

The background of the top half of the page is a solid blue color. Scattered across this background are numerous keyhole-shaped icons in various colors: orange, yellow, light blue, and green. The keyholes vary in size and are oriented in different directions. A large white diagonal shape cuts across the bottom right of the page, containing the title and logo.

The Bridge Project

a progress report on Parkhead
Citizens Advice Bureau's work in
Barlinnie Prison

September 2026

The logo is a dark blue circle with a white vertical line on the left side. Inside the circle, the words "citizens", "advice", and "bureau" are stacked vertically in a white, sans-serif font.

**citizens
advice
bureau**

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Parkhead Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) has two aims: to deliver advice and information services for the people of the East End of Glasgow and to campaign and lobby for legal and policy changes to improve people's lives. All CABs are independent charities and members of Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), the network organisation that provides services for bureaux in Scotland including quality assurance.

For the past 21 years Parkhead CAB has delivered a service in Barlinnie prison offering advice and information to prisoners and their families. Demand for the service had always been extremely high, outstripping the bureau's capacity to deliver. In 2022 with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, a new project, 'Improving Lives' sought to expand the advice service in new and innovative ways.

'Improving Lives'

The project aimed to provide the advice, information and support to enable prisoners to make informed choices, to build resilience and make better use of services that would enable them to re-build their lives. The capacity for one-to-one advice work was extended by employing a full-time adviser but the project also engaged a training officer whose role was to increase the information available to prisoners, through workshops and written materials, and to train selected prisoners as peer mentors (PMs) who assist in the delivery of information to fellow inmates. Prisoner participation was fundamental to the project: in identifying information needs and in the design and delivery of workshops and written information.

The project worked closely with the Barbed Wireless Media team in Barlinnie, making use of the prison TV and radio stations to produce podcasts and information briefings. Parkhead CAB, in collaboration with the Scottish Human Rights Commission produced a booklet 'Your Rights under the Prison Rules' (an accessible guide to the legal rules). It has been distributed by the Scottish Prison Service to all Scottish Prisons. Below is a summary of the key outputs of the 'Improving Lives' project.

