated from her children when they were babies; they are now teenagers and were not used to having their mother at home:

When I first got home, it was like I didn't belong there. They were all still carrying on as if I wasn't there. .. I was entering their world and they were entering mine so it was new for them as well to have mum home. It was different for them then because I was coming home like a friend, not as a mother but when I finally came home for good, it was like a mum and they had to get used to this new role model in their life that they never had, they had only ever heard about. And actually hearing about one and visiting is totally different to actually staying there and being in their faces 24 hours a day.

I found it a lot easier for me than it was for them. I suppose I wanted to try and put those years back in for them but I knew that I couldn't so I did it in other ways. I had learnt skills and could help them with different things and part of them were over the moon and the other part was like what is she after, why does she want to do this for me?

Follow on address

Eight of the interviewees have now moved from their original release address; four of these obtained housing with no assistance. The time of the move varied from two to nine months. In three of the cases, the supervising probation officer assisted the licensee in obtaining suitable accommodation.

Sue's mentor assisted her in identifying suitable housing. Jennifer moved in with her partner after 9 months in supported housing. In the case studies, two have moved from the original address, both with the assistance of probation and key workers.

Louise was released to a medium secure unit because there was no lower security accommodation that catered for her needs. After 12 months the hospital staff identified a suitable follow-on address. However, the probation service did not approve of the hostel. A second address was identified and again the probation officer did not

approve. She was kept in secure accommodation longer than deemed necessary and her health deteriorated as a result. On the third occasion a hostel was identified and approved by probation.

Joan was released in Jan 2003 to a hostel with extensive support and an assigned key worker. After the six month requisite period she moved to independent accommodation without the same level of support, sadly she committed suicide in August 2003.

It is of concern that in some cases there may be the appropriate level of support immediately after release. However, after 6-12 months the licensee can be moved to accommodation with less support and she can find the transition difficult to cope with.

Jade spent the first six months in a refuge and hoped to stay there. Her probation officer identified a house for her and she felt obliged to accept. The refuge was in fact willing to accommodate Jade for longer and the housing officer would have assisted her in identifying a suitable address. Her probation officer, however, insisted she move after the 6 month period. The transition presented a real challenge for Jade and initially she found it hard to cope with the practicalities of living independently.

4. Practicalities

In the original research some of the lifers interviewed were anxious about the practicalities of living independently in the community. In practice, the practicalities of day to day living did present difficulties for some of the licensees.

For those convicted at a young age it can be difficult because they may have had no experience of independent living prior to release. In Sue's case she has been in prison since she was 17 years old and had therefore grown up in prison. On release she found it challenging coping with

things like...prescriptions, when I got my first prescription I had to come and say well, "How do I fill this in?" and "Where do I go?". Just simple little things that a thirty- one old should know but because I haven't been kept up to date.

On release she also needed help with opening a bank account, registering with a GP and signing on for benefits. Fortunately for Sue, her mentor assisted her with these tasks.

The majority of the licensees have had no experience of living alone prior to incarceration, often because they had previously lived with partners. Tracey explains that it was difficult at first:

Having to do things for myself such as gas, electricity...I had never done it. So they were major steps, but I did it.

Even for those with previous experience of living independently there have been significant changes:

I did back in the 1970's but it was different then. I have never done it on my own. Things have changed, like the cookers have all changed and things like that. It's silly things really.

In particular, the majority of the interviewees had difficulties in applying for and receiving their benefits. All the interviewees had been in paid employment before their release and often there was a gap between the last payment and the benefits being received:

My contract ended on the 4th December and no money went in my bank account until the 29th December. It was a long time especially with the Christmas period in between. If I had been a normal person, as in if I had not had any money and I was a criminal, what would I have done during that period? Go out and shop lift?

When the licensees applied for benefits they had to supply the details why they had left their previous employment. In two cases their benefits were stopped because they had left their previous employment for no reason Rachel explains:

They said go to the Job Centre and they ask you all questions about your job and why you left it and you have to explain it all to them and then a while later you get a letter saying that your benefits have been stopped because you left you last job for no reason. They actually stopped my benefits and I had to appeal against it to get it reinstated.

