



Frontline agencies in partnership

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Dear Sir/Madam

Reducing Re-offending in London 2009-2011

Homeless Link is the national membership organisation for frontline homelessness agencies in England. Our member organisations include hostels, day centres, outreach and resettlement agencies, housing advice centres, youth projects, health projects, welfare rights groups, refuges, drug and alcohol services and church groups.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Reducing Re-offending in London consultation and the recognition given in the consultation document that stable, settled and suitable accommodation for offenders can reduce the risks of re-offending.

Research shows that ex-prisoners who are homeless upon release are twice as likely to re-offend as those with stable accommodation¹. Statistics also show the strong link between prison and homelessness. According to research, 30% of people released from prison will have nowhere to live² and a fifth of homelessness projects report that 50% or more of their clients are prison leavers.³ Homeless Link's response is focussed on Section 6 of the consultation document, and specifically the proposals outlined in the Accommodation Pathway.

¹ ODPM and Home Office (2005) *Guide to Housing and Housing Related Support Options for Offenders and People at Risk of Offending*. London: ODPM/Home Office

² 352. Niven, S. and Stewart, D. (2005) Resettlement outcomes on release from prison, Home Office Findings 248, London: Home Office

³ Homeless Link (2008) Survey of Needs and Provision, London: Homeless Link

Strategic Commissioning

We welcome the focus given to local delivery and commissioning of services to meet the accommodation needs of offenders.

Homelessness providers work with large numbers of people leaving prison and play a significant role in reducing reoffending. This is particularly the case for those individuals who have served only short sentences and have no links to probation.

The expertise and skills of homelessness sector providers in working with those with multiple needs makes them well placed to do this job and they contribute to criminal justice outcomes as well as housing related issues.

It is vital that the 2009-11 Reducing Reoffending Strategy considers how it can support the provision of these services. One way would be to explicitly support local areas to make best use of the new commissioning opportunities provided by Local Area Agreements. Over the past 12 months Homeless Link has been supporting homelessness agencies to build up an evidence base and show Local Strategic Partnerships how they meet specific LAA targets (including those related to offending such as NI18 and NI143). Our online toolkit enables organisations to profile their work against their LAA and use this to engage with potential partners and commissioners in their local area.

In the following section we make some suggestions about the kind of cross-cutting services that could be delivered.

The Accommodation Pathway (ref. question 6)

Homeless Link welcomes the priorities outlined in the Accommodation Pathway. We would highlight several points:

- **A successful Accommodation Pathway requires early interventions**

We welcome the proposal to develop and enhance advice services on housing and homelessness to offenders in custody and the community. Research suggests that current housing advice services in prison cannot meet demand, with many prisoners not receiving adequate or appropriate support⁴. Homeless Link strongly believes that a successful Accommodation Pathway must start as early as possible. The provision of adequate housing assessments and advice to address the accommodation needs of prisoners in custody and early on in their sentence can better ensure these are met on release.

⁴ Yvette Hartfree, Chris Dearden and Elspeth Pound (2008) *High hopes: Supporting ex-prisoners in their lives after prison*, Research Report No 509: Department for Work and Pensions, p.40

We particularly welcome the recognition that advice should be provided to offenders in the community. We would urge, however, for the new strategy to explicitly address the needs of offenders on short sentences as currently these individuals are not eligible for probation services and are often omitted from support on release. Evidence suggests there is a higher re-offending rate amongst those serving short sentences⁵, so it is essential the housing needs of this group are addressed.

- **Improving housing options for offenders on release**

We welcome the commitment to improve housing outcomes for prisoners, including the private rented sector. However, while the PRS offers opportunities to house those leaving prison, we would highlight that this form of accommodation is not accessible or appropriate to some people, particularly the most vulnerable with high needs. In addition, PRS schemes must take into account the barriers which can prevent accessibility- such as the impact of the LHA, engagement of landlords, and providing tenable rent deposit schemes.

It is therefore important that other suitable accommodation is provided to those on release. The provision of assessment beds, with appropriate support, is one example of how the immediate accommodation needs of those leaving prison with no fixed address could be met to reduce the risks of these people sleeping rough. It is also vital that there are sufficient services to support ex-offenders through the resettlement process - for example individuals often require support with arranging benefits claims and making referrals to accommodation providers.

Voluntary sector agencies currently provide a range of services which have been shown to achieve immediate accommodation outcomes for prisoners on release (for example Through the Gate schemes) and these services need to be supported.

Importantly, as outlined above, the wider homelessness sector also has a role to play and must be supported in the work that it does. We welcome the reference given to groups of offenders with specific needs, for example drug using offenders, within the strategic priorities of the accommodation pathway. There remains a lack of appropriate accommodation for some groups and the strategy must support the commissioning of accommodation to better respond to people's needs in order to reduce the risks of them losing their tenancies. Opportunities for cross-borough commissioning should be explored in areas where there is insufficient local demand from a specific client group for some types of specialist provision.

⁵ Shelter (2007) Time to change: Housing and related support for short-sentence prisoners, London: Shelter

- **The proposed Pathways need to be better linked up**

Many offenders requiring supported accommodation are likely to have needs which do not fit discretely into just one of the Pathways outlined in the consultation document. For example, a high number of prisoners with a housing need experience mental health problems⁶, drug issues, or are likely to require access to ETE services.

The Pathways outlined must recognise the multiple and often complex needs of offenders and be better integrated to ensure these needs are met. The basis for nearly every pathway will be suitable accommodation.

For example the provision of ETE services as outlined in the paper could be integrated into the accommodation pathway through pre-tenancy and independent living skills training, delivered in a hostel for homeless people; our Clean Break report shows how drug treatment outcomes can be better met if suitable accommodation is provided alongside; and the success of the recent Communities and Local Government Places of Change programme demonstrates the support that can be delivered to people who are housed in suitable accommodation with a strong staff team focussed on helping people move on with their lives.

With the right support and commissioning frameworks the homelessness sector can help link up the pathways described in the consultation document and this should be a focus of the Strategy.

- **Building on opportunities for cross-sector working**

While we welcome the emphasis given to improving links between Local Authorities and prisons, more needs to be done to develop joint working practices across all stakeholders involved with this client group.

The targets under PSA 16 highlights the importance of sectors working together to support the needs of socially excluded adults. Under the 'Making Every Adult Matter' coalition, Homeless Link is working with Clinks, Drugscope and Mind across the drug, criminal justice and mental health sectors to seek further solutions to supporting those who have multiple needs.

We would support more measures in the Strategy which facilitate sharing of practice at a borough level between all relevant partners and agencies- for example through reviewing the role of the Accommodation Pathway Group - and at a commissioning level which recognises the role homelessness providers can play in meeting the needs of this group.

⁶ Revolving Doors agency found that 49% of prisoners with mental health problems had no fixed address on leaving prison, Revolving Doors Agency (2002) Where do they go: Housing Mental Health and leaving prison. London: Revolving Doors.

Conclusion

While we welcome the inclusion of an Accommodation Pathway, we feel it needs to be better integrated with the strategy's other proposals. We have also outlined the valuable role homelessness agencies can play in meeting both housing and criminal justice related outcomes for offenders, and would welcome further opportunities for more cross-cutting commissioning to enable this to happen.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Helen Mathie', written in a cursive style.

Helen Mathie
Policy Projects Officer
Homeless Link