

RESPONSIVE SERVICES AND CUSTOMER CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

POLICY REVIEW 2012/13: REDUCING RE-OFFENDING – TACKLING ACCOMMODATION ISSUES FOR OFFENDERS

10 SEPTEMBER 2012

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide the Responsive Services and Customer Care Scrutiny Panel with a strategic overview in regard to accommodation issues for offenders.
- 1.2 The presentation of the report and subsequent debate will form the evidence for the Scrutiny Panel's policy review for 2012/13 into Reducing Re-offending.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- 2.1 At its meeting on 19 July 2012, the Panel agreed the scope of the Policy Review, Reducing Re-offending. One element of the review is to investigate the challenges and opportunities in regard to tackling accommodation issues, one of the Safer Sunderland Partnership's key priorities.
- 2.2 The Social Exclusion Unit report *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-prisoners*, published in 2002, recognised a range of factors that contribute significantly to the likelihood of an individual re-offending - known as 'pathways out of offending'. These were further refined in 2004 in the National Re-offending Action Plan into seven areas including accommodation as a key pathway. The accommodation pathway has been adopted as a key area for action as part of the Safer Sunderland Partnership Reducing Re-offending Delivery Network and identified within the Partnership Strategic Intelligence Assessment (PSIA) as an area for prioritisation.
- 2.3 Nationally, around one third of prisoners about to leave prison have no accommodation arranged for their release. Living in a settled home helps to restore or continue family ties and can provide the vital foundation for engagement in services and interventions to meet an offenders complex needs. Appropriate accommodation is a necessary pre-condition for either accessing education and training or obtaining employment. Offenders serving community sentences with accommodation problems have been found more likely to re-offend without this basic need having been met.
- 2.4 Research conducted at a regional level concluded that:-
 - 14% or 746 people had no settled accommodation on release from a NE prison during 2009/10;

- Most people accessing supported housing from prison are accessing services not specifically designed for offenders;
- There are strong links between experiences of homelessness, repeat offending and custodial sentences;
- Those entering supported accommodation are mainly men, which reflects the higher proportion of male offenders. There are though a growing number of female offenders and there is a lack of focus and provision of accommodation and services available for women;
- Most offenders accessing supported accommodation have at least one other support need, be it drug and/or alcohol issues or a mental health problem;
- If the number of NE prisoners in housing need was reduced from 50% to the national average of 37%, this could lead to a reduction of 197 people re-offending within 12 months of release;
- 16.7% of offenders had a significant problem with the suitability of their accommodation; and
- The age group 25-40 has the highest proportion of offenders and the largest number of people reporting no fixed abode;
- Nationally, over 10% of the prison population are ex-military service personnel. Work is ongoing at a city-wide level with the Sunderland Armed Forces Network to consider what can be done to support ex-service personnel to prevent offending.

2.5 Within the Tyne and Wear area gaps in supported housing have been identified for women offenders; young offenders; people with personality disorders; offenders working towards abstinence or recovering from drug or alcohol addiction; and emergency provision.

Legislation and Policy Implications

2.6 The Government Green Paper; Breaking the Cycle was presented to Parliament in Dec 2010 and proposes radical reforms to the punishment, rehabilitation and sentencing of offenders. There is recognition within the paper that having suitable accommodation for offenders is critical to rehabilitation and reductions in reducing re-offending.

2.7 The Paper specifically sets out the intention to ensure offenders receive appropriate housing assessments and advice, however most other commitments are not designed and targeted at offenders. For example, the objectives to work with the VCS to improve access to the private rented sector to single people; utilising housing services to maintain tenancies; and working with other Government departments to agree shared priorities on tackling and preventing homelessness are aimed at tackling homelessness generally.

Welfare Reform (Housing Benefit)

2.8 The Welfare Reform Programme intends to save £18 billion per year by 2014-15 by a range of proposals, mostly affecting people of working

age, with the intention of reducing benefit dependency and making work pay. The reforms provide for significant reductions in housing benefit entitlement.