Rebecca had the same experience:

I was angry and I wrote back and said that being in prison is a bit restrictive in terms of looking for alternative employment and sent it back.

Utilities

Another challenge expressed by all the interviewees was setting up accounts and payment for the utilities:

When you receive an electricity bill or gas bill, it can be, if you are not careful, a headache. And you can panic. One, if you are not used to getting bills and two, if you haven't got the money to actually pay it. They can be a problem. When I first moved in, they sent me a gas bill and an electricity bill and they were wrong. I had to set up an account to change from the last person. They sent me two bills that belonged to the last person living here. I paid one and then when they sent the next one, I noticed that the account number was different. When I phoned them up and queried it with them they said that account is now closed, this one is yours and you should not have paid the last one. I got that sorted but it is good job that it is a free number. (Chris)

I have had problems with electricians because I had just moved in the house and some chap came round before Xmas and I didn't know what he was talking about and he sat there and did not make sense at all. He was taking me away from Powergen with my electric but I didn't know about that. I had loads of trouble with it. I don't know how to pay my bills yet? I have not been in long enough to get it sorted. (Jade)

I was a bit scared as well because I thought if I go to somebody and say how do you pay a water bill, they would wonder where I had been and wonder if there was something wrong with me. People just assume, so you don't want to feel uncomfortable or different, because you don't know these things. I think they are very important issues to be looked at and let people be aware that they have been away a long time and they need to know about procedural changes, Just the basics are very important (Alice)

Rachel was fortunate to have assistance with setting up utility accounts and managing the payment from her daughter:

She said about all these payment cards instead of having one big bill and I am lucky that she did all that for me. She run all around and got all my payments sorted out for me. She asked me to give her all the phone numbers and she rang them all up because she had a land line and I would have been using my mobile. So I gave her all the information like even when we had to read the electric meters to start the key up again. I asked what I did because I hadn't seen a box like that with a key. What threw me is that I had a landline installed and I had this phone bill for £16.55 for the installation charge so my daughter said just take it to the Post Office and pay it. I did all that and filled it all in and she gave the whole thing back to me. I asked her if she kept it all and she said that they were all on line with them now and I felt

such a fool. I didn't know this.

Another area that was a challenge for some of the licensees was learning to budget and manage their own finances:

I thought it was going to be awful and I thought if I would cope financially, would I be earning enough. I hadn't thought about the electricity, gas bill, water bill, I just thought about paying the rent, earning my wages to pay the rent. So I started earning enough to pay the rent. But I had to add to it and all I had was my child allowance which was £16.00 and then we had to eat. So then I tried to go for working tax credits and see if I could manage and get on my feet that way. I didn't know how to go about things for help. (Alice)

The majority of the interviewees felt they would have benefited from more advice on budgeting and paying bills before their release:

I think that the prisons, when you are in open, need to do more with people because if I didn't observe what my parents were doing with bills and things. The prison didn't really help me in that area. So you find a lot of people especially who have spent a long time in prison, they will find it hard because everything was done for them when they were inside. They didn't pay any bills, meals were cooked.

To have some sort of advisor to tell me about process. I think when you are away and you come back out in society, people assume and take it for granted that you know how the prices have changed. (Alice)

The majority of interviewees felt that the opportunities for temporary release from prison were too restrictive and it would have helped to have a greater range of experiences in the community before release:

On unescorted releases, you are tied to a space and time,. You have to go from A to B. if you get dropped off here, you go to work here, you are not allowed to do anything, then you have to go back on the bus.

The licensees would have benefited from a wider range of activity in the community prior to release, including the opportunity to manage money. Whilst on voluntary placements in the community, the lifers were only allowed to take money for the bus fare and for no other purposes. It was therefore difficult for the lifer to gain experience of managing money in such restrictive circumstances.

