

Housing Rights

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Policy Response

A response to the Prisons 2020 Discussion Document

September 2017

when everyone has a **home**

Introduction

Housing Rights is the leading provider of specialist housing advice in Northern Ireland, with over 50 years' experience of advising, supporting and representing clients on housing issues.

Research has consistently shown a clear and strong link between homelessness and re-offending.ⁱ In Northern Ireland, 42.5% of those leaving custody will re-offend within one yearⁱⁱ, with 55.8% of this group re-offending within the initial three months.ⁱⁱⁱ Many of these repeat offenders will have complex needs including mental health issues, addictions or learning difficulties, and in the absence of specialist intervention these individuals will remain chronically homeless. A recent report by the UK Parliament Work & Pensions Committee found that if individuals on release from prison received minimum requirements for resettlement (defined as a safe place to sleep from the day of release; access to enough money to meet basic needs; a sense of hope for the future; and active links to other services relevant to other needs), they are more likely to take steps to reduce their risk of reoffending.^{iv}

For this reason, Housing Rights currently delivers a number of projects working specifically with prisoners and prisoners on release, with the overall aim of preventing homelessness, reducing reoffending and supporting people back into independent living:

- Our **Housing Advice in Prisons** project delivers housing advice to prisoners across the three Northern Ireland prisons, and trains “peer adviser” prisoners to deliver initial housing advice within custody.
- Our **Beyond the Gate** project works with those prisoners with the most complex needs on release, and aims to prevent homelessness by ensuring that these clients are linked in with the support they need to transition back into independent living.
- Our **Community Housing Advice Partnership** works with front-line advice agencies across Northern Ireland. CHAP advisers provide specialist housing advice and training to generalist and specialist advice agencies across Northern Ireland, including agencies dealing with prisoners on release; we therefore empower agencies across the country to work effectively for this client group.

Given this experience, Housing Rights appreciates the importance of appropriate and sustainable housing and resettlement, as a basis for consequent rehabilitation, and the importance of this in meeting the core aim of the Prisons 2020 strategy: *“to make the community safer by supporting people in our care to change and to reduce their risk of re-offending when they return to the community.”* Housing Rights is therefore pleased to respond to this consultation.

Contextual factors

In developing and delivering on the Prisons 2020 strategy, Housing Rights would encourage the Prisons Service to consider the following contextual factors:

- **Universal Credit.** The gradual introduction of Universal Credit across Northern Ireland, beginning in Limavady area on 27th September 2017, will pose a significant external challenge to the resettlement and rehabilitation of prisoners on release. Key barriers which may face those applying for Universal Credit on release include the 6-week wait for initial payment, and the consequent risks of accumulating debts or arrears in this time; requirements for verification of identity, which have the potential to pose specific issues for those on release from custody, who may not have any eligible ID; and the increased conditionalities which claimants must meet in order to receive their benefit. Housing Rights welcomes the Prisons Service's active engagement with the Department for Communities, Housing Rights and others, to consider and develop specific arrangements for prisoners which aim to alleviate some of the worst potential impacts on the prisoner client group. Housing Rights would encourage the Prisons Service to continue this constructive and co-operative work as Universal Credit rolls out.
- **Homelessness Strategy 2017-2022.** Housing Rights notes the current NIHE Homelessness Strategy which, like Prisons 2020, follows the structure of the draft Programme for Government and is outcomes-focussed. The Strategy includes the aim of "ensuring a cross-departmental and interagency approach to ending homelessness." Housing Rights would therefore encourage the Prisons Service to further consider how it can best interact with NIHE and other Departments and agencies relevant to addressing homelessness, particularly given the clear and strong links between homelessness and re-offending detailed above.
- **Increasing prevalence of Housing First model.** "Housing First" is a support model aimed primarily at chronically homeless individuals/households, which emphasises the necessity of secure and decent housing as an anchor around which other relevant support services can be provided.

During delivery of the Housing Advice in Prisons project, Housing Rights advisers identified a group of chronically homeless households who exhibited a continuous pattern of homelessness on release and consequent reoffending. This led to the commissioning of 2012 research by University of York and Policis^v, which found that the private rented sector could be used effectively to meet the needs of the most vulnerable homeless people, if a "Housing First" model accompanied by multi-disciplinary and person-centred support services was delivered.

This research informed the development of Housing Rights' own Beyond the Gate project. This project is aimed at those prisoners on release who have the most complex and intensive needs, and focusses on securing accommodation for these clients, and consequently establishing the initial support networks to assist these clients with their resettlement. Housing Rights would encourage the Prisons Service to consider expansion of this model of housing support for prisoners on release who have particularly complex support needs.

- **Review of Allocations Policy.** At the time of writing, the detail of the forthcoming Department for Communities review of social housing allocations is not known. However, it is highly likely that changes to allocations policy will have implications for individuals on release from custody. Housing Rights would therefore encourage the Prisons Service to take these proposals into consideration over the course of the Prisons 2020 strategy.

NI Prisons Service: Resettlement & rehabilitation

Housing Rights believes that, at the most basic level, effective resettlement leads to rehabilitation. In our work delivering Housing Advice in Prisons and the Beyond the Gate project, Housing Rights' work is initially focussed on effective and sustainable resettlement, as we believe that this resettlement is a necessary precursor to full rehabilitation and prevention of re-offending.

Currently, there are many examples of good practice within the Prisons Service – and in partnerships between the Prisons Service and other agencies – which represent sustained improvement in promoting resettlement and rehabilitation:

- **Prisoner Development Units.** Housing Rights feels that the development and operation of PDUs across the prisons – and the involvement and funding of external specialist partners including Housing Rights – have delivered positive outcomes for many prisoners. The general focus on rehabilitation which PDUs embody is highly constructive and positive, and the work of the Prisons Service and partner voluntary agencