

Debt advice and financial capability:

A best-practice guide for professionals and policymakers working with prisoners, offenders, and ex-offenders

Background

This guide explores the experiences of people with an offending history who have debt problems. It draws on both literature and evidence from professionals in the field. It highlights the complexities of working with prisoners and ex-offenders, identifies the most common types of debt accrued, and discusses some of the key themes and challenges when working in this area. It seeks to provide an evidence base to help shape professional conversations about working effectively with prisoners and ex-offenders and the broader policy issues that influence people's lived experience and the delivery of services. It includes a case study that highlights how positive outcomes can be achieved for service users.

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Introduction

Delivering debt advice and promoting financial capability are important elements of support for prisoners and ex-offenders, and they are critical to the resettlement process. A person-centred approach to debt advice is needed, and this should recognise that the challenges faced by prisoners and ex-offenders are often more significant than those experienced by other population groups. Key challenges can include a lack of basic life skills or education (Oksanen et al., 2015), challenging relationships with family (Grieb et al., 2014), the difficult transition from prison to the community (Bullock & Bunce, 2020), and mistrust of social institutions (Fader, 2021).

Careful consideration needs to be given to the individual circumstances of a service user, including their age, gender, and ethnic background. The nature of their offence, the length of their sentence, their mental and physical health, and cultural and social needs will all affect the dynamics of how effective debt advice can be delivered. A long-term and

holistic view needs to be taken that recognises that debt advice and financial capability sit alongside other important needs including housing, health, education, and employment (van Beek et al., 2021). Debt casework is multifaceted, incorporating legal advice and advocacy; however, with this client group, it also involves a navigation role, assisting with the complexities of social welfare provision (Heslop, 2014).

A long-term and holistic view needs to be taken that recognises other important needs.

Working with complex and varying needs

The challenges faced by prisoners have been described as relating to six basic life needs: livelihood, residence, family, health, criminal justice compliance, and social connections (Simmons University, 2016). These form part of the fabric of the complex debt advice process.

Research has found that debt and problems in accessing advice are issues for the vast majority of prisoners and ex-offenders.

Meadows et al. (2010) found that a custodial sentence can worsen existing debt problems, as tenancies may not be properly ended, and direct debits may not be terminated. They found that the main types of debt experienced are court fines, debt to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), catalogue debts, debts to mobile phone companies, rent arrears, and money owed to family and friends. Financial problems were found to be heightened by low levels of financial capability and an overreliance on family and friends (particularly for women) rather than engagement with debt advice services. Longer-term resettlement problems were evident – particularly relating to the inadequacy of the discharge grant – and there were problems with claiming benefits and accessing bank accounts on release. These issues often create barriers to finding employment and suitable accommodation.

There is a need for improved legal services for prisoners, especially for those on low incomes.

The Prison Reform Trust (2021a) makes links between prison debt and the low level of prison wages; the presence of drugs and the trade in prescription medicines have also been found to intensify debt problems (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

Links to offending behaviour

Much of the academic literature in this field focuses on the links between debt and offending behaviour. Debt problems and crime have been shown to have ‘reciprocal causation’ (Aaltonen et al., 2016, p. 325), and during periods of debt enforcement, crime levels increase (Link, 2019). Martire (2010) also linked financial strain to crime and found that financial difficulties can create a barrier to seeking mental health support. Aaltonen et al.’s (2016)

large-scale study recommended that more proactive work is done with creditors to facilitate an understanding of a debtor’s financial and offending history.

Harper et al. (2021) found that there is an overrepresentation of minority ethnic groups and those on low incomes in the indebted population in the criminal justice system. The authors note that there is a need for improved legal services for prisoners (including debt advice), especially for those on low incomes. They suggest that financial capability could be improved with access to online resources, and that more needs to be done to support people into employment and reduce employer discrimination in recruitment processes.

