

RR3 Special Interest Group on Accommodation 2023-24: Report 3

Breaking down the barriers – accessing housing-related support

Introduction

The Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3) provides the key interface between the voluntary sector, and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), in order to increase mutual understanding and build a strong and effective partnership. The group is made up of senior leaders from the voluntary sector and meets quarterly with civil servants to provide guidance and feedback on MoJ policy developments.

The RR3 convenes Special Interest Groups (SIGs) to advise on specific areas of policy and practice as the need arises. This SIG has convened to explore the barriers to accessing accommodation faced by people leaving prison or people with criminal records and builds on the learning and recommendations of the 2018 Special Interest Group on Accommodation.¹

This includes repeating the previous report's call for a cross-departmental strategy on accommodation, specifically focused on people leaving prison. This is because the issue of homelessness amongst people leaving prison remains extremely prevalent. The Ministry of Justice's [Accommodation Following Release from Custody](#) statistics highlight that:

- Between April 2022 and March 2023, "the proportion of persons released from custody who were housed at the point of release decreased by 2.4 percentage points"
- In the year to March 2023, "the proportion of people known to be housed drops from 86.3% on the day of release to 75.5% three months later"².
- In Wales, "the number of those who were rough sleeping at three months post-release from prison trebled in 2022-23"³.

Additionally, the Ministry of Justice has stated that "evidence shows that offenders in stable accommodation are 50% less likely to commit further crimes"⁴.

The SIG held two evidence sessions comprised of twenty-one voluntary organisations and officials from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), alongside a call for evidence that received 30 submissions. The SIG considered legislative changes and Government initiatives designed, since 2018, to mitigate some of the issues raised, and explored proposed recommendations.

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The evidence that follows has been divided into three papers, corresponding to the three core barriers listed below.

- 1) Problems accessing temporary accommodation or suitable settled accommodation via effective resettlement planning, homelessness legislation or government provision
- 2) Problems accessing the private rented sector (PRS), including Local Housing Allowance (LHA), guarantors, upfront costs and discrimination
- 3) Problems accessing adequate housing-related support, including the level of support required and the limitations of current commissioned services.

Following the conclusion of the evidence sessions, the SIG met to discuss solutions and recommendations. These have been grouped into a **series of three reports**, corresponding to the three barriers highlighted (listed above). This is the third report corresponding to the third barrier – problems accessing adequate housing-related support.

Supported housing is when accommodation “is provided alongside support, supervision or care to help people live as independently as possible in the community”⁵. Accommodation can be available to a range of different groups, including people who have been in contact with the criminal justice system. Housing provision and support is drawn from a combination of providers, which includes housing associations, local council housing, private landlords and voluntary organisations. The support on offer, which can vary significantly, is a key component in the effective resettlement of people leaving prison, through a positive impact on physical and mental wellbeing in addition to its role in reducing homelessness.⁶

Structure

This report is divided into two sections.

- 1) Housing-related support and the barriers to the effective delivery of services
- 2) The limitations of commissioning.

Section 1: Housing-related support and the barriers to the effective delivery of services

The issues

The SIG heard of a number of issues within the supported housing sector which are creating barriers to effective service delivery for voluntary organisations. To note, this report acknowledges that the majority of SIG participants provided input on the issues faced in England, though there were also participants that provided expertise on the situation in Wales. This is particularly important to raise within the context of housing policy, given that housing is a devolved matter for the Welsh Government. In Wales, supported housing is funded through the Housing Support Grant (HSG), which is an amalgamation of three existing grants – the Supporting People Programme; the Homelessness Prevention Grant; and Rent Smart Wales Enforcement.⁷

Resource and expertise gap – there is a significant gap in resources and the expertise to offer supported housing to people leaving prison, as well as a gap in bespoke services which can support people with complex needs and/or who are considered higher risk of serious harm.

- Bespoke mental health and substance misuse support were highlighted as particularly lacking, with a reduction in specialised, registered professionals, including occupational therapists and mental health leads, given as a specific example
- This gap in resources is exacerbated due to pressure from adult social care services for supported housing providers to accept “higher risk” individuals who providers cannot effectively risk manage. This includes supported housing providers not receiving the necessary assurances from statutory organisations to effectively manage and respond to risk of serious harm
- The Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023, with its focus on increasing the quality of supported housing provision, also carries the risk - due to increased regulation and local scrutiny - of reducing the provision that is available for people leaving prison.

