

Campaigns: briefing

Housing and reoffending

Ensuring offenders can access and keep a home on their release from prison can significantly reduce reoffending and act as a gateway to resettlement. Increasing the provision of specialist housing advice to prisoners is a simple and cost effective way to keep the prison population down and offer ex-offenders the foundation for a life free from crime.

Stable accommodation reduces the risk of reoffending by more than 20%, and a St Giles Trust evaluation has concluded it can reduce reoffending by up to 40%.

The Prison Reform Trust has found that every year, around 30,000 of the 90,000 prisoners released in England and Wales have no home to go to.

Introduction

The prison population of England and Wales currently stands at more than 85,000, and the average cost of keeping an inmate in prison is around £45,000 a year. In such a challenging fiscal climate, it is vital that cost-effective policies to cut reoffending rates are fully explored. The National Audit Office has found that only a small proportion of prison budgets are currently spent on reducing reoffending by prisoners on short sentences, despite the fact that 60% of such prisoners are reconvicted within a year of release, at an economic and social cost of around £7bn to £10bn a year.

Shelter, and other third sector organisations, run services providing housing advice and support to offenders which enable them to acquire and maintain safe, suitable accommodation on their release from prison. These schemes have a significant impact on reducing reoffending and improving the lives of service users on their release.

Suitable housing is the foundation for every other part of rehabilitation, resettlement, and risk management, and is the cornerstone for beginning a life free from crime. Shelter believes that further investment in prison housing advice services can significantly reduce reoffending, and should be prioritised as part of future prison spending plans.

Housing issues facing offenders

Getting prisoners into settled housing can act as a gateway to effective resettlement - Home Office research has found that prisoners who have housing arranged on release are four times more likely to have employment, education or training than those who do not have housing in place.

In 2002 the statutory homelessness safety net was strengthened for ex-prisoners with the requirement to give 'priority need' for re-housing to those 'vulnerable' as a result of serving a custodial sentence or being on remand.

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Homeless Link has found that 130 out of 137 prisons have access to housing advice services, but in a 2006 survey only 56% reported that their housing advice service could meet demand.

However, those leaving prison are not often assessed as vulnerable and therefore not in priority need for housing. Even those prisoners who are recognised as being in priority need are often unable to access affordable housing due to the severe shortage, and social and private landlords can be unwilling to let to ex-offenders.

There are also specific issues faced by those serving short and long term sentences:

Long-term offenders

- Offenders on sentences of more than one year are entitled to probation help, but have a much greater need for support as well as resettlement on release.
- They are highly likely to have lost their home while in prison and will be trying to access affordable or suitable housing from scratch.

Short-term offenders

- There is no statutory responsibility to provide probation help to offenders serving sentences of less than 12 months.
- Many short-term offenders are repeat offenders, trapped in a cycle of poverty, homelessness, addiction, mental ill health and crime. Having no suitable accommodation to go to on release increases their chances of re-offending by two or three times.
- Short-term offenders may be able to retain their tenancy if they can transfer the responsibility for it to a friend or family member. However, many people are unaware that this is possible, or of how to do it.
- 12% of offenders depend on housing benefit to help with their rent before they enter custody and many short-term offenders face a loss of this benefit, which stops for all prisoners whose sentence is longer than 13 weeks. When released, the claimant has to reapply for housing benefit, and this claim can take weeks to process.
- Tenants who retain their tenancy while in prison can accumulate arrears, and face losing their tenancy on release and problems accessing other housing.

Housing advice and support schemes for offenders

In 2008 the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) set a target for the prison and probation services that 90 per cent of prisoners have an initial housing assessment, undertaken within four days of reception. This advice is provided by a diverse range of personnel including prison officers, probation officers, voluntary sector staff and peer advisors.

By providing Prison Housing Advice Services in addition to this assessment, Shelter and other third sector organisations offer expert housing advice to prisoners in custody. They help people to explore the housing options available on release, to sort out housing benefit claims or to make a homeless application. The provision of specialist housing advice is dependent on funding and on the priorities of each individual prison, meaning services greatly differ from prison to prison.

Shelter, the housing and homelessness charity.

Until there's a home for everyone.