Van Beek et al. (2022) emphasise that the links between debt and crime are often underpinned by adverse childhood experiences, mental health problems, substance misuse, and unemployment. They suggest that debt is too often overlooked as a risk factor for recidivism, and it needs to be considered as part of a ‘complex interplay of risk factors’. They recommend that probation staff need training on debt management and financial capability to help to equip people to respond to these issues.

According to van Beek et al. (2021), debt hinders resettlement, and financial sanctions reinforce poverty and increase a person’s vulnerability to offending. They link debt advice to crime prevention and emphasise that debt advice should not only focus on budgeting and debt management but also address other recidivism risk factors, such as poor housing, mental health problems, addiction, and unemployment.

The Prison Reform Trust (2010) state that a ‘rehabilitation revolution’, where prisoners transition to become taxpayers, cannot be achieved without access to basic financial services such as bank accounts and insurance. One participant in this study stated: ‘The reason I’m in here, I did it to get money to pay off my bills. I regretted it from the moment I agreed to do it. But there was no other way at the time to pay my debts.’

Needs of specific groups

Research and campaigning work on debt and offending history conducted in the charitable sector often focuses on the needs of particular groups. The Prison Reform Trust (2013) highlighted the need for debt advice to be targeted at women. They cite evidence that 48% of women engage in crime as a result of a partner's drug issue, compared with 22% of men. Additionally, 38% of women prisoners cited the need to provide for children as contributing to their offending. Evidence demonstrates that the financial vulnerabilities experienced by women have worsened over the last decade because of welfare reform and austerity (Clinks, 2014). Financial problems for women with convictions have been described as criminogenic, and most women who enter the criminal justice system experience debt and prolonged poverty (Caulfield, 2012).

38% of women prisoners cited the need to provide for children as contributing to their offending.

Blom et al. (2011) found a close link between debt and delinquency – particularly among adolescent males – that was underpinned by risky behaviours, while Hoeve et al. (2014) reported a strong correlation between persistent crime in youth and debt in later life. Relatedly, the Consumer Financial Education Body (2016) has emphasised the importance of financial capability for young offenders, they endorse peer training provided by other young people that includes consideration of unrealistic media representations around spending capacity and habits. Breakthrough (2019), an apprenticeship provider that recruits directly from prisons, has described the importance of inclusive education to help to limit school exclusions relating to poverty and to reduce the 'school-to-prison pipeline'. Prisoners from minority ethnic groups often report negative experiences of the prison system and poor relationships with staff (Prison

Reform Trust, 2021b). The provision of high-quality social welfare advice on issues such as debt and housing can be one element of challenging racial inequality.

Common types of debt

Prisoners and ex-offenders may have a wide range of debts. Priority debts have serious consequences if they are not paid, such as the loss of a person's home, disconnection of utilities, deduction from wages, a fine, repossession of goods, or even imprisonment. Priority creditors have significant powers to enforce a debt. The consequences of paying a non-priority debt are less serious, although enforcement action could still be taken, such as the issuing of a county court judgment or the debt being passed to a debt collection agency.

Priority debts include:

- Rent and mortgage arrears
- Council tax
- Court fines
- HMRC self-assessment penalties
- Deductions from social security benefits
- Mobile phone debts

* Debts to drug dealers or other prisoners are not considered a priority in legal terms, but in practical terms may require urgent action

Non-priority debts include:

- Legal aid
- Credit cards or store-card debts
- Catalogue debts
- Bank or building society loans
- Unsecured loans
- Money borrowed from friends and family

For further detailed information on dealing with debt, please refer to the Money Advice Service, Money Helper webpages,¹ and the Child Poverty Action Group's *Debt Advice Handbook* (Wolfe et al., 2020).

The complexities of delivering debt advice to prisoners and ex-offenders

This section explores some of the complexities of delivering debt advice to offenders and ex-offenders.