Summary: outputs from 'Improving Lives' August 2022-August 2025

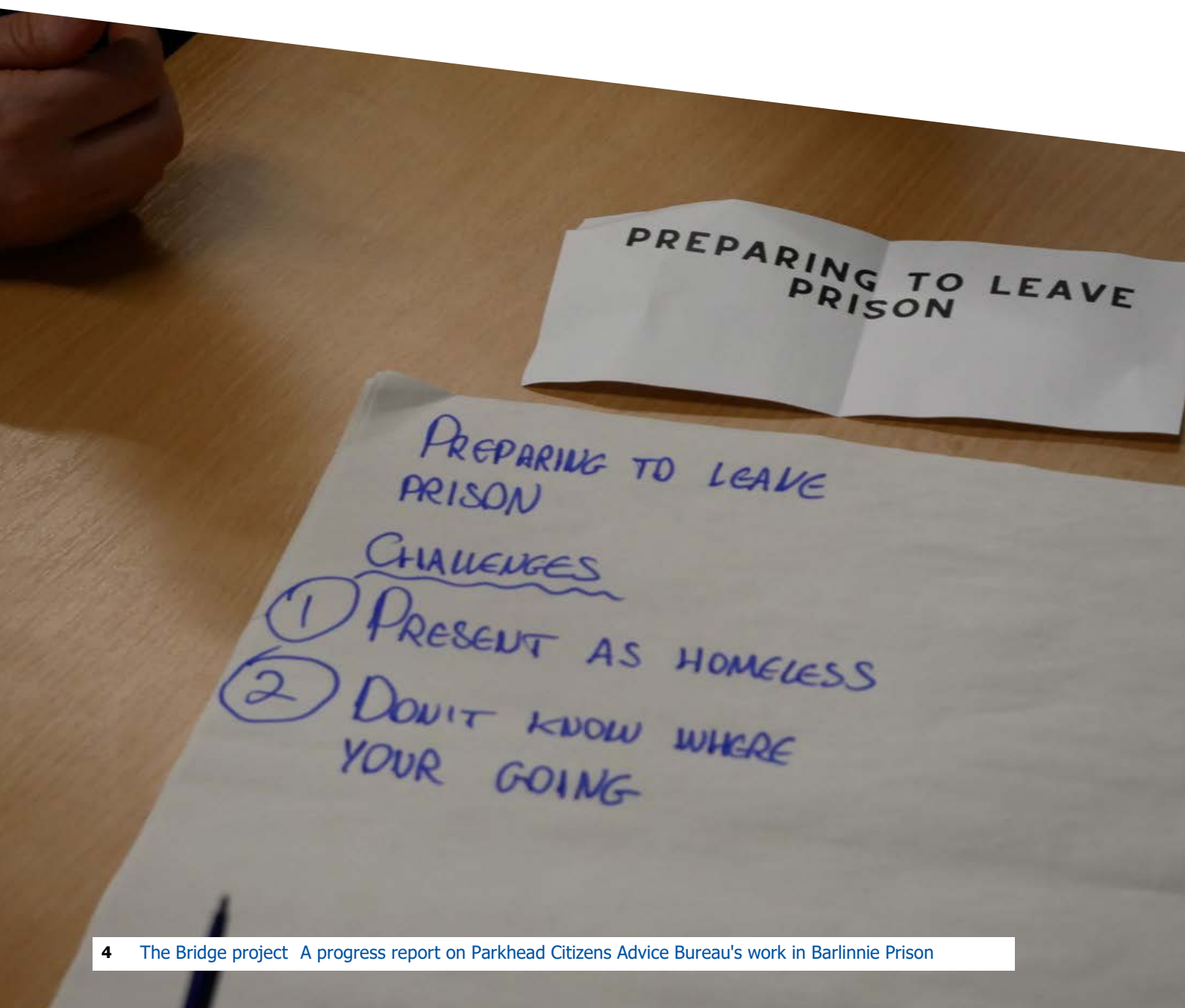
Overall total beneficiaries (attended workshops; received DIY information packs) used advice service: 12,387. Workshops and DIY information packs created on housing, debt, money management, family support and community reintegration. Key publications: 'Through the gate' and 'Beyond the gate' focusing on the information needed when coming into, and being released from prison.

Advice service: 1033 prisoners received advice and support on 5583 separate issues. On average each client presented with 7 issues.

Peer mentors: 136 trained and worked in the prison assisting fellow prisoners with information on key issues and how to use the DIY packs, for example, helping prisoners to apply for council tax exemption; supporting new prisoners on arrival and signposting people to the adviser for specialist help when needed.

Evaluation of 'Improving Lives'

An evaluation of the project showed that timely advice prevents homelessness and the build-up of unsustainable debts; two major factors in reoffending. Most importantly the workshops and training as peer mentors helped to build the skills and confidence that increase prisoners' employability on release. The work empowered prisoners helping them to rebuild their lives in the community post release. This success was recognised by Barlinnie's Governor who awarded peer mentors the status of a work party which attracts a small prison wage. He commented: *"This holistic, preventative and proactive work is a key component in supporting a reduction in reoffending...specialist advice and information is at the heart of what they do, but their willingness to innovate and 'think outside the box', for example, by training peer mentors and producing podcasts, is to be commended."*



Building on 'Improving Lives' – The Bridge Project

Recognition of the success of the project led to continued support from the National Lottery Community Fund which provides funding for the core elements of one-to-one advice, the production of information, workshops and the training of peer mentors under the title: the 'Bridge Project'. There are, however, wider aims.

On entering prison people lose whatever employment they had. Many prisoners have low educational levels and lack the transferable skills required by today's employers. 'Improving Lives' provided evidence that the skills and knowledge gained would directly support a prisoner's progression post release. Those that engaged with the project gained transferable skills in advice and information, media production, design, communication, teamwork and administration. However, finding a job post-prison is extremely difficult; the stigma of conviction coupled with the lack of transferable skills present formidable barriers. Further, many prisoners, through lack of information, fail to access the support that is available from statutory and third sector organisations working on the 'outside'.