- 2.9 On 1 January 2012 the shared accommodation rate was extended to cover people under 35. Previously this only applied to people under the age of 25. Single, under-35 year olds, with no dependants and renting from a private landlord receive local housing allowance in the form of the shared accommodation rate. This means they are only entitled to enough local housing allowance to cover the average cost of a single room in a shared house in the area, which in Sunderland is around £43 per week. The local housing allowance at this rate applies to those renting an abode alone. The consequence of this is that some landlords will now not consider under 35's and some landlords are giving notice to their tenants who are under 35 because they are only getting half the rent than they were previously. This has obvious implications for homelessness and could hamper initiatives to prevent re-offending.
- 2.10 Relevant exemptions to the shared accommodation rate are; those aged between 25 to 34, living in a homeless hotel or hostels for the three months and offered support to help become resettled into the community; those aged between 25 to 34 and an ex-offender who is still considered a risk to the public.

3. LOCAL PROVISION, BARRIERS AND GAPS

- 3.1 The Supported Housing Gateway is a single point of access for a range of statutory agencies including Northumbria Police, Children's Services, Access to Housing, Adult Services, Northumbria Probation and health to refer into. The Gateway determines from a referral the needs of the client and then matches to the appropriate supported accommodation provider. The providers are commissioned by the Council to provide the appropriate accommodation and support for clients, with each client having a 'Support Plan' in place. Providers include organisations such as Gentoo, Norcare, NECA, Stonham, YMCA, Centrepoint, Wearside Women in Need etc. The Council provides funding to the tune of around £2.8m for housing related support to help prevent homelessness and social exclusion. A list of all provider vacancies is updated daily and is used to liaise with the support providers for clients pending accommodation. The Gateway also supports clients when they are ready to move from supported accommodation into independent living identified by the support provider.
- 3.2 Several barriers and gaps to securing stable and suitable accommodation have been identified locally by those working with offenders. Several case studies can also be found at **Appendix 1**

which seek to illustrate the complex work undertaken to obtain successful outcomes in regard to accommodation for offenders:-

Issue	Accommodation Barriers/Gaps
Prison Leavers	Prisoners have to rely on Hostel/Supported Accommodation as Private Landlord tenancies cannot be secured in time; Hostels do not like to pre-book bed spaces, so a vacancy can not be guaranteed until day before release. This creates stress and anxiety for the prisoner about where they will live on release and Landlords are reluctant to accept anyone coming straight out of prison and asking for background checks and disclosures.
Housing Benefit Changes & Finance	Change in Housing Benefit rates i.e.; the Shared Room Rate for under 35's makes it very difficult to access suitable accommodation; and Some offenders have little or no savings to secure a tenancy and do not hit the criteria for a Paper Bond.
Registered Provider (Housing Association)& Shared accommodation	Often shared accommodation available is unsuitable due to other residents and the area; Some adult offenders (age under 35) refuse to reside in shared accommodation; however their offence history can prevent them from obtaining a Registered Provider tenancy. We must also take into account that it is not appropriate for certain individuals to share properties with other vulnerable people; Offence history usually triggers an automatic ban when trying to access Registered Provider properties.
Hostel provision	Offenders can have unrealistic expectations of accommodation available. Currently there is only one suitable Adult Supported Accommodation in Sunderland (Salvation Army). If a person is refused a vacancy there, they have to rely on Private Hostels to provide accommodation (most of these hostels have very little support in place and cannot monitor or support drug/alcohol problems). We continue to develop our intelligence about those living in the hostels and their presenting issues. This is enabling us to develop our strategy to help address issues, with a view to reducing the number of private hostels in the city, particularly in the Sunnyside area.