Sub-standard provision – there has been an increase in examples of sub-standard supported accommodation, lacking in appropriate support. This includes examples of unscrupulous landlords who receive enhanced housing benefit rates but who subsequently provide limited support.

Blockages due to limited move-on options – there are blockages within the supported accommodation sector as a result of a general lack of move-on options, as well as a shortage of specialist, supported move-on accommodation, and for high-risk cases in particular.

Limited options for women – there is a limited pool of women-only supported accommodation, resulting in reduced options for women in contact with the criminal justice system.

- Women are often placed in accommodation that often do not apply gender and trauma-informed approaches acknowledging that women have separate needs – as stated in the Female Offender Strategy
- Participants noted that much of the supported accommodation that is available is unsuitable highlighting instances of women feeling unsafe in their accommodation. Examples of women being evicted from supported housing, only to be informed by the local authority that they were under no obligation to rehouse them, were raised. This was despite evidence illustrating that many women were being coerced into behaviour that resulted in eviction.

SPOTLIGHT - PACT

Pact's grant-funded Journeys to Freedom programme has successfully supported 28 women in London and Kent. The programme adopted a holistic keyworker approach to supporting women to access and sustain accommodation, post-release.

It offers intensive and personalised support, with accommodation, as well as with education, training and employment, finances, health and family, and relationships.

The programme's evaluation, published in 2023, revealed that 95% of those supported were in their own property or living in supported accommodation by the end of their support period. The keys to success were:

- Wraparound support, provided by a trusted keyworker, before, on the day of, and post-release
- The keyworker model focuses on developing each woman's agency, coordinating a team of professional support around them, and ensuring increased engagement with these professionals.

Section 2: The limitations of commissioning

The issues

The SIG also explored limitations within the current commissioning of supported housing provision, with several key barriers to effective service delivery raised as of particular concern:

- The limitations of short-term contracting
- Contract values
- Siloed support
- Increased complexity of need.

Limitations of short-term contracting

Floating support contracts vary in length, with examples given of four-week support contracts (which specifically relates to the terms of engagement between the service and a person using that service). Such a short period of time does not allow for sufficient support to be provided for people with particularly complex needs. This issue has become more acute given that voluntary organisations are reporting an increase in the complexity of need of their service users, with one SIG participant stating that "housing-related support contracts need to be longer."

Organisations supporting people with mental health needs felt that short-term contracts are a particularly pressing issue for them given that mental health-related referrals can take a while to filter through given existing blockages within broader mental health services.

The Group therefore recommended that the commissioning of these support services take a longer-term view, beyond current one-to-two-year timeframes.

Contract values

Contract values were also raised as a significant issue, with a number of SIG participants highlighting that contract values have remained stagnant for the majority of the last decade. Voluntary providers have stated that full cost recovery on existing contracts is not being achieved in many instances, and that the value of these contracts need to reflect the costs accrued by service providers. The issue of value has a knock-on effect on the staffing of services, with specialist services having to be run by a smaller number of staff members, thereby impacting on the level of service that people receive.

Siloed support

Support available is often offered in siloes, which is not suitable for people presenting with complex and often overlapping needs. For services that offer such support, demand is rising because previous eligibility requirements, such as having been in contact with the criminal justice system, no longer apply. As a result of widening the criteria, people leaving prison are being pushed out of accessing support and are often deprioritised.

The SIG also heard of a focus on the commissioning of different services “without thinking strategically about pooling resources to create an effective pathway.” The result of such an approach is siloed services which struggle to cater for people with multiple needs. The problems associated with siloed services are then further exacerbated by the short-term nature of funding, leaving services with limited time to fully embed their work with service users, as well as impacting on staff recruitment and retention.

In Wales there is further danger of siloed support where HMPPS accommodation contracts need to be aware of what existing Welsh Government provision is in place. Where possible, criminal justice accommodation provision should be co-designed between the Welsh Government and HMPPS and co-commissioning should be considered.