Being a peer mentor: Dan* When he first came into prison Dan described himself as 'devastated'. Previously he had worked in the hospitality sector. As a person of colour he feared discrimination and knew that to get through his sentence he would have to *"keep strong and keep my head up"*. Being a PM is very important to Dan. He helps with general enquiries and assists with form filling, for example, for council tax exemption. The CAB operates from within the Hub; a recreational resource area in the prison which houses the library, the Barbed Wireless Media studio and various rooms which can be used for interviews or other activities. Attendance in the Hub is organised on a rota basis dividing the timetable between the different residential halls. PMs operate a triage system for the CAB, listening to fellow inmates to understand their issues, relaying simple information or completing a CAB 'quick slip' for more complex problems. The slip is then put in a sealed box and can be dealt with by the CAB adviser.

"People just approach me, sometimes they come to my door (in the hall). It makes me really happy helping somebody... you feel proud that you've been there for somebody."

The Bridge project argues that peer mentors' experience of volunteering can be continued on release and provide a valuable stepping stone to paid employment. Many charities and third sector organisations make use of volunteers and recognise them as valuable assets. For ex-prisoners, volunteering provides a way of paying back to a community as well as a reason to get up in the morning. The design of the project included 'throughcare' provision for an advice worker in the community dedicated to assisting ex-prisoners and their families and a community liaison worker whose role would be to identify volunteering opportunities and match those being released with placements. Parkhead CAB has not received any funding from central or local government for the 'employability' aspects of the project and continues to seek the funding for these two posts.

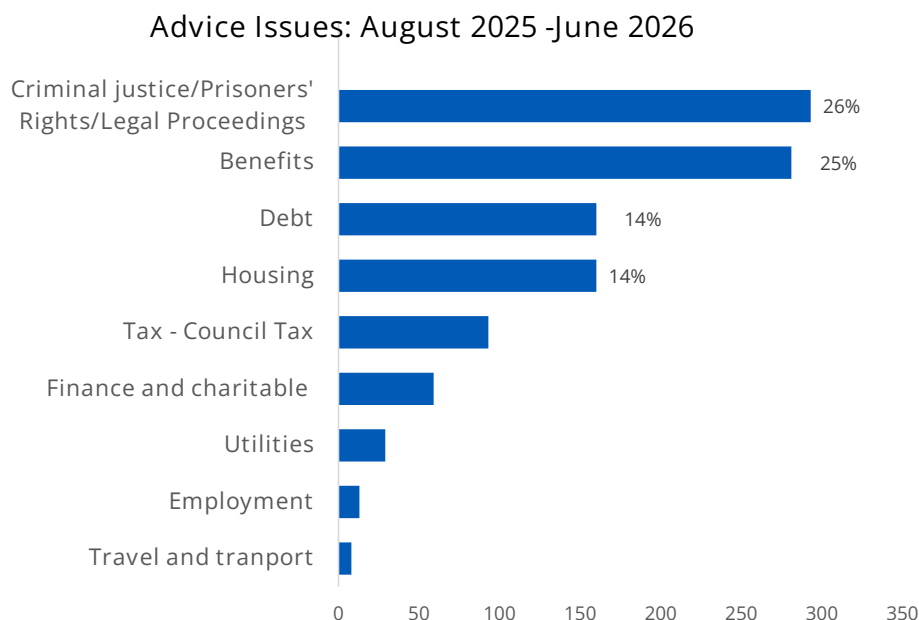
* all names used are fictitious to maintain confidentiality

Progress on the Bridge Project

The advice and information service

The need for advice and information is most crucial on entering and leaving prison. Going 'inside' often follows immediately from arrest and a court appearance with no time to put personal affairs in order. While benefits are routinely cancelled by the DWP, rent, utility bills, mobile contracts, credit card and other debts rapidly mount and, if unattended, present a formidable obstacle to rehabilitation on release.

The graph below shows the main issues dealt with by the full-time adviser who is assisted by a volunteer part-time law student.



In the period under review, on average, each client received help on 4.4 issues. CAB offer a holistic service – that is offering help on all the issues presented by the client. Interviews are one to one and conducted in accord with CAB principles: the service is free, confidential, impartial and independent.

