



## **West Berkshire Council Prevention Officer**

In Feb 2023 West Berkshire Council received funding from the Rough Sleeping Initiative for a Rough Sleeper Prevention Officer to exclusively work with both with people being released from prison and those discharged from hospital. The post is based within the RSI team and works closely with Housing Options. This case study focuses primarily on the work with people leaving prison.

The aim of the post was to address a selection of challenges including clients being released from prison with complex homeless cases sometimes presenting to the Council late on a Friday afternoon with little or no notice. In some cases clients had no prevention work undertaken in advance of their release or discharge and, if not found priority need, could be forced to sleep rough. In other cases, clients chose not to attend the offices as they had low expectation of housing needs being met and instead disengaged from support. In addition people were presenting with a high level of mental health and other support needs that the broader team were not trained to support.

The prevention officer aims to reach potential clients as quickly as possible and do the prevention work that previously hadn't taken place including undertaking housing assessments. The officer is trained to complete housing assessments meaning that things can be put into place ready for release. They are also able to coordinate with other support agencies to access the services that are needed and also provide insight into the person's situation that was previously lacking.

The post-holder has been able to undertake a range of work that has greatly improved the situation both for people facing homelessness and for colleagues at the local authority. The officer has played a key role in encouraging officers to complete the Duty to Refer early in the pre-release process to enable the Prevention Officer to visit people facing homelessness prior to release. The Prevention Officer is then able to engage with people while they are still in custody and begin tackling barriers to accessing housing such as obtaining ID. Where possible housing assessments can also be undertaken prior to release from prison which can enable them to take preventative actions prior to release. Where it is not possible to contact the client prior to release, in some cases the officer can provide 1 night's discretionary accommodation to allow assessments to be completed the following day. This

is funded by the RSI and booked by liaising with the Housing Operations team. The officer is able to provide flexible and out of office appointments to help engagement in certain circumstances. There is also the option of using RSI funding to find customised solutions for people who might otherwise disengage.

The work involves working closely with colleagues across sectors. In particular engaging with the Prisoner Release Units has led to increasingly open channels of communication. It also requires a close working relationship with probation with whom it's essential to share information prior to release to support with assessing housing needs such as risk assessments and medical history whilst in custody. Drug and alcohol services work jointly with the officer supporting people on release and attending housing drop-in sessions. The police also engage on multiple levels depending on the level of risk to prevent reoffending. This can include the neighbourhood police teams as well as MAPPA and IOM.

The outcomes have included an increase in clients being offered suitable accommodation on release, an increase in engagement following release and a greater level of trust with the professional and better outcomes for other clients as a benefit of networking with partner agencies. There has also been a positive impact for other housing options staff who now have fewer complex cases presenting at short notice. Due to late notifications of releases or other limitations on visiting, last minute presentations do still occur but the dedicated prevention officer post provides enables staff to seek support and advice.

There has been a great deal of learning. Key to the success of the work is starting prevention work early which enables building a connection with the client early on so the fears of housing on release are minimised. The ability to provide discretionary accommodation on release to allow sufficient assessments to be completed has also been hugely beneficial at times. This is made possible by the funding coming from RSI allowing access to a different budget to mainstream housing options. Working with probation to access Approved Premises and CAS3 accommodation has also been a huge help to the prevention work.