Supported Accommodation	Interviews for Supported Accommodation (out of area) take months to come through. Offenders are not often sure of where to attend an interview, or not having funds available to travel to the interview; There is a lack of specialised Supported Accommodation for adult females; Supported Housing Providers are often particularly strict about allowing a person to apply again-not taking into account progress they have made (hopefully the Gateway will improve this problem); and Refusing to consider out-of-area hostel placements when all options have been exhausted in Sunderland,
Mental Health	Finding accommodation for people with significant mental health needs can be challenging. Landlords may not be tolerant of particular behaviours relating to their mental health, and may consider them to be too high risk despite extensive support being offered.
Offenders with 'high risk' offences	Difficulty finding accommodation for people with high risk offences i.e.; Arson, Sex Offences, Violent offences etc; and Lack of suitable intensive support out in the community for those who may get housed and remain chaotic.
Landlords	Landlords and private hostels will use and research any potential applicants via internet sites, resulting in immediate exclusions

Issue	Personal Barrier
Substance Use	Returning to drug/alcohol use immediately on release from prison; and Not addressing drug use within the prison and being released on high levels of methadone.
Finance	Not budgeting prison discharge grant well, and spending it immediately upon release; 'Starting from scratch'-being released with very few belongings. Having to start again and save for furniture, clothing etc; Benefits taking a long time to come through-lack of income leads to re-offending; Leaving numerous addresses with rent arrears; and Failing to address arrears which prevents them from being able to reapply for housing.
Transitions	Moving from the YOS into Probation and unable to cope with change in systems; Leaving Care cases sometimes have unrealistic expectations about accommodation available, and affordability is

	an issue when Leaving Care are no longer working with them.
Behaviour	Behaviour within Supported Accommodation (young people and adults). Poor behaviour leads to a cycle of evictions from various establishments; 'Sofa Surfing' between friends as exhausted all other accommodation options available to them; and Immediate return to known associates/peers.
Families	Offending creates problem for family tenancies which can result in eviction due to sons/daughters behaviour.

4. FUTURE ACTIONS

- 4.1 In recognition of the vital role accommodation plays in reducing re-offending, improvement activity has been highlighted within the Safer Sunderland Partnership Single Delivery Plan - Reducing Re-Offending Delivery Network Priorities 2012/13:-

Demonstrate increased successful outcomes around the accommodation pathway

- **Intelligence;** Gain a fuller understanding of the accommodation needs of offenders; identify gaps and develop a range of solutions to meet these needs
- **Support:** Ensure vulnerable offenders housing needs are met following the review of hostel provision in the city. Prioritise offenders released from custody, and support those living in hostels with substance misuse issues.
- **Support:** Ensure the Bail Assisted Support Scheme (BASS) liaises with the SSP around proposed accommodation for offenders
- **Enforcement:** Support HHAS in pursuing an additional licensing scheme for those properties that are 'hostel type' accommodation that do not fall within the mandatory licensing scheme.

5. RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 That Members note and comment on the information provided.

6. Background Papers

- Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders (Ministry of Justice 2010)
- Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012
- Improving Housing Outcomes for Offenders in the North East – Report for North East Reducing Re-offending Partnership Board (2011)
- Housing Offenders in the North East: A Good Practice Guide (2011)

- Safer Sunderland Partnership Single Delivery Plan – Reducing Re-offending Delivery Network Priorities 2012/13.

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Appendix 1

Case Study 1 – Mr M

Mr M was referred to the Access to Housing Team by the Probation Service, as it was established that he would be homeless on release from prison.

Mr M was 72 years old, and was subject to a 15 month prison sentence for a sexual offence against a child. He was due for release 2 months time from the initial referral.

Mr M was visited in prison by the Access to Housing Team, to provide pre-release support. He explained that prior to prison he had a 10 year tenancy with a local Registered Provider; however they had advised him to give up the tenancy when he went into prison, to prevent him from building up arrears. Mr M also explained that his offence was against his neighbour's child.

Mr M was extremely reluctant to consider any form of Hostel accommodation, stating that he needed his own flat for his release. He would have preferred to move back into his old property; however given the circumstances this was not appropriate. Mr M also had a number of health issues and mobility problems.