Of the first category (criminal justice/ prisoners' rights and legal proceeding) 88% of the enquiries concerned criminal justice that is the legal process, including the rules of legal aid. However, an initial conversation often leads to discussion of other issues.

Of the total benefit enquiries applications for the Scottish Welfare Fund were 23% (largely for essential items on release); universal credit claims 37% and 28% for Scottish child payments/ child benefit and housing benefit.

Progress on the Bridge Project

The advice and information service

Client characteristics: who received help from the CAB? (August 2025- June 2026)			
Homeless before coming into prison	Social or local authority landlord	Unable to work because of a disability or long-term illness	In interview mentioned disability or long-term sickness
20%	44%	41%	47%

Housing is a key issue particularly with respect to the prevention of reoffending. Universal credit allows for 6 months of housing costs to be paid for existing, single claimants with a sentence of less than six months but with ever lengthening remand times this is insufficient and there is often pressure from social and private landlords to evict. A person on remand awaiting trial may lose their job and their home but post trial be found not guilty and released or given a community sentence.

On release temporary accommodation, either a homeless hostel or B and B, is frequently the only option and there are then financial disincentives to seeking employment. The rent for temporary accommodation is often around £400 a week, a level that requires a substantial salary level and the address of a homeless hostel is stigmatising and off putting to potential employers. Temporary accommodation represents a significant cost to the public purse of around £20,000 per annum. Many prisoners comment that they fear homeless accommodation as it implies association with people and behaviour that leads to criminality. Helping prisoners to retain tenancies and prevent homelessness is therefore vital in preventing reoffending but also represents considerable potential savings for government.

In the category 'tax', 95% of enquiries concern council tax. Prisoners are exempt from paying council tax but an application has to be made to the relevant local authority. This is a crucial area of work for PMs. Every local authority has its own process for claiming an exemption. An agreed Scottish-wide process would reduce the associated recovery costs and therefore public debt.

John requested advice on a threatened eviction from his housing association home. In conversation it became clear that he also owed considerable debts. On discovering that John was a veteran the CAB referred him to SSAFA (the armed services charity) and took action on the threatened eviction. Support from SSAFA enabled John to write off arrears of £4,500 for rent, £2,500 for council tax and £450 for energy bills. CAB managed to halt the threatened eviction. John was invited to the CAB veterans' coffee morning where he connected with SACRO Veterans Mentoring Service and the Veterans Champion from the DWP who supported John to receive funding to renew his expired HGV license. John has now secured stable employment.