5. Disclosure

Employment

All the interviewees had the opportunity to engage in voluntary and paid employment before release. The majority felt that they had gained confidence from the placement and had the opportunity to deal with the public.

Well, it built my confidence, having the kind of job that I did have already, boosted my confidence no end, plus I was in contact with people every day at the job so it helped prepare me to meet strangers because that is what I was doing in the hotel anyway, was meeting strangers everyday which meant I did not really have any problems when I was finally released. (Nicky)

Since being released; only three interviewees had secured paid employment, one was undertaking voluntary work and two were studying. Six of the licensees were unemployed. The interviewees all cited disclosure of their conviction as the main barrier to obtaining suitable employment.

It is stated in the Lifer Manual that the supervising probation officer must consider advising certain third parties of the nature of the offence and implications of the supervision process including conditions. In the case of partners, employers, educational providers and accommodation suppliers the presumption is in favour of disclosure. The preferred approach is for the licensee to disclose this information themselves⁶.

All the interviewees had been advised on the preparation for work course that they would need to disclose their conviction to a prospective employer and provide details if asked:

They said that I had to disclose a certain amount with having a life sentence, the time wasn't spent so I had to disclose. But they didn't say that I had to disclose everything and they said that I didn't have to disclose certain things, just enough for them to have awareness, but I didn't have to go in depth with anything.

However, four licensees thought they had to disclose in all circumstances, and five licensees thought they only needed to disclose if asked. The interviewees were unsure of the other circumstances they would need to disclose their conviction. The advice they had received from probation varied. Rachel explains:

I was told to say that it was basically domestic violence, even though in a way my offence wasn't really, it was domestic violence related but it wasn't direct. But they said that that was the best way to go about it so I have sort of used that.

Once in the community, the issue of disclosure can create a disincentive to seeking employment. In Sue's case:

When she was looking for work she went to employment agencies and they now do police checks and of course they asked about her criminal record. She said yes but it didn't stop there and they asked her what it was for and she got as far as saying for a violent offence but she couldn't say the actual word murder..it's not as straight forward as that. You can't just say the word murder without giving the circumstances.. she said I am not willing to tell you

and walked away. (mentor)

When I was being interviewed for a particular job, I was very careful when I filled out the application forms because they seem to blank you right away if they know that you are on licence (Alice)

Alice applied for jobs and was refused when the employers discovered she was on life licence:

I was trying to get a job but every time I went to get a job, I had to tell them why I was in. I was getting knocked back. I had a cleaning job in a bank which I thought was okay because it was cleaning. I did explain to the chap that I was on licence and he wanted to know a bit about it so I told him. He gave me the job on the Friday and by the Monday he told me that he had given the job to somebody else. He had changed his mind even though he said that it was alright and that he had got to know me and what was past was nothing to do with him and it was nice that I had been open and honest about it. When I rang up a week later through the Job Service, because I told them what had happened, they said that he should not have done that. I rang up while they were there and spoke to him and he apologised and said that he already had someone for the job but he forgot to ring me back and tell me because he had lost my number...but we all think that was an excuse.

Alice has now secured employment; she was able to resume her position from her prison work placement.

As a lifer on licence, there is the added disadvantage of the nature of the conviction:

The future employers are really nice to your face and when you are explaining things. I told the manager where I was interviewed that I had been in prison and he asked me if would like to tell him about it. So I started to tell him about it and he said, that was a long time ago and it was probably a crime of passion and he told me not to worry about it and he said that they wouldn't let that go against me. A couple of weeks later they said that they had had so many applications and they were sorry but I didn't get the job. (Rachel)

The licensee is disadvantaged by the fact the conviction can never be spent and she is on a life licence. Jennifer applied for a job as a cook in an old people's home:

I got the job but when it came to my convictions and I explained about my crime she said if it was her decision she would take me on but I would have to be security cleared.. that was a shame.