Financial literacy

Financial literacy has been defined as 'knowledge and understanding of financial concepts and risks, and the skills, motivation, and confidence to apply such knowledge and understanding in order to make effective decisions across a range of financial contexts' (OECD, 2014). However, for prisoners and ex-offenders, levels of financial literacy are often low, and this has implications at both an individual and a societal level. Over the course of their lives, individuals will make increasing numbers of financial decisions and have greater access (often through technology) to financial products (Lusardi et al., 2018).

Numerous studies have linked low levels of financial literacy to debt (e.g., Mottola, 2013); particular concerns have been raised about gendered inequalities (Goyal and Kumar, 2021) and groups who have had contact with the criminal justice system (Clinks, 2016). Financial literacy should be of concern to practitioners and policymakers in the criminal justice arena; it has been described as a 'fundamental right and universal need' (Lusardi, 2019, p. 7). A lack of financial literacy in prisoners and ex-offenders has been linked to a lack of meaningful participation in economic life (Johnson and Sherraden, 2007) and increased levels of wealth inequality (Lusardi, 2019).

¹<https://www.moneyhelper.org.uk/en/money-troubles/dealing-with-debt/help-if-youre-struggling-with-debt>

Financial literacy should be of concern to practitioners and policymakers in the criminal justice arena.

In practical terms, financial literacy translates as equipping prisoners and ex-offenders with the skills needed to deal with their finances and debt. This may be on a basic level such as help with opening and managing basic bank accounts and developing essential budgeting skills. The aim should be to equip people with the basic money-management tools that they will be able to use when professional intervention ends. Dispelling myths and educating people about different types of debt, fines, and enforcement is an important element of this work. This will often include guidance on accessing reliable credit instead of relying on illegal or informal money lenders.

Delivering financial-capability training in a prison environment can be more effective than delivering it in the community.

This element of debt work is essential if a cycle of debt is to be avoided; for this reason, financial capability is often part of the contractual agreement between prisons and debt advice agencies. Research has found that delivering financial-capability training in a prison environment can be more effective than delivering it in the community following release (Ipsos MORI, 2010). This emphasises the importance of financial capability being delivered on a face-to-face basis and being most effective when it is started as part of prison induction.

Understanding the debt environment

An appreciation of the criminal justice debt environment is important. The debt advice process for people in prison is likely to be more complex and time-consuming than when delivered in more traditional environments, and yet advisers will typically have less direct contact with their service users. The logistics of delivering debt advice can be problematic. There may be delays in receiving credit reports and other essential information from creditors (StepChange, 2022). Creditors may not respond directly to an adviser, and basic communications can be delayed and convoluted. In-person appointments may be restricted or not permitted and taking clear instruction and maintaining ongoing contact can be difficult. It is not uncommon for further debts to be accrued in prison through the 'informal economy' (unauthorised items or drugs). This informal trading can be accompanied by intimidation and violence, with new prisoners being particularly vulnerable (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016).

These complications can lead to worsening debt problems and, in the long-term, a risk of reoffending. This means that practitioners need to understand the working environment in which they are operating, and some modifications to the practices adopted in other debt environments are often required. Different prisons and probation services often have very different systems and working practices that impact the debt advice process. Where debt workers encounter problems, it is important that these are escalated to line managers and the host criminal justice organisation.

Effective advice is a 'double process' that requires the careful navigation or 'translation' of complex legislation, policy, and bureaucratic systems.

Clarke (2016, p. 60) has highlighted that effective advice is a 'double process' that requires the careful navigation or 'translation' of complex legislation, policy, and bureaucratic systems. Firstly, an adviser needs to be able to translate a service user's presenting issues into the framework of debt law and policy; secondly, they need to be able to translate the complexities of the action taken to a service user in a meaningful and understandable way.

Debt advisers are often required to negotiate with the DWP about ongoing deductions from welfare benefits for court fines. Where fines are imposed at a high level, this can leave people with insufficient income and increase the risk of reoffending. A practitioner needs to approach this situation with a clear knowledge of the law and understand more local policy and practice where the DWP have discretion to reduce the deductions (Heslop, 2014). The intensity of need for this service-user group necessitates a tailored debt advice approach.