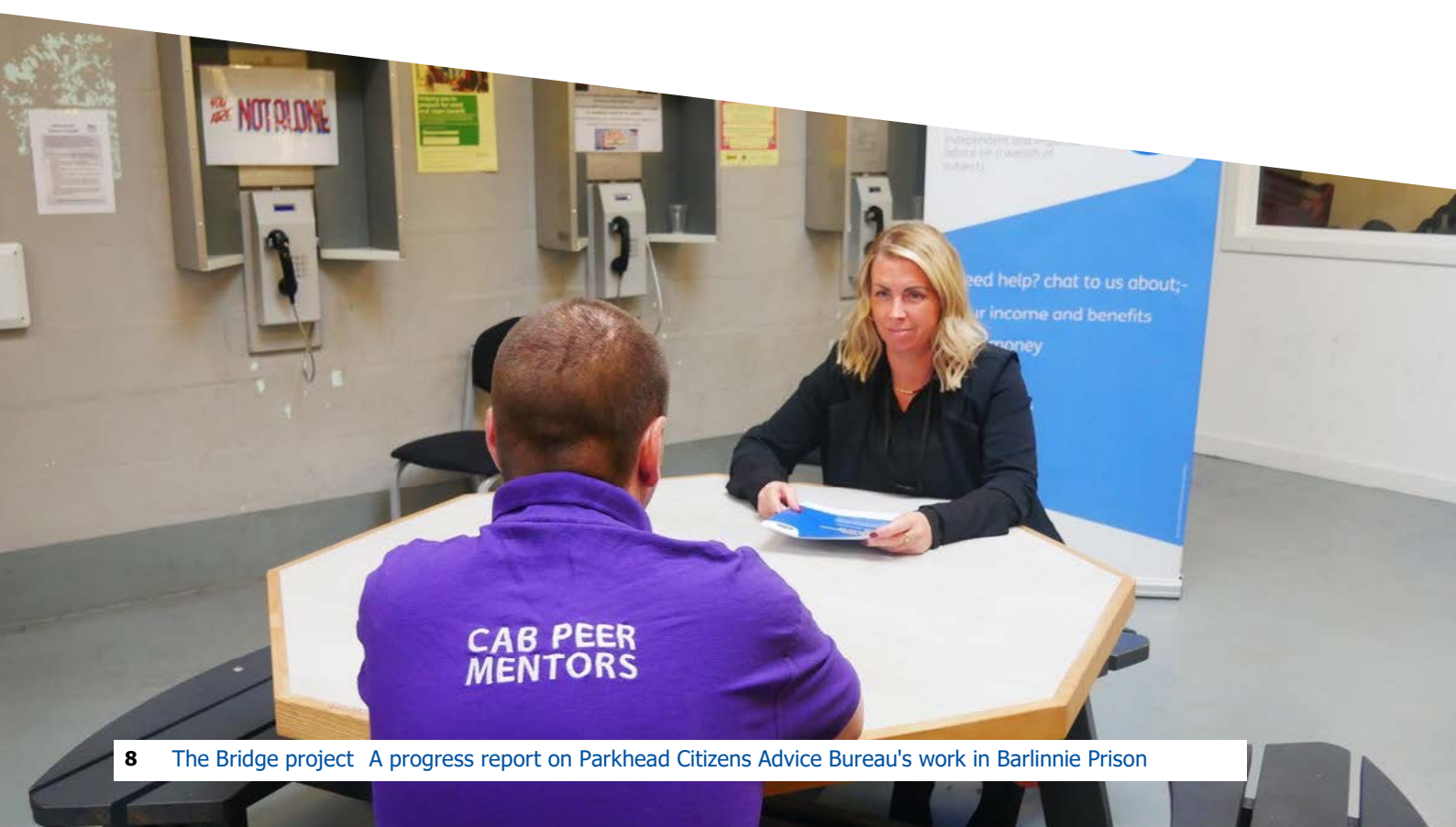
Progress on the Bridge Project

The advice and information service

CAB Advice and Information Service statistics August 2025 – June 2026			
No. of prisoners seen 1-1 interview	No. of advice sessions held	No. of advice issues	Contacts made by CAB on behalf of prisoners
256	468	1119	1174

Access to banking: a social policy issue

A recurring issue concerns prisoners' access to banking services. Practice varies; some banks insist on letters from the prison to enable access, some allow telephone banking whilst others do not and only some recognise a CAB mandate to speak or negotiate on behalf of a prisoner. This lack of access has resulted in prisoners experiencing increased arrears, problems with housing, and in several cases, fraud being committed on their accounts. A working bank account is essential on release to claim benefits, apply for housing or commence employment. Lack of access causes financial stress, jeopardises reintegration into society and increases the risk of reoffending. The Glasgow CAB Social Policy project is currently organising a survey of prisoners which when complete will form the basis of a report to be used to lobby banks to increase access and adopt a uniform approach. The PMs are assisting by helping prisoners to complete the survey.



Training, information and support in prison and post release

The Parkhead CAB project takes a broad view of the information and advice needed, recognising that prisoners often don't know what they need to know and that although a substantial number use the Hub, many do not. For a variety of reasons, including mental health and addiction issues, many prisoners do not engage with the opportunities offered and are often unaware of both services in prison and those outside that could provide much needed support. The training officer as well as taking responsibility for the peer mentors, has been extremely creative in reaching out to those who remain most of the time in their cells.