88 Old Street

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Registered charity number in England and Wales (263710)
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...you lose your children, you lose your home...you come out and you have to go to the Homeless Persons' Unit and then benefits take forever...you end up somewhere that you don't know...it is not easy and if you are all on your own trying to sort everything – let's say if you are into drugs or drink then you are more likely to take drugs and drink again because you are so fed up and then you might end up in a bad way again...so it is really important that people have support...

(Shelter service user)

In addition to housing advice, bespoke projects in some prisons build on these services in innovative ways to help both short and long term offenders. Some examples of current projects include:

For long-term offenders

Prisons Peer Advisory Projects, run by Shelter and the St Giles Trust, train long-term inmates and prison staff to act as peer advisory teams, allowing them to provide housing advice and support for other prisoners. Training is given in areas such as housing benefit, housing allocation, domestic violence and relationship breakdown, and a support advice line is provided to keep teams up to date with changes or developments in the law.

Through the Gates (or across the gates), run by the St Giles Trust, offers and makes referrals to other specialist services, such as substance misuse or mental health teams.

For short-term offenders

Shelter Prisoners Advocacy Release Team (PART), in Leeds, a three year project funded by the Pilgrim Trust which supports ex-offenders pre-release, through the gates and post release to ensure they can obtain and maintain stable and appropriate accommodation. It mainly targets men serving short sentences who will not receive statutory support but are at high risk of becoming homeless on release.

Value and success of housing advice services

Clients helped by prisons housing advice projects often have a multitude of other problems alongside accommodation, including social exclusion, drug and alcohol misuse or mental health problems. Despite this challenging client group, housing support services can have excellent outcomes:

- The re-offending rate of St Giles' Through the Gate clients is 40% lower than the national re-offending rate.
- In one year, Shelter's PHAS has either saved or found homes for in excess of 700 clients.
- Two thirds of those helped by Shelter's PART project were in settled accommodation, living with friends/ relatives or parents or living in a hostel or supported accommodation on release.
- Pro-Bono Economics estimates that the cost: benefit ratio of the Through the Gates project is 10:1, concluding that the programme offered 'outstanding value for money to society' due to savings of over £10 million pounds to the taxpayer from the £1 million scheme.

Recommendations

Reducing prisoner numbers and reoffending is a hugely complex area with many challenging factors - including a lack of suitable accommodation, poverty, unstable backgrounds, mental ill health and drug and alcohol - hampering effective resettlement. Addiction is a particular problem, with St Mungo's research showing that 80% of prisoners have substance use issues.

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I can't see how it could be improved...it is top notch – give them double [the funding] and that's from a Yorkshire man...

(Shelter service user)

However, with National Audit Office figures showing that around 60,000 prisoners are jailed for less than 12 months each year, it is vital to look to at policy changes and advice services that ensure offenders have a accommodation to go to on their release, which can in turn help reduce reoffending. Shelter believes:

- Local authorities should plan ahead for the release of prisoners and work more effectively across authority boundaries to find suitable housing for offenders before they are released, rather than wait until they are released and have no secure housing to go to.
- Housing Benefit claims for short-term prisoners should be reviewed so that short-term prisoners serving sentences of 6-12 months have their claim suspended rather than stopped, preventing them from having to reapply on release.

In particular, all prisons should ensure they prioritise funding housing advice services, and particularly investment should be directed to extending the provision of the following types of service:

- Tailored housing advice services for prisoners - settled housing can act as a gateway to effective resettlement and be the first step many people need to begin building a life outside of prison. Without these services, finding suitable accommodation is incredibly challenging.
- 'Through the gate' support services - helping people make the transition from prison and supporting them both inside and on release is vital to break the cycle of poverty, homelessness and crime.
- Housing advice services that facilitate rehabilitation - peer advisory services empower people to learn and develop skills that are useful to their fellow inmates and increase their knowledge and confidence, which can help them find employment on their release from prison.

These models are highly cost effective, and can bring huge financial benefits to society, as the Through the Gates evaluation showing a 10:1 cost benefit ratio proves. The CBI has estimated that reducing the re-offending rate of ex-prisoners by just 10% could save over £1bn for the UK economy.

These support services will never have a 100% success rate. But with our prison population and our prison budget escalating, models of advocacy and tailored support have real success not only in preventing reoffending and homelessness, but also in helping people to break the cycle of poverty and criminality long-term.

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