



# Evaluation of homelessness services to adults in the secure estate

## Executive Summary

### 1. Background

- 1.1 The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 introduced major changes to the way homelessness would be tackled in Wales. This refocused services around preventing homelessness and providing assistance to all eligible applicants facing or experiencing homelessness. One key change was to remove the automatic priority need status of prison leavers, to a category where only former prisoners who are vulnerable as a result of their time in custody would have priority need status.
- 1.2 To address concerns of the possible impact of this on those leaving custody the 'National Pathway for Homelessness Services to Children, Young People and Adults in the Secure Estate' was launched in December 2015. The National Pathway for adults sets out minimum expectations in relation to information exchange, assessment and interventions in respect of housing need at three key points in a prisoner's journey into and out of custody: (a) at reception (b) at the point of release and (c) after release.

### 2. Research aims and methodology

- 2.1 The research aim was to engage in a post-implementation process and impact evaluation of the homelessness services available to adults leaving the secure estate in Wales. The research objectives were:
  - To assess how the changes to legislative duties towards those leaving custody have been implemented by Local Authorities, prisons and

probation providers both in prison and in the community.

- To undertake an initial assessment of the impact of these changes on ex-offenders.
- Identify areas good practice and areas for improvement.

2.2 The evaluation team asked a representative from each of the 22 local authority housing options teams in Wales to complete a survey. The evaluation team also interviewed representatives from five respondent groups. These were local authority staff (n=21); prison based staff (n=19) community based housing/housing support staff (n=18); Responsible Officers i.e. staff from probation services supervising prison leavers on release (n=34); and prison leavers themselves. Attempts were made to interview prison leavers twice. The first time 4-6 weeks before they were released and the second time 6-8 weeks after release. In total, 75 prison leavers were interviewed before release and 22 of these were then re-interviewed.

### **3. Key findings**

#### Reception stage

- 3.1 Staff responsible for addressing accommodation issues on reception – for example, by helping prisoners apply for housing benefit or to close down tenancies – were said to engage well with most prisoners on their arrival into custody. However, relevant staff were reported to be very busy and often off-site so that that housing advice on reception might not always be provided to every prisoner. The likelihood some prisoners would not receive a housing advice service on arrival into custody was greater where relevant induction paperwork and assessments were not completed by prison staff.
- 3.2 The vast majority of prison leaver respondents that were interviewed could recall discussing their housing needs with someone on reception. However, frequently the focus of those discussions had been on eligibility for housing benefit. Very few recalled that local authority housing teams had otherwise become actively involved in their case to prevent homelessness. Assessments of housing needs at the reception stage were described by prison leaver respondents as being superficial. Four prisoners reported experiencing accommodation or financial problems at the point of release that could be linked to missed opportunities to address housing needs on reception.

#### Pre-release stage

- 3.3 The pre-release resettlement service in relation to accommodation was described by most respondents as being poor. In relation to housing they were limited to identifying some

prison leavers who needed accommodation and, in some of these cases undertaking referrals to housing departments. There was insufficient evidence that such referrals were normally timely or good quality. Either because the prison leaver was serving a short sentence or because demand on staff time allowed for no other practice, housing referrals were largely made in the last 2-6 weeks before release, rather than 12 weeks before release as stipulated in the National Pathway. This left insufficient time for responsible officers to provide risk assessment information and for local authority housing staff to engage with a prison leaver to help them find accommodation before they were released.

- 3.4 Poorer service was associated with larger prisons accommodating those serving short term sentences. Referrals were also of poorer quality when they were completed by the prison leaver themselves or by another prisoner on their behalf rather than a housing professional. The National Pathway for adults leaving the secure estate worked better for longer term and higher risk prisoners who were more actively and assertively case managed by Responsible Officers.
- 3.5 Local authority staff were left with very little time to address the housing needs of prison leavers. In the time available they prioritised assessing eligibility for priority need as opposed to helping prison leavers to secure accommodation. In that regard, the eligibility bar for being assessed as vulnerable and potentially in priority need was considered by many respondents as being too high.
- 3.6 Some prison leavers reported getting a better service. Prison leavers returning to some local authority areas in south Wales talked about being in contact with individuals from the Prisoner Release Empowerment Project (PREP) service who were trying more assertively to help them find accommodation before they were released from custody.