Working closely with the Barbed Wireless Media Team, the training officer is engaged in training prisoners to produce podcasts and videos that go out via radio and TV to all cells. Recent topics have included: how to access services within the prison, for example, the gym, the chaplaincy, interventions which support addiction recovery and family visits; health topics such as harm reduction, suicide prevention, and awareness of blood borne viruses such as Hepatitis C; information about work and projects within the prison such as Barlinnie Bike Works, help for veterans, the CAB peer mentoring system and a video targeting first-time offenders.

Revision of 'Through the Gate' has continued. This contains much information that people need on coming into prison while 'Beyond the Gate' focuses on taking prisoners through a series of steps in the run up to release and contains vital information for seeking help in the community. Current events and services are also broadcast through the newspaper.





Derek responded to the CAB marketing and attended the Veteran's Exhibition Event. He also came along to the coffee mornings and contact was made with SSAFA and the DWP Veteran's Champion and he signed up for 12 months throughcare support. The DWP has granted funds for a 4 week welding course and money to complete his HGV driving licence with a guaranteed job on completion. Derek says that this has greatly helped his mental health and PTSD problems.

Information and support in the community

Helping prisoners who qualify for early release to ease the overcrowding situation has been another focus of attention. The short notice that prisoners receive of early release makes following the planned steps difficult. Working to prevent reoffending often means helping prisoners to complete applications for the Scottish Welfare Fund to ensure that essential items, such as clothing, travel costs and energy costs can be secured to ease reintegration into the community.

A key objective of the training officer is to put in place information about support available to ease re-integration in the community and prevent re-offending. Ideally, a CAB community based worker would be able to liaise with the training officer to provide the throughcare which many prisoners need as well as identifying opportunities for ex PMs and other prisoners who wish to volunteer. In the absence of funds for this post, the training officer has been creative in partnering with organisations that have a presence outside of the prison. Around 40 veterans have been identified and a monthly coffee morning is held in the Hub to encourage them to engage. Applications for the Veterans Card and badge provide valuable photographic identification and access to discounts similar to the Blue Light Card, on release. The card also provides proof of service which opens the door to other organisations that can provide support in the community such as SACRO (a community justice organisation) and SSAFA.

Training, information and support in prison and post release

In addition the training officer has been working with a number of organisations focusing on employability to enhance ex-prisoners' chances of gaining employment on release. There are regular meetings with SPS Headquarters Employability Manager, Barlinnie Employability Officer, SPS Industries Management, PeoplePlus and the DWP. One success story is Amey Construction who launched a new programme in May to offer prisoners Streetworks qualification training within HMP Barlinnie with the prospect of interviews and placements on release. The partnership paved the way for the participants to have the opportunity to sit the online CSCS examination (a construction qualification). Six external computers were brought in to facilitate the test and 13 prisoners passed in July 2026. As the training officer points out: *"The project doesn't have the resources to maintain community engagement. I have tried to build connections with partners who currently deliver within the community, but I know many prisoners are leaving custody that I can't keep the communication channels open with and we miss out on the progress of these people. The project would highly benefit from a community worker that split their time between prison and community."*

In terms of employability, housing is a key issue; it is not only the financial disincentives referred to earlier, as the training officer comments: "if an ex-prisoner is looking to obtain employment as a means of staying out of trouble and problematic behaviour and is leaving homeless, this is almost an impossible pathway. Even looking at volunteering from temporary accommodation is extremely challenging. Hostels and B&Bs are a hot bed for addiction and criminality." It is for this reason that the CAB adviser prioritises housing issues to prevent evictions and seek ways of the prisoner maintaining the tenancy.

Rehabilitation – throughcare the role of local authorities

To improve rehabilitation prospects, the training officer has been engaging with local authority community justice departments who have statutory duties with respect to the rehabilitation of offenders. While Barlinnie is situated within the boundary of Glasgow City Council, prisoners come from a wide variety of local authority areas. Local authorities and housing associations have different policies and procedures for prisoners and ex-offenders with respect to eviction, rent arrears and housing issues which entails both inequitable treatment and time consuming research for CAB advisers. Going forward Parkhead CAB will prioritise social policy work on this issue.

The Parkhead Bridge Project has established a very effective partnership with Renfrewshire Community Justice who have been very open to new ideas and ways of working.. To better understand the needs of prisoners returning to their communities, the project arranged four focus groups with prisoners which were attended by Renfrewshire Community Justice staff.