Confidentiality and consent

The debt advice process has three distinct stages: exploration, options, and action (Wolfe et al., 2020). Throughout this process, it is important that confidentiality is maintained and that a client has confidence in the agency providing advice. Delivering debt advice to prisoners and ex-offenders may involve face-to-face and/or remote contact, and careful consideration needs to be given to privacy and confidentiality in all settings (Money Advice and Pensions Service, 2020).

It is not uncommon for prisoners and ex-offenders to have confidentiality concerns. These may focus on how personal and debt information is stored and shared, anxiety that other people will become aware of debts, or concerns about the physical space in which debt advice is being delivered. These concerns may lead to an unwillingness to open up and to fully disclose information at the exploration stage, and this impedes the options that follow. It is important that time is taken so that the full debt picture can be explored. Practitioners need to work closely with host agencies to ensure that

face-to-face debt advice is delivered in a safe and private space, that referral processes ensure confidentiality, and that information is only shared when a legitimate and lawful reason is established (Data Protection Act, 2018).

Research has shown that information-sharing protocols can make it difficult to access information from creditors on a prisoner's behalf and to pass information from prisoners to external organisations who may not be aware that they are being detained. Liaison with the DWP can be problematic, particularly where there is high staff turnover. Wherever possible, establishing a clear line of communication with named DWP staff is important, alongside a familiarisation with DWP processes (DWP, 2010). Where practitioners are liaising with a client about Universal Credit issues, they should be aware of 'explicit consent' arrangements that only allow a representative to make enquiries about a single issue (DWP, 2020). Where there are ongoing issues with a Universal Credit claim, arrangements will need to be put in place to allow multiple contacts with the DWP.

Suspicion of authority

Debt advice practitioners should be aware that service users may have a suspicion of authority, and this could extend to the work undertaken to assist with debt-related problems. Bell (2017) contends that previous coercive experience of the criminal justice system can create feelings of distrust and alienation. Crewe et al. (2011) identified the concepts of negative and positive cultures within a prison environment. Negative cultures are characterised by a focus on control and disrespect; positive cultures are associated with clear boundaries, confidence, and professional knowledge. Debt advice values align with these latter positive cultures, with the Money Advice Service emphasising that it should promote confidence and resilience, and improve wellbeing (Money Advice Service, 2017).

Although the debt advice process is complex, it should seek to empower people wherever possible.

Debt advice workers can use what NACRO (2006) describe as 'the smell of the outside'; meaning a trust in external, non-state-provided services. It is important for debt advisers to emphasise their independent role in assisting with financial problems and to highlight the importance of consent and confidentiality discussed in the previous section. Although the debt advice process is complex, it should seek to empower people wherever possible. Establishing trust is an important element in the process; in practical terms, this can be developed by dealing with urgent debt issues, exploring how income can be maximised on release, providing financial-capability advice, drawing up a financial statement, and sensitively exploring and pursuing all available options (Wolfe et al., 2020).

Debt is one element in a much bigger picture

It is important to see debt as one part of a much bigger picture of complex need. A holistic approach is needed, one that recognises that financial insecurity is often accompanied with vulnerabilities in relation to mental health, drugs and alcohol, relationships, and housing (Meadows et al., 2010). Two particularly helpful resources are available that provide guidance on how debt issues can be navigated for service users with mental health problems (see: Royal College of Psychiatrists/Money Advice Trust, 2014; Money Advice Liaison Group, 2015).

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Signposting is an important element of the debt advice process and is crucial when working with prisoners and ex-offenders. Practitioners should be clear about the non-debt-related services to which clients can be referred, including specialist welfare benefits, housing, employment and training, counselling, and advocacy. It is important to build relationships with community-based services when prisoners are released, both statutory and non-statutory, including the probation service, local authority services, and services in the voluntary and community sector (National Offender Management Service, 2009). Engagement with these types of service can significantly reduce rates of reoffending (Ministry of Justice, 2013). This holistic approach is time-consuming, but it is vital to ensuring that debt advice is not a single intervention but part of a broader range of support.