The majority of licensees had not anticipated the extent of the issue of disclosure:

I nearly had a job and I was made up and they asked if the hours suited me and when I could start and I said whenever and they just asked me why I located to Reading and I told them and they said that they would have to talk to their Supervisor. Ten minutes later got a phone call saying that they couldn't offer me the job. I said that I thought that I had paid my debt to society and that was what I was led to believe but obviously somebody has forgotten to tell society. (Rachel)

A lifer on licence also has to disclose her conviction in any applications for educational places. Chris found that the education providers were extremely supportive:

The manager thanked me for telling me, some people would not have done and she was alright with it and they have been ever so helpful, they have really been very supportive. I was a bit worried first of all because I didn't know when I had to disclose it, whether I would be accepted or not but they let me know and they monitor my work.

Housing

When the licensee initially applies to accommodation providers she normally would disclose her conviction. The majority of the interviewees disclosed the conviction themselves. In three of the cases, the licensee's probation officer disclosed the conviction and details. Alice's probation officer disclosed her conviction to the housing association by writing murderer on her application form. Alice feels that this wording prejudiced her application,

because they weren't interested in a person trying to move and settle with a family or getting a house or property, they were looking at the actual wording and thinking, wow where are we going to put this woman.

However, Nicky disclosed the conviction to the housing association when they asked, because they wouldn't just take anyone on, particularly if they had been convicted on anti-social behavior:

But I said that I had been convicted of murdering my husband and they said that's fine!

The extent of disclosure varied depending on the nature of the case, the probation officer explains:

We have a protocol arrangement with housing, so anybody who was subject to registration or a public protection panel, or was seen as being at high risk of re-offending, a schedule 1 offender or on the Sex Offender register, it would have to be disclosed to the housing. There was some disclosure to the provider in (Nicky's) case about being on life license. That was it, that was the extent of it. But had the offence been different and of a different nature then I would have actually gone into a lot of detail about it.

Rebecca chose to disclose her conviction despite the fact that this information was not requested to the providers of sheltered accommodation where her mother was living:

Probation decided that I had to tell Head Office so I wrote a letter out and sent it off to Head Office and the other week the business projects manager came to see me and my mum.... she came to see both of us and she was fine with me, she said just to let her know every month how I was getting on flat- wise and whatever and I said fine. And then she said to be fair to the manager of the staff, she should know and that sent my mum into a panic because she was scared of the repercussions it would have on her. So I plucked up the courage and went to see this lady and she was really nice and she told me not to worry and it was fine. I said that I will try and get a job and get out of your hair and she said that it was okay and she

even gave me a bit of help with flat finding and she recommended a trust for me to go to. I didn't really expect that. But it was something that I had to do and I did it really for my mum's sake.

Partners

There is a presumption⁷ in favour of disclosure to partners of the licensee. The licensees held differing views on the timing and extent of the disclosure.

Rachel held the view that you should always disclose the conviction in a serious relationship:

If you get involved with anybody, with a partner then you have got to tell them... when you realise that the relationship is becoming serious, then you have to tell them and take the chance of whether they are going to walk away or not.

There was however the concern by some of the licensees that this could terminate the relationship and that the partner may tell other people:

It is the trust issue as well. You are getting on fine and that it is that added thing well if I tell them it is going stop or will it stop and then will it get round.

Friends

There is no requirement for the licensee to disclose her conviction to friends and neighbours. In practice, the licensees varied in the extent they would be prepared to disclose:

I am very close to the lady next door and her husband and she is always in and out of her, having a cuppa, we go off shopping together. Actually tomorrow we are going shopping. We go to different places Although I have know her for almost 12 months, I still have not got the trust to tell her yet but I've spoke to (my probation officer) about it and he says that it is up to me whether I tell her or not, she does not need to know. (Nicky)

However Rachel felt differently:

I think from my own conscience really that I would have to tell them. I don't know how I would tell them but I think that I would, just in case anything did happen. I would rather be open and honest and take my chances.

The fear of people finding out about the conviction can prevent the licensee from meeting new people and building social ties. Alice was concerned that her children may be affected:

My kids have built up new lives for themselves and nobody knows about my past.