Contact was made with Mr M's Probation worker. She explained that he was barred from entering particular areas near his old home, to prevent him from having any contact with the victim. His family had completely disowned him, and all of his belongings were in storage.

Contact was made with the Manager of the Housing Association, and they confirmed that the victim had moved area. After some negotiations, they agreed that they would consider offering Mr M another property, in a different area, given his support needs.

A lot of restrictions were in place regarding area, and type of property most suitable for Mr M's mobility. There was also a specific time limit in place, as Mr M was due to be released from prison very soon.

Prior to release, a bungalow was identified that would be appropriate for Mr M, which was suitable for his mobility needs. Unfortunately there were a number of repairs to be completed on the property, and he could not move in on the day of release.

The Access to Housing Team made arrangements for Mr M to be placed in temporary accommodation, until the property became available.

Mr M expressed concerns that he had a lot of issues to deal with, such as his Pension claim, moving/setting up home etc. He felt that he could not cope with these issues alone. As such Mr M was referred to a tenancy 'floating support' service, to support him with these issues.

Mr M was supported by the Access to Housing Team to the Registered Provider's office, to sign for his tenancy. He expressed concern that the property had no wallpaper, and that his belongings could not be delivered from storage for another 3 days. As Mr M would have no furniture to use straight away, the Access to Housing Team agreed to fund his temporary accommodation placement until his furniture was delivered. This would enable Mr M to carry out any necessary cleaning/work on the bungalow before he moved in.

The Access to Housing Team also arranged for a Community Decorating service to visit his property, to offer a quote on redecorating the home.

Mr M moved into his property 3 weeks after his release date. Throughout the process regular contact was made with Mr M, his Probation worker, the Registered Provider, and also the Tenancy support service to ensure Mr M's move was a success.

Case Study 2 - Ms J

Ms J was referred to the Access to Housing Team by the Probation Service, as she required accommodation support.

An appointment was made with Ms J at a Probation Office, for her convenience. Ms J stated that she had been 'sofa surfing' for over a year, and required stable accommodation.

Ms J was 22 years old, and had 2 young children who permanently resided with her Mother. She did not have any contact rights at the time.

As Ms J had a number of outstanding support needs, including drug and alcohol issues, it was felt that a Supported Accommodation placement was most suitable for her needs.

Referrals were made to a number of providers, and Ms J was transported and supported to necessary housing interviews.

Ms J was immediately offered a placement with a female-only housing provider, and could move in immediately. Unfortunately Ms J repeatedly delayed her moving in date, and eventually chose not to accept the vacancy stating she did not want to live in that particular area.

At this point it was widely believed that she was residing with her ex-partner. Ms J was very reluctant to provide any address details as Children's Services were involved with her case, and they had concerns about her ex-partner's behaviour.

Regular contact was made with Ms J's Social Worker, to provide updates on her case.

Ms J then contacted the team again after the Christmas period, and explained that she was pregnant. At that point Ms J stated that she was temporarily staying with a friend in shared accommodation. She refused any temporary accommodation from the Access to Housing Team.

Due to her change in circumstances, Ms J was supported to apply to Ashkirk, which is a Family Supported Housing scheme, and she was accepted on to their waiting list for accommodation.

Ms J had started to disengage with services, and had failed to attend any Midwife appointments. The Access to Housing Team supported Ms J to the hospital, to ensure she attended an important scan appointment.

The team also encouraged Ms J to engage with her Social Worker, and liaised with her Probation worker as she was also in breach of her Community Order.

Ms J moved into one of Ashkirk's supported 'satellite' properties, which was a 2 bedroom flat that staff regularly visited to offer her support with her tenancy.

Unfortunately there were a number of concerns about Ms J's behaviour in the tenancy, and as a result she was then moved into a property that provided 24 hour staff support.

Throughout the case, the Access to Housing Team engaged with a number of professionals and support services to help Ms J address her needs. Consideration was also given to Ms J's housing preferences. Accommodation was secured that offered the best level of support to help her engage with services, and protect the health of the unborn child.