Systemic and policy challenges

This section outlines some of the key systemic and policy issues that affect people with an offending history who experience debt problems. It provides suggestions on how to respond to these issues based on feedback provided by money advice professionals in the East Midlands (see acknowledgments).

Housing issues

Studies have shown that imprisonment increases financial exclusion and can create obstacles to finding appropriate housing (e.g., Edgar & Bath, 2011). There is a close correlation between debt and housing-related problems, and these can be particularly acute for prisoners and ex-offenders. The provision of appropriate housing can play a significant role in breaking a cycle of re-offending, and this makes housing decisions – including where and who a person lives with – crucial. Despite this, research has shown that a third of people about to leave prison have nowhere to stay (Cooper, 2013), the rates of women leaving prison who are able to secure long-term accommodation are particularly low (Kannan, 2021).

Accommodation is often lost when entering custody, and on release, there can be difficulties

in securing housing in both the private and social rented sectors; these problems are often exacerbated by delays in the payment of welfare benefits. In the private rented sector, the shared-accommodation rates mean that single people aged under 35 are assumed to be living in shared housing and are only entitled to Housing Benefit covering the cost of renting a room in a shared flat or house. Raising a deposit for a tenancy in the private rented sector can also be problematic. In the social sector, council or housing-association accommodation can be difficult to access in the short-term, especially where people have previous rent arrears or have been evicted due to criminal behaviour.

The Homelessness Reduction Act (2018) places a duty on prisons and probation services to refer people to the local authority where there is a risk of homelessness. However, homelessness-related problems, which are often linked to financial vulnerability, are common. Local authorities will create personalised plans for people released from prison, but an obligation to provide permanent accommodation relies on a decision-maker assessing an applicant as being in priority need and not intentionally homeless. A period in custody does not automatically class someone as being vulnerable and in priority need; specialist housing advice may be needed to argue that this should be the case.

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When applying as homeless to a local authority, a check is made to ascertain whether a person has a local connection (the location in which a person is detained does not contribute to the local-connection test). A local authority may refer someone to another location if there is evidence of a closer connection elsewhere.

However, there can be a problematic link between the local-connection rules and reoffending where someone is obliged to move back to an area where they have an offending history.

Suggestions

- Ensure that local authorities discharge their full homelessness duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act, and appeal decisions where appropriate.
- The homelessness charity Crisis advocates for the use of 'Help to Rent' projects that work with landlords to ensure that rent is paid and that tenants receive tenancy training and support.
- Where the need to pay rent in advance, removal costs, or a rent deposit are problematic, consider an application to the local authority for a discretionary housing payment. Additionally, many local councils or charities may have rent-deposit or bond schemes.
- Where appropriate, ensure that prison governors issue a discretionary payment of up to £50 directly to a housing provider to provide accommodation on release.
- There are a number of examples of best-practice training and guidance to support people into housing on release from prison. These include pre-tenancy prison training courses, housing advice services being delivered in prison, and mentoring and befriending schemes to help people when they have left prison (Unlock, 2023).
- The support and local knowledge of resettlement officers, probation services, and youth offending teams should be sought and used where appropriate.
- Nacro (2023) deliver the Community Accommodation Service (CAS-2) in England and Wales. This offers supported living, including financial support for people on bail, Home Detention Curfew, or Intensive Community Order who are assessed as low to medium risk.

Social security issues

The literature demonstrates a significant link between experience of the criminal justice system and the provision of social security (Garland, 2017). Around a quarter of out-of-work benefits are claimed by people with a criminal conviction and concerns have been raised that only a quarter of offenders leave prison and enter employment (UK Parliament, 2016). The offender experience of the social security system is complex and varied, but Fletcher's research (2013) found three broad categories: people who are unable to work and rely on welfare benefits, people who intermittently claim benefits during a cycle of precarious employment and unemployment, and those who purposefully avoid engaging with the social security system. This study found that the insecure nature of the labour market means that some offenders transfer between work and welfare with the complexities of the benefit system often making this an unsatisfactory dynamic.