Training, information and support in prison and post release

As Jamie Gardyne, Community Justice Lead Officer for Renfrewshire, explained the focus groups were not about presenting what the Council offers but listening to what the prisoners had to say about the issues they face. The topics for the focus groups were housing, employability support, health and well-being. Other partner organisations such as the DWP, Skills Scotland, the NHS, staff from the Renfrewshire housing department and third sector organisations were invited to sit in.

Often prisoners are not aware of the support that is available in the community and have little understanding of the engagement processes needed to gain access to support. Being able to engage directly with prisoners and understand their views is vital. Jamie was particularly impressed by the peer mentor system: *“they fulfil an obvious need in the communication flow making the link between in custody and the services available in the community.”*

The experience of Renfrewshire’s staff in listening to prisoners speak about their problems and issues to more closely identify needs has led Renfrewshire to formulate a more tailored strategy to meet information needs and smooth the processes that ex prisoners need to follow to gain support. The new strategy identifies four priorities: housing, employability, health and leisure. Parkhead’s training officer has attended meetings with the Community Justice group to provide further input. Liaison with Barlinnie CABx staff has been fundamental in putting in place that strategy and providing ‘joined -up’ services for those leaving prison.

The partnership between the Parkhead Project and Renfrewshire Community Justice has had other positive spin offs. Renfrewshire Council is now a member of the Barlinnie Throughcare Group. Other aspects of the project’s good practice have also been exported to prisons in other local authority areas, for example, Low Moss now uses the booklet ‘Beyond the Gate’. Other local authorities are also beginning to engage with the project and a series of focus groups for Glasgow City Council are planned.

In recognition of the success of the partnership and its improvement work, Renfrewshire Council submitted the project to COSLA for consideration of an excellence award.

The Bridge Project going forward

One year in, the Bridge Project is making substantial progress towards its stated objectives and a valuable contribution towards the prevention of re-offending. However, both the CAB adviser and the training officer are working at full stretch. The waiting list for appointments in the Link Centre, where the CAB adviser operates twice a week, is a month long. Demand far outstrips the capacity to deliver. The training officer has an extremely large workload. Her job involves dissemination of information within the prison, responsibility for the peer mentors, identifying employability opportunities, community support for ex-prisoners and working with partner organisations to support volunteering as a pathway to employment. These are all necessary activities but the combination is more than one person’s job.

Training, information and support in prison and post release

Being a peer mentor: Peter, Rory and Eddie

"You worry about your house, your bills your family... you lose your job everything – all your independence" said Peter. "I didn't know anything. I was shell shocked I wasn't thinking about my house, my bills or anything" said Rory. "I was absolutely terrified" commented Eddie "I asked them to put me in a special (suicide) cell. I was at rock bottom when I came in." Remembering their own experience of coming into prison underpins the empathy and understanding that PMs must have to assist their fellow inmates. Peer to peer advice, information and support is fundamental to the scheme. This year the project has trained 16 peer mentors who have assisted 1190 fellow prisoners.

All PMs are carefully selected. They receive training on key issues and must abide by the CAB principles; the service is free, confidential, impartial and independent. Full training as a CAB adviser would entail access to the digital information system that CAB advisers use to ensure the information given is accurate and up to date. While there is access to computers in the Hub, prisoners are forbidden internet access. There are other obstacles to offering full training. The churn of prisoners is constant; long term prisoners may be subjected to sudden removal to another prison. There is an issue of continuity and therefore the triage model makes best use of the PMs. The quick slip system appears to be working in that those with complex issues can be directed to the CAB advisers while others can make use of DIY information packs or information supplied by the PMs. The PMs commented that many prisoners have literacy problems and therefore they are often asked to fill in forms, not just for council tax exemption but prison services such as interventions (drug and alcohol rehabilitation) and NHS appointments. All felt that they were trusted by their fellow inmates.