One difficulty mentioned by some of the licensees was how to explain to people where you have been for the past 20 years. Nicky still felt unable to attend the local church:

I have not built the confidence up to just go in there yet in case they start asking questions and whatnot. I know that it is easy enough to say well you know and give them stories but I don't want to be telling anything but the truth so, until I can....

6. Recall

A licence can be revoked at any time and the licensee recalled to prison by the Secretary of State on the recommendation of the parole board⁸. If the licence is revoked, the licensee is immediately recalled to prison to continue her life sentence. The licensee must be informed of the reasons for the revocation of the licence and has the right to make representations to the Parole Board in an oral hearing⁹.

In deciding whether to recommend the recall of a lifer the Parole Board should consider:

- A. whether the licensee's continued liberty would present a risk to the safety of the public and if the licensee is likely to commit further imprisonable offences¹⁰;
- B. the extent to which the licensee has failed to comply with the conditions of the life licence and otherwise failed to cooperate with the supervising officer;
- C. whether the licensee is likely to comply with the conditions of the licence and supervision if allowed to remain in the community.

The Parole Board take account of the supervising officer's recommendation as to whether the licensee should remain on licence.

There were 62 recalls of life licensees between April 2002- 30 November 2003: none of these were women. From November 2003 to June 2004 there were three recalls of women on life licence. The circumstances which led to recall are outlined below:

Case 1 - Assaulted her male friend while under the influence of prescribed medication and alcohol.

Case 2 - Assaulted her female partner after an argument. In addition she kept information from her probation officer and admitted that she had problems controlling her temper whilst under the influence of alcohol.

Case 3 - Assaulted her best friend & criminal damage. She has also not been open with her probation officer and has admitted using drugs.

One lifer was re-released on licence after her case was considered by the parole board at an oral hearing.

In the research sample, seven of the licensees were concerned about the possibility of recall:

You try and push it to the back of your mind but it is always there and I think that it always will be there. It scared the life out of me.

It weighs down on you but you have to try and forget about it otherwise it will eat away at you. (M)

I think that I am a bit more relaxed now but there is that hanging over your head but I try to not let it bother me so much. (Chris)

It's just the fear of going back into prison again, "its there", I know that I would not cope with it. I know I wouldn't. (Nicky)

Well I am worried in case my children are left alone after me getting to know them again because their father is very ill and I have only just started to put up support networks for them. They have got to get to know me and they are getting to know me and to take that way from them, to strip them all again would be devastating so I don't want that to happen. (Alice)

One of the main concerns was the possibility of accidentally missing appointments with probation.

I had an appointment for a smear test at the clinic and say an hour later, a Probation appointment, Well I went for the smear and Probation went out of my head because I hated the smear. Anyway I had it done and I went to my brother's house and sat there drinking coffee to calm down and Probation Officer telephoned the house to ask where I was. He said that he had been sitting at my flat. So I apologised and told him what had happened and he said that I was to come in and see him on Friday and so I went down and he said that he was not going to do anything that time but if it happened again, he would have to report it and if it happened again I would have been recalled. So that made me realise just how important it was. (Tracey)

There was one time I was nearly five minutes late for a Probation appointment and I was panicking and everything that I even phoned Marion to come and pick me up and as soon as I got there he said that if there was ever a time that you are not here, don't worry about it; I'll come back or leave a note saying that I have been. But it's just the slightest little thing when you think that you're going to be recalled. (Sue)

The Probation Officer explains the procedure when a licensee fails to turn up for appointments:

I would have to check out what the reasons are and then give an appointment, and if they fail to turn up the second appointment, ring up my the manager and go through that process gain and it all depends on the level of risk that is around at the time. With some people that is something that happened before their last offence, you know they were on supervision and then all of a sudden they stop coming here or whatever, so that is seen as a major risk factor so its about the risk issues really.

