

This time round:

exploring the effectiveness of current interventions in the housing of homeless prisoners released to Wales

Summary of the report

This time round explores the experiences of homeless prisoners released to Wales and the perceptions of professionals who work with them in order to determine the effectiveness of current housing interventions. Commissioned by the Welsh Assembly, the report provides evidence on the current model of intervention, highlighting good practice and making recommendations to address key service deficiencies.

The research was designed to:

- Compare the experiences of homeless prisoners who have been rehoused after leaving prison with those who have failed to find appropriate housing, identifying any common factors which either assist or obstruct the resettlement process.
- Explore the experiences of key professionals working with prison leavers.
- Discern key stages within the process at which interventions are / would be appropriate and if these differ from current practice.
- Identify good practice proposals to assist the successful rehousing of released prisoners.

The research method consisted of face-to-face interviews with 27 prison leavers and the distribution of 27 self-completion questionnaires to key stakeholders across six local authorities (Bridgend, Conwy, Neath Port Talbot, Newport, Pembrokeshire, Wrexham). The key stakeholders included prison resettlement officers, local authority officers (homelessness, housing and supporting people), housing association officers and probation staff.

There are seven key chapters to the report. The first contextualises the study in a brief literature review, the second discusses the housing histories of prison leavers, the third gives perceptions of current resettlement interventions, the fourth presents possible improvements, the fifth explores accommodation and support in the community, whilst the sixth comments on joint working arrangements. The final chapter presents conclusions and recommendations.

Good practice

The study highlighted eleven examples of good practice housing interventions with ex-prisoners:

- Initial housing needs assessments within four days of reception into prison
- Resettlement fairs in prison
- A range of accommodation providers going into prison
- Counselling, Advice, Referral, Assessment and Throughcare teams in prison
- Resettlement teams /Transitional Support Schemes
- Drugs Intervention Programmes
- Local authorities maintaining a duty whilst ex-prisoners are in accommodation provided by an alternative accommodation provider
- Doorstop supported accommodation
- VESTA supported accommodation
- Project Pearl floating support service
- Gwent Criminal Justice and Supporting People Forum

Recommendations

By exploring the generally unsettled housing histories of prison leavers, which are characterised by periods of homelessness and periods in prison, factors have been identified that have assisted prison leavers to feel settled in the past. The report recommends:

1. All accommodation providers (statutory, voluntary and private) should ensure that accommodation provided for prison leavers is in a *suitable location*. Important aspects of location include; being close to employment and being away from people who are likely to have a negative influence.
2. For ex-offenders to feel settled, they should have the opportunity to *secure their own affordable and decent accommodation*.
3. Many ex-offenders require significant *support in the community* from a range of support providers (statutory and voluntary), in order to maintain accommodation and avoid recidivism. Where possible, support should also be encouraged by family and friends.
4. Prison leavers should be *supported to find suitable employment*. Prison services should make employment support available during custody, whilst probation should ensure it continues into the community.

The research has demonstrated that there is currently a broad range of support for prisoners from the pre-custody stage through to the period immediately post release. Hence, eleven examples of good practice interventions were identified. However, the report also shows that support is inconsistent across Wales and interventions are often not implemented early enough in the prison sentence. The report recommends:

5. WAG should amend the Link Protocol Wales to ensure that housing is arranged earlier in the prison sentence. Furthermore, WAG should monitor the implementation of and amendments to the Link Protocol.
6. Pre-custody, probation services should give offenders initial housing information and support them to end or maintain tenancies where necessary. Where appropriate, referrals should also be made to local authority family mediation services. On reception, the housing needs of all prisoners should be assessed and appropriate action should be taken. Action should include dealing with housing benefit and rent arrears issues. Furthermore, prisoners should be supported to end or maintain tenancies where appropriate. Initial assessments should be the responsibility of the prison service but other agencies (statutory, voluntary or private) may need to action some of the interventions identified.
7. Accommodation should be secured earlier for prison leavers by learning from innovative schemes (e.g. dedicated local authority officers who deal with offenders or resettlement fairs in prisons). Prison Link Cymru should ensure that prisoners are aware of their entitlements, liaising with housing providers and arranging interviews with accommodation providers prior to release. Where accommodation is provided by an organisation other than the local authority, local authorities should retain any duty owed to the prison leaver. Moreover, all accommodation providers should acknowledge receipt of any applications for housing.
8. Continuity of support is essential pre and post release, necessitating wider availability of resettlement, TSS and DIP support. This support should include gate pickups. WAG should emphasise the importance of transitional support to a greater degree in the Link Protocol Wales. Moreover, early release schemes should be used more appropriately and should be reviewed through further research.
9. The prison service should arrange greater mental health and employment support throughout the prison sentence.

A range of supported accommodation is available to prison leavers and is provided by various local authorities, housing associations and other organisations. Despite the quality of some accommodation and support in the community, prison leavers are far too frequently placed in B&Bs due to the general lack of alternative accommodation.

Excellent examples of joint working in providing housing interventions for prison leavers include the Criminal Justice and Supporting People Forum and homelessness forums. However, joint working is not consistent enough across Wales and often organisations are not sharing information early enough in the housing process. The report recommends:

10. Local authorities and other supported accommodation providers should provide homeless prison leavers with more housing options, including temporary, move-on and long-term accommodation. In particular, more supported accommodation is required for prison leavers.

All accommodation providers should consider establishing nomination agreements with the prison service.

11. Probation and local authorities should make floating support more widely available, particularly in the private rented sector in order to increase the availability of this accommodation.
12. With regard to partnership working, current forums should continue to consider prison leaver issues. In addition, efforts should be made to develop joint working relationships with the private sector in order to increase the viability of this sector as a housing option for prison leavers. Furthermore, WAG should consider evaluating the effectiveness of recent one-stop shop approaches to partnership working in the community (e.g. SMART in Wrexham) and in prisons (e.g. Altcourse support services located in one cabin).

Further information

The full report: **This time round: exploring the effectiveness of current interventions in the housing of homeless prisoners released to Wales** by Peter Mackie is available to download for free on the websites of Shelter Cymru sheltercymru.org.uk and the Assembly Government wales.gov.uk

This time round was written by Peter Mackie and researched by Peter Mackie, Repa Antonio, Linda Bell-Jazani, Mal Devonshire, Suzanne McKevitt-Harvey, Annette Brenchley, Dafydd Davies, Lee Hopkins, Justine Jenkins, Ruth Martin, Clare Panton and Clare Williams.

Web: sheltercymru.org.uk

Tel: 01792 469400

Email: research@sheltercymru.org.uk

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