Genders and Player (2014) highlight that prisoners and offenders are more likely than the general population to rely on welfare benefits; they place this experience as part of a broader picture of social disadvantage where exclusion from school, low numeracy and literacy levels, teen parenthood, and experience of care are common. Kotova (2020) has emphasised the stigma attached to offenders who claim welfare benefits, this has been found to be particularly problematic for foreign national prisoners (Gavin, 2022) and can extend to the families of prisoners who can become financially vulnerable because of the imprisonment of a family member (Loucks, 2004). Public Health England's (2018) gender specific standards for health and wellbeing in the female prison population emphasise the importance of holistic support to ensure take-up of welfare benefits. Evidence demonstrates that where benefit sanctions are imposed there is a risk of 'survival crime' to offset the loss of benefit income (Fletcher, 2020).

Most social security benefits are not payable during a prison sentence. This includes means-tested benefits (e.g., universal credit, pension credit) and non-means tested benefits (e.g., contributory employment and support allowance, carer's allowance). Disability benefits, such as personal independence payments, stop after four weeks in prison (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022). Housing benefit can only be claimed if you are single and likely to return home in less than 13 weeks. Child benefit continues if a child is with you in prison; if the child lives with someone else, the equivalent sum is paid to them. HMRC make a decision about child tax credit based on the length of a person's sentence and their relationship and contact with the child. For prisoners in receipt of Universal Credit, the housing-costs element can be paid for up to six months if the absence from home is not expected to exceed this length of time.

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The rules and adjudication relating to welfare benefits are complex, and many vulnerable groups require legal advice and practical assistance to navigate the system (Machin, 2021). This is certainly the case for prisoners and ex-offenders, and a key element of prison debt advice work is to ensure that the correct entitlements are secured (Meek et al, 2013). The 2021 *Prisons Strategy White Paper* recognised the difficulties experienced by prisoners in relation to welfare benefits and committed to equipping people with the 'basic tools to function in the modern economy' (Ministry of Justice, 2021). This includes the provision of a bank account and ID, which are prerequisites for welfare benefit claims. A longer-term aim is for Universal Credit claims to be made before release from prison, but regulations currently prevent a claim from being submitted and processed while a custodial sentence is being served.

In response to the white paper, Nacro (2021a) emphasised that current delays in the payment of Universal Credit contribute to upheaval on release; the initial payment can take up to six weeks, and although a short-term advance can be claimed in the interim, this is a repayable loan, which creates a further debt. Digital exclusion is a particular issue for prisoners, as the default position is for Universal Credit claims to be made and managed online. Nacro (2021b) argue that the importance of the timely payment of welfare benefits is compounded by the inadequacy of the discharge grant (a one-off subsistence payment paid on release for immediate expenditure). They argue that welfare benefits should form an important element in a greater level of financial support on release, alongside a release pack and somewhere to live.

Suggestions

- Complete a welfare benefits check to ensure that entitlements to all means-tested, non-means tested, and disability benefits are taken up. Wherever possible, claims should be made on the day of release.
 - If a claim for Universal Credit is in place, ensure that the correct housing, childcare, and disability elements are in place.
 - Apply for a local authority discretionary housing payment if there is a rent shortfall.
 - Ensure that a plan is in place for Council Tax debts and that the correct rebates are in place; consider asking for payments to be spread over 12 months instead of 10 months.
- Consider applying to the Council's local welfare assistance scheme, which can provide emergency support such as household items or food.
- It is important to support people with the bureaucracy that surrounds claims for social security payments. Access to a smartphone and bank account are critical.
- It may be possible to work with a DWP liaison officer before prison release. This may be helpful to identify correct welfare benefit entitlements.