Whether the probation officer then recommends recall would depend on the circumstances of the case and if they are linked to the original offence:

Anything that jeopardises supervision or is seen to be a risk, a risk factor in terms of re-offending and it is not always clear, it's never straightforward.

A minority of the licensees also worried about being in the wrong place at the wrong time:

It is the fear that something might happen and because I am in the vicinity, even if I know nothing about it, I would get recalled because I have been in prison.

Well my husband is really ill at the moment so if anything happens to him, how we handle it. Will they turn around and say what happened to your husband- would they believe me because I am on licence, would they believe that I am telling the truth when I say that I don't

know what happened. Its frightening and worrying because my partner is sick, even though I know how ill he is I look at all things like that. I think of all silly things and I worry myself to death about things like his medication, if its make him a bit funny and he takes the break off his wheelchair or if he goes out with one of the boy and he has an accident and he dies and they ask me why I wasn't there. I look at everything else. (Alice)

Some of the girls in the hostel shoplift and I say them to them please, when you are with me, don't touch anything unless you are going to buy it because you might get away with a caution but I will go back for three years. (Rachel)

Two of the licensees were not concerned about the potential of recall whilst they continued to abide by their conditions of the life licence:

I don't worry as long as I am doing what I am doing, you are not going to get recalled for nothing.

7. Discussion

On release from custody all prisoners face the challenge of reintegrating into society and building a new life for themselves. In particular:

Whatever disadvantages the woman suffered before prison she now faces the world with the added disadvantage of prison experience and a prison record.¹¹

Women lifers also face additional issues: they may also be institutionalized after spending an average of 12 years in custody. They will often have to resettle in a new area because of an exclusion zone and will often have limited ties within the community due to the length of time spent in prison. They can therefore be particularly isolated on release.

Women lifers are also a distinct group because of the nature of the life licence; they have to demonstrate they are a low enough risk to the parole board before release and they will be on a life licence all their life subject to recall. The life licence itself provides the framework for supervision in the community. However, the focus of the licence is on risk management and not on reintegration. The licence provides the bare bones of supervision and will dictate where the lifer can live and what they can and can't do. It would appear to be an effective system in terms of supervising risk, indeed the recall rate for lifers¹² is much lower than determinate sentence prisoners¹³. However, the licence itself does not necessarily provide an appropriate level of support. The issue is not only whether the life licence is an appropriate tool in managing risk but also whether the current system assists in the resettlement of lifers into the community.

One benefit of the current system is that the lifer is supervised on release by an allocated probation officer. The probation officer can provide the link for the licensee between custody and the community. However, the emphasis of the supervision is on risk and not necessarily on support. The research has shown that there is a huge variance in the relationship with the supervising probation officer, the extent of supervision and the support provided. A lifer can be particularly dependent on this relationship; it may be the only relationship she has in the community. She can feel vulnerable in the relationship due to the fact that the probation officer actually supervises the life licence and therefore has the power to initiate recall to prison. The majority of the licensees that were interviewed had a positive relationship with their supervising probation officer but for the women with a negative relationship the repercussions could be far reaching, in particular with finding appropriate housing or employment. The research highlighted the need for increased contact with the supervising probation officer prior to release, to ensure that the relationship is established and to explore any concerns before release. In both the initial research and the follow up interviews there appears to be variance in provision. The interviewees received varied advice from their supervising probation officer in terms of the operation of the life licence and disclosure; this could be avoided with a simple information pack being supplied to all lifers who are released on licence providing information on the key issues. It would also be prudent to provide lifer training to all probation officers that supervise lifers.