Case Study 3 - Mr A

Mr A was referred to the Access to Housing Team by a Shelter worker, who was based within the prison where Mr A was serving his sentence. Mr A was due for release in 3 months time, and would be homeless.

Mr A was 19 years old, and had a history of residing in a variety of Supported Housing placements, and Bed and Breakfast accommodation. There were concerns that his previous evictions may prevent him from obtaining suitable accommodation for his release date.

Mr A had recently recovered from drug and alcohol issues, and required a form of Supported Accommodation to ensure that necessary staff support was available to help him with his ongoing needs.

The Access to Housing Team contacted the local YMCA, which is a Supported Housing provider for young people that provides 24 hour staff support. Although Mr A had previously been turned down by the YMCA, we queried if they would reconsider him given the length of time that had passed.

The YMCA agreed to conduct a housing interview with Mr A prior to release. The Access to Housing Team made necessary arrangements via the Shelter worker to visit Mr A, and transported the YMCA to the prison for the interview.

Mr A's interview went very well, and he showed a level of maturity and progress since he was last seen by the YMCA.

The YMCA then conducted reference checks, and expressed concerns about Mr A's behaviour at a previous address. To ensure that Mr A was given a fair opportunity to access accommodation, the Access to Housing Team agreed to fund one weeks stay for Mr A at the YMCA in a trial bed. Mr A's behaviour would then be monitored during that week, and if his stay proved successful he would be offered a more permanent flat.

Mr A moved into the trial bed on day of release, and his behaviour was excellent during the trial period.

Mr A successfully moved into a more permanent flat with the YMCA, and has made good progress.

This level of forward planning ensured that Mr A did not face any housing difficulties for the day of release, and also gave him the opportunity to access accommodation that previously found him to be unsuitable.

Case Study 4 – Mr D

Mr D was initially referred to the Access to Housing Team by the Probation Service, as there were concerns that he may have problems with accommodation on release from prison.

Mr D was 29 years old, and had a history of serious offences including numerous Assaults, and a Sex Offence. Probation also advised that Mr D displayed some form of learning disability and could struggle to process information at times.

The team visited Mr D at the prison, and he explained that he had a Private Landlord tenancy prior to prison. His brother had taken over the tenancy, and he was unsure if he could return to the property.

The Access to Housing Team initially struggled to contact Mr D's brother, however after regular visits to the property we were able to speak to him. He confirmed that Mr D could return to the property, and his brother would be moving into the vacant flat above him.

On the day of release Mr D was informed by his family that there had been a fire in the flat, and the property was uninhabitable due to the level of damage. The fire had actually occurred a couple of weeks prior to his release; however the family had not informed any services that the accommodation was now unsuitable.

As a temporary measure, Mr D was accommodated at his Mother's home via the Probation Service. This placement was not ideal as his Mother looked after his teenage nephew, and given Mr D's offence history this had to be reported to Children's Services.

There were a number of obstacles in obtaining accommodation for Mr D. Mr D was not a suitable candidate for Hostel accommodation, as it was felt he could not cope in a shared home environment due to his support needs. Mr D could not afford a Private Landlord tenancy, as Housing Benefit rates had changed, and he would only be entitled to the 'Under 35's shared room' rate. As Mr D was not suitable for a shared property, this could not be considered. Mr D would also be excluded from most Registered Providers due to his offence history and recent time in prison.

Mr D was referred to the Sunderland Partnership Scheme (SunPas) for consideration. The SunPas scheme is a partnership with Gentoo, Probation, Access to Housing Team, and Youth Offending Service. The aim of SunPas is to help Offenders who would normally struggle to obtain accommodation, access accommodation with the right level of support.

Mr D's case was discussed at the SunPas panel. Since his release, he had shown excellent progress and was fully engaging with professional services to address his needs. Contact was made with Mr D's support workers, who provided references on his outstanding progress.

Mr D's case was considered suitable, and he is currently waiting to be allocated a property with Gentoo.