Cost-of-living crisis

Due to increases in energy costs, food bills, national insurance, and petrol/diesel costs, as well as the currently high levels of inflation, existing debt issues are likely to be exacerbated and new debt issues may emerge. It is important that prisoners and ex-offenders are given advice about these emerging financial pressures, which can increase vulnerability and make resettlement more problematic.

A range of national organisations offer help with these cost-of-living pressures. The Money Advice Service provides a number of online tools including a bill prioritiser, budget planner, and debt-advice locator.² Citizens Advice provides advice on welfare benefits and entitlement to the cost-of-living payment, help with energy bills and other costs, and mental health and crisis support.³ The UK government has a dedicated 'Help for Households' website.⁴

Suggestions

- There are several national government schemes including a Cost-of-Living Payment for people in receipt of means-tested or disability benefits, the Household Support Fund administered by local authorities to help with essential costs such as food, utilities, and clothing, and a range of schemes to help with energy bills, including the Energy Price Guarantee and Energy Bills Support Scheme.
- If a person is moving into work, ensure that the National Minimum Wage is being paid, and establish whether there is entitlement to a Universal Credit top-up.
- Check entitlement to free school meals and healthy-start vouchers.

Summary

This guide has identified the links between debt and offending behaviour and highlighted that the debt advice process in this environment is likely to be more complex and time-consuming. Despite this, positive outcomes can be achieved when the individual needs of marginalised groups are recognised, a flexible approach is adopted, and debt is recognised as one part of a broader picture of complex need.

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²<https://www.moneyhelper.org.uk/en/money-troubles/cost-of-living#cost-of-living-tools-and-calculators>

³<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/debt-and-money/get-help-with-the-cost-of-living/>

⁴<https://helpforhouseholds.campaign.gov.uk/>

Case study

This case study demonstrates how effective and timely debt advice can produce positive outcomes for service users with an offending history and multiple debts. It is based on case notes from a charity that delivers social welfare advice in the East Midlands of England.

Circumstances of the service users: A couple, Andrew in his early 30s and Sharon in her late 20s, were evicted at short notice from a private rented property and were temporarily placed in a hostel for the homeless. Andrew has criminal convictions, and his offending history made it difficult to secure housing; he also had rent arrears with social housing providers. Sharon had recently been released from prison. They were caught in a cycle of criminal behaviour and short prison sentences.

Key issues: The couple had very significant debts, including rent arrears. Their criminal records and poor credit ratings made accessing the private rented sector problematic; debts to multiple social housing providers meant that there were problems being housed in this sector. They wanted professional advice to support them with these issues, but they often missed appointments. They had poor budgeting skills and tended to run out of money each month before the next benefit payment was due. Their debts were exacerbating their mental health issues; they were not registered with a GP or receiving any other health services. They presented as having low self-esteem and confidence, but they were desperate to move from the hostel accommodation.

Action taken: Regular meetings were set up to build trust, although this was challenging as they had both lived at many different addresses and had no paperwork. Liaison with multiple debtors and local authorities was required. Practical steps that were taken included: support to secure alternative housing, referral to a community shop for food parcels, help to register with a GP and access mental health services, help with an application for disability benefits and a budgeting loan. Financial help was secured to reduce rent arrears, budgeting advice was given, and a referral was made to a befriending scheme.

The couple reported that their mental health had improved and felt that they had a clean start after rent arrears and other debts had been written off and budgeting advice had been given.

Positive outcomes: Their rent arrears were cleared, they were registered with a GP, and they were awarded Personal Independence Payments. The couple moved into a new property, and a Universal Credit claim was set up with an arrangement to pay rent directly to the landlord. They were given assistance with budgeting and gained increased financial literacy, reducing the risk of future rent arrears. The couple reported a much-improved mood and a desire to move forward in a positive way.

They said that their mental health had improved and felt that they had a clean start after rent arrears and other debts had been written off and budgeting advice had been given. They recognised that they would not have been able to move into and sustain their tenancy without professional support.

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