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was that the majority of the women had underestimated how isolated they would feel in the community. Whilst in prison the women live in a highly regimented environment where they are encouraged to be passive and abide by the rules. On release they have to learn to live independently and with complete personal autonomy. The contrast perhaps is not fully realized until release. To ease the potential isolation it is important that the licensee is able to access appropriate support if

required. Although the lifer has the benefit of an assigned probation officer this may not be enough in terms of support on a practical everyday level. In particular, the licensees referred to needing help with establishing a home and living independently; including setting up an account with the utility providers and budgeting to meet payments; filling in prescriptions forms, setting up a bank account and registering with a doctors surgery. The licensees could have been better prepared whilst still in custody with specific courses on practical issues and more flexible use of temporary release which could provide the necessary experience. It would also be helpful if women lifers had the opportunity to live in hostel accommodation attached to the prison before release, to gain essential experience of cooking, shopping and running a home before release. The hostel provision in the female estate is extremely limited and at the present time does not allow for individual shopping and cooking.

Some of the licensees were fortunate to have help from a family member but the majority had to cope alone. Some licensees would have also benefited from a secondary level of support (aside from their supervising probation officer) such as a mentor or volunteer to help with the practicalities on release. Only one licensee had a mentor, which made a significant difference in her resettlement and eased her transition from custody to the community. It is recognized that not all licensees would require this additional level of support but it could assist in the transition, particularly in the first six months following release. Some of the licensees referred to other lifers, also on licence, as a source of support. This was deemed particularly useful because they have direct experience of the transition.

The majority of licensees had also underestimated how difficult it would be to find suitable accommodation on release. For the licensees released to hostel accommodation they felt that it was almost like a prison environment and one which did not encourage independent living. Furthermore, because the hostels normally operate as a bail hostel and probation hostel there was often a considerable amount of drug misuse. This was the type of environment they had hoped to avoid on release but it was difficult to obtain independent housing immediately for release.

For those licensees released to a family address the majority had underestimated the difficulties in reintegrating into a family unit after a long period of separation. In custody the women have focused on family reunion on release with the desire to make up for lost time. It was sometimes disappointing when the reality did not live up to the expectations. The difficulties were sometimes further compounded by the fact that the women may be very dependent on family members because they may be their only ties in the community. The families themselves did not receive any advice or assistance with dealing with the transition. It would be helpful if the families could receive support and advice before the lifer is released so they are better prepared for any potential problems.

A significant issue that was also underestimated by the women before release was the difficulty in obtaining suitable employment. In custody the majority of lifers had used their time to gain qualifications and increase their employability. In custody the women often had high expectations in terms of employment. Fortunately, the majority had also benefited from the opportunity to work in the community before release. All the licensees felt that this experience had greatly increased their confidence in the workplace and dealing with the public. However, on release the majority had difficulty in obtaining suitable employment because of their conviction. The requirement of disclosure can provide a real disincentive to seek employment. This is an issue for all prisoners being released but for lifers their conviction will never be spent so they will always have to disclose it to prospective employers. In addition, the nature of the conviction itself can add a further barrier to

employment.

The licensees had received different advice on disclosure and varied in their understanding on the requirements. To increase consistency and avoid misunderstandings it would be helpful if lifers being released on licence were supplied with information on disclosure and a list of supportive organizations.

8. Conclusion

One of the aims of the research was to explore whether the women had been adequately prepared for release and whether they received sufficient support to assist with their reintegration into the community. The women certainly benefited from a gradual reintegration into the community before release in terms of temporary release and employment. The women would have also benefited from increased home leaves and more flexible use of temporary release provisions.

The women all benefited from being allocated a supervising officer but the nature of the relationship, extent of supervision and the advice they received varied. It is essential that all supervising probation officers have a minimum level of contact with the lifer before release to build the relationship and the element of trust. It would increase consistency in supervision if all supervising probation officers were lifer trained. An information pack covering the principal issues would also ensure consistency of advice and be a useful resource for women being released on life licence.

The level of support provided by the supervising probation officer also varied and was generally limited to risk management. The focus on risk can mean that the issue of support is overlooked. These social factors feed into risk because they provide the stability and structure of day to day living. The majority of the licensees received very limited support on release; some felt they would have benefited from additional support to assist with living independently, particularly in the first six months after release. It was suggested that to have

some sort of advisor somebody who is not judgmental but a Samaritan or mentor to say that they know the pitfalls that will happen, not necessarily bad', would be beneficial or 'to align themselves with another lifer who is out and can perhaps help, that would be good... to show them the ropes and just advise and be there for them if needed.