#### In the community

- 3.7 Temporary accommodation was provided to those assessed as being vulnerable and in priority need. In some areas the local authority also exercised its power to offer accommodation to those not deemed priority need. This would be space in a facility catering for homeless people or in a hostel reserved for prison leavers. Most of the 22 prison leavers who were re-interviewed in the community after their release had contact with local authority housing departments and many had been helped into accommodation by a range of housing service providers. A few prison leaver respondents, with a long history of failed placements and who would have been difficult to house had been designated 'intentionally homeless'.

- 3.8 A group of prison leavers were caught in a revolving door of serving short prison sentences followed by relatively brief periods in the community before they reoffend or are recalled and are imprisoned again. They presented as having multiple needs and likely to be difficult to house because they had a history of substance misuse, tenancy failures and exclusions.
- 3.9 Female prison leavers were more likely to be assessed as vulnerable and in priority need. They were more likely to report having been provided with support. Female prison leavers tended to consider themselves at risk when using homelessness services because they primarily catered for males. The absence of spaces for females in Approved Premises was especially problematic.
- 3.10 Local authority and community based staff did not consider that the removal of priority need status had substantially worsened the situation of most prison leavers. The previous system was said to have only provided very short term help to some prison leavers. Local authority stakeholders reported that many prison leavers returned to live with family or friends once it became clear to them the local authority was not going to provide them with accommodation.
- 3.11 Prison based stakeholders, Responsible Officers and some prison leavers considered that things used to be better for prison leavers when they had priority need status. That said, when prison leavers described their past experiences with housing, they did so in negative terms and recalled problems arising from being placed in low quality shared accommodation with other prison leavers not all of whom were committed to avoiding crime.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

- 4.1 In the absence of conclusive statistical information, opinion was divided as to whether more or fewer prison leavers were being released as homeless. Most local authority stakeholders perceived, however, that the level of support provided to prison leavers eligible for housing related interventions in the medium and longer term was better than before the National Pathway was introduced. Transitional funding and Supporting People funding had been used in various way to provide for the needs of prison leavers.
- 4.2 Improvements were noted in relation to information exchange between key stakeholders in the resettlement process. That being said, local authority, prison and community based staff referred to difficulties accessing information from each other. This created problems in managing risk and ensuring individuals were assisted into appropriate accommodation all

along the National Pathway. Information exchange and communication between staff was described as being more seamless where relevant staff knew each other personally.

4.3 A full list of recommendations is included in the full report. Key recommendations include increasing capacity to deliver the National Pathway through evolving joint working arrangements; devising systems to monitor and provide feedback on the timeliness and quality of services being delivered; developing arrangements to identify and meet the needs of 'revolving door' short term prison leavers; and developing provision and access to gender specific services.

4.4 Key recommendations for specific stakeholders are outlined below.

The Welsh Government should:

- Continue to evaluate and promote implementation of the National Pathway.
- Review Prison Link Cymru delivery contracts to ensure they adequately reflect workload demands and contain contingencies in relation to staff absences.
- Remove 'intentional homelessness' as a disqualification criteria for housing.

The Ministry of Justice and HMPPS should:

- Review Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC) contract compliance and how the needs of prison leavers are being managed under the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda.
- Ensure that housing referrals are completed only by professional staff.
- Review the inclusion criteria for Integrated Offender Management (IOM) to ensure 'revolving door' offenders, who move quickly into and out of prisons are provided with the most intensive and potentially most supportive access to services.
- Develop Approved Premises facilities for High Risk females.

The Wales CRC and NPS Wales should:

- Develop auditing processes that include a timeliness and quality assessment of housing risk assessment (Annex 9) practices.

- Link with local women centres to ensure access to gender specific services that can contribute to addressing the complex and multiple needs that most female prison leavers have.
- Explore the advantages of having dedicated staff (SPOC) to work with prison leavers as per the ‘throughcare’ team model.

Local authorities should:

- Develop individualised plans (PHPs) for all prison leavers which link them into meaningful housing options in the community prior to release.
- Review the thresholds and evidential requirements associated with conferring priority need status paying particular attention to the relevance of the harm attendant on repeat prison sentences.
- Train staff in principle of good offender motivation and engagement.

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Full research report available at: <https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-homelessness-services-adults-secure-estate/?lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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