Increased complexity of need

Many of the group’s participants highlighted the increased complexity of need of their service users, and therefore the increased level of support that is required from service providers. The SIG heard that, in the women’s sector “the main needs are substance misuse and mental health. But many accommodation support-related services are only offering low-level support.” The feedback from across the session almost unanimously highlighted this insufficiency in support. This is not to say that every person leaving prison requires intensive support, but that the support systems in place would be more effective if there was a recognition of this range of need. As one participant told the SIG: “we are not talking about a homogenous group of people coming out of prison with the same needs. The system needs to be more intelligent about how it’s dealing with this range of needs. Intensive support isn’t needed for everyone, but currently there’s this focus on something rather than nothing. Instead of a person-centred approach, people are accessing whatever is available.”

This recognition must include greater awareness of the issues that people in prison, due for release, may face or are already facing. This includes problems with addiction, and the need to educate staff working in prisons on the nature of addiction. One such project that is already providing this training is the [Choose Life Project](#), which includes people recently released from prison going into schools, colleges and training the police on the issue of addiction.

“Even where there is supported accommodation, it comes nowhere close to meeting the needs that have been identified and doesn’t recognise significant trauma and PTSD. The different levels of complexity means we are almost containing people as opposed to offering the good quality support that has been offered in the past.”

SPOTLIGHT - THRIVE

Target Housing, based in Sheffield, opened its THRIVE Project in June 2021 – a supported accommodation service for men and women with a history of trauma and adversity.

The service provides support to people who have experienced multiple disadvantage – common amongst many people leaving prison – delivering an effective multi-agency approach, while incorporating the need for more sustained, intensive support for people with complex needs. The project:

- Only considers people with needs under the Health and Social Care Act.
- Once a referral has been accepted, offers a “dispersed property in Sheffield which is suitable to both their physical health and safety needs as well as being appropriate to their emotional needs”.
- Offers a “forever home” to ensure long-term stability.
- Provides 8 hours of support per week offered “in line with their preferences.” This can vary between shorter, more frequent contact or contact at a more intermittent level but of a longer duration. Flexible support is offered for as long as it is needed, with a recognition that support needs to be in place as long as is required.
- Is underpinned by psychologically and trauma-informed principles.
- Embodies many of the housing first principles, namely that people have a right to a home; housing is available quickly, and that suitable housing is offered “with a view to long-term stability”.
- Ensures that housing and support are separated, with housing not conditional upon a person engaging with support.
- Ensures people have choice and control with the type and location of accommodation, and support led by the person rather than the service.
- Enables staff to have small caseloads so that they can offer the level of flexible support needed.
- Is based on people’s strengths, goals, and aspirations, seeking to develop existing strengths and skills to build self-esteem and confidence to aid in the recovery process.
- Takes a harm reduction approach – where people are using substances or self-harming, steps are taken to minimise immediate and ongoing harm to the individual and to promote recovery.

Recommendations

To note – the range of recommendations set out below will require engagement with both the UK and the Welsh Government given that housing is a devolved matter. Subsequently, the recommendations as set out are dependent on the separate processes and legislation that govern housing policy in both England and Wales.

1) Ensure access to prisons for supported housing staff to meet people ahead of release.

2) Obligate local authorities to consider the level of supported housing stock required to support people leaving prison with support needs best met in supported housing, including specific provision for women.

This recommendation follows the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill receiving Royal Assent – thereby become in Act – in June 2023, which obligates English local authorities to conduct a strategic review of their supported housing stock and develop a strategy for how they will meet their level of need.

In Wales Supported Housing is legislated for in the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 and we recommend that the Welsh Government reviews supported housing stock for people leaving prison as part of the work being done in the Ending Homelessness White Paper.

3) Ensure that housing support contracts are of a length necessary, reflecting need, to provide the amount of support required.

4) Ensure that commissioned services cater for people presenting with complex and overlapping needs, with specific provision for people who have been in contact with the criminal justice system.

This commissioning should build on the existing evidence base, referenced in this report, that highlights the success of tailored, consistent, one-to-one support, and reaching beyond accommodation.

5) Provision of additional, women-only supported accommodation:

- Offering holistic and trauma-informed support.
- Based on the individual needs of women.
- To work in partnership with community teams based out of each women's prison to support women through the gate, with support beginning in custody, continuing through the gate and into the community.
- Specialist women's centres to be funded to develop their own accommodation offers to combine stable accommodation with wraparound support. For an example of best practice, this paper highlights Anawim's Birmingham's Centre for Women.



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End notes

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Clinks supports, represents and advocates for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

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