The majority of the interviewees had underestimated the difficulties they would face dealing with day to day practicalities. The interviewees felt they would have benefited from more advice on paying bills before release:

The prison didn't really help me in that area so you find a lot of people, especially who have spent a long time in prison, they will find it hard because everything was done for them when they were inside, they didn't pay any bills, meals were cooked'. I think that the prison should actually do courses where they do even have mock bills and meters and because there are different types of meters.

All of the licensees had underestimated the difficulties they may face in obtaining suitable employment and housing:

I think that we thought that it would be a lot easier to get a job, a flat, a new life.

One of the aims of the research was to consider whether the reality of release corresponded with the women's expectations before release. The majority of the licensees found that the transition from custody into the community was more challenging than they had anticipated before release:

The biggest thing was actually getting used to being back in normal life again.

One of the factors that was not anticipated was the isolation that they felt after being

surrounded by people.. it therefore feels strange on release to be alone.

Loneliness was also a surprising aspect of living in the community,

I think that the other thing that I was surprised at in myself, there were occasions when I was lonely.

If a further level of support was available the loneliness and isolation could also be reduced.

Whilst in custody the lifers have lived in a highly regimented and institutionalized environment; to adjust to independent living and to adapt to thinking for themselves often took longer than expected:

I think that I am trying to do too much at times but because I have been in prison for a long time, I want to catch up but you do have to take your time and slow down because you can't overdo it.

All of the licensees felt that reintegration into the community takes time: 'It has been one long hard journey but I am getting through it bit by bit'. The majority of the licensees also stressed the importance of taking things slowly and not expecting too much too soon:

I think the main thing is to actually think what you really want and to be honest with yourself, don't set your goals too high and then be disappointed, don't rush at everything in the beginning.

It was difficult for the licensees to fully anticipate all of the challenges they would face on release:

We come out and we expect to be joined with our families and friends and for everything to be okay now and we've done what we had to do. But then we look back and think that this didn't happen the way it was supposed to. Things can happen, like you think that you can just have a flat and pick up the pieces but it's very hard and it takes time.

Whilst in custody the primary focus is on being released, it is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that the majority of licensees had underestimated the hard work that building a new life would entail.

Recommendations

The research has highlighted areas that could be improved to ensure the effective resettlement of women lifers in the community. Some of these recommendations were also suggested in the original research; the follow up research has shown that there are gaps in appropriate support for women on a life licence. The following recommendations have been identified.

1. Release Information Pack- to be supplied to all women lifers before release when they receive their positive decision by the parole board. To include information on; operation of life licence, requirements of disclosure, benefits advice, recall procedures and a list of organizations.
2. Supervising Probation Officer- to be allocated before release and increased contact/consistency before release, specific life licence training to be provided and support available for prisoner families.
3. Before release- in open prison:
 - course on practicalities: setting up a bank account, filling in prescriptions, paying bills, budgeting etc)
 - increased home leaves and more and flexible use of town visits to keep up to date
 - increased hostel accommodation attached to open prisons
4. Mentor scheme to be established – to offer support on release in first 6 months

¹ Resettlement Issues Facing Women Lifers: 2002/01, The Griffins Society

² Lifer Manual - Chapter 14

³ para 14.15.2 - Lifer Manual

⁴ para 14.15.1

⁵ Lifer Manual and national standards for supervision before and after release from custody

⁶ Lifer Manual - 14.13

⁷ Lifer Manual - 14.13

⁸ Lifer Manual - 14.17.1, s.32 Crime (Sentences) Act 1997

⁹ s32 Criminal Justice Act 1991

¹⁰ Risk test to life and limb

¹¹ p.56 *Women After Prison*, Mary Eaton

¹² The rates for women lifers are lower than for male lifers

¹³ Although this could also be due to the stringent risk test and the nature of the offence