The PMs interviewed raised a number of issues and suggestions for improving the service. They all agreed that information is needed on coming into prison and one of the PMs mentioned that he is working on an updated version of 'Through the Gate'. Others mentioned that it would be good to have PMs working in reception or the D hall section that is used for 'first nights'.

Visibility of the service is key. Comments were made to the effect that the service needs better publicity. While officers in the Hub are fully aware of the service, in the halls understanding is less widespread. PMs are entitled to wear a purple T shirt which carries the words 'peer mentor' on the back. But one of the PMs pointed out that in his hall the officers would not allow him to wear the T shirt and another commented that: *"They don't understand what we actually do."* Another pointed out that not all prisoners get to go to the Hub and therefore it is important that they are allowed to operate in the halls.

The PMs voiced the fears of all prisoners when they spoke about being released: *"Am I going to get a job?"* said Rory, *"the stigma of being in prison... getting a job will be hard... people will think he's a bad guy."*

Without exception all of those interviewed said they enjoyed being a PM and that they would be volunteering when they are released. *"I like helping people... I like being able to tell them things in a way they will understand"* said Eddie. *"Volunteering! Definitely I'm going to do that."*

Recommendations

Currently the Bridge project exists on charitable funding. The work to date has demonstrated a workable model for addressing prisoners' needs for information, for upskilling prisoners, for providing employability opportunities post release and therefore the project makes a valuable contribution to preventing reoffending. The project saves lives; it enables some prisoners to 'turn their lives around', re-establish family connections and make a contribution to their communities.

There are also potential financial benefits. The cost of maintaining a prisoner for one year is estimated to be £47,140; preventing homelessness can save an estimated £20,000 per annum. These sums represent savings for the public purse. The Bridge project deserves financial support from public sources which to date have not been forthcoming. With relatively small financial support the Bridge project could make a much bigger impact.

Priorities for Parkhead CAB

- > Demand for the adviser service outstrips the capacity to deliver. A second full-time adviser could help meet that demand.
- > Funding for the two posts that were included in the original design of the Bridge project: a community liaison officer to focus on identifying voluntary organisations willing to take on ex-prisoners as volunteers and enhance opportunities for paid employment and a second adviser post based in the community to focus on advice information and support for ex-prisoners and their families.
- > There is a need to make more prisoners aware of the CAB service. Issues such as housing and debt if left unattended cause further obstacles to rehabilitation; immediate action on entering prison is required. The CAB should approach Barlinnie Management to ask that peer mentors be allowed to work in the First Night Centre to make new prisoners aware of the service.
- > Work on the revision of 'Through the Gate' should be completed as soon as possible.

Priorities for Barlinnie Management

- > Interviews with the peer mentors suggested that some officers are unaware of the CAB service and the role of PMs in helping fellow inmates with information needs. This issue was highlighted by those PMs who had been forbidden to wear the purple T shirt in the halls which is an advert for the service.
- > The original aim was that sufficient PMs should be trained and recruited so that each hall would have the services of at least one PM. This is important given that not all prisoners use the Hub. While this may create further demand, the PMs are able to triage enquiries and assist in the use of DIY information packs.

Recommendations

Priorities For Local Authorities

- > The pressures on housing and homeless accommodation are well documented. Effective local strategies to help prisoners retain tenancies and prioritise re-housing have both individual and financial benefits for the councils involved. A house as opposed to a homeless hotel increases the chances of employment for ex-offenders, providing substantial benefits for each individual but also considerable financial saving for hard-pressed local authorities.
- > The Partnership between the Bridge Project and Renfrewshire Community Justice team has demonstrated a model for providing improved services for those leaving custody. It is important that the effectiveness of the model is evaluated in terms of its impact on individuals well-being and the prevention of re-offending.
- > Other local authorities should consider further engagement with the Barlinnie CAB staff with a view to identifying the needs of ex-prisoners and improving community justice services.
- > The Barlinnie project demonstrates the cost effectiveness of timely advice. Local authorities and housing associations should review their policies and procedures with respect to prisoners and ex-offenders and increase co-operation with advice services to prevent evictions, the build up of rent arrears and homelessness, all of which contribute to re-offending.
- > Local authorities should prioritise funding advice services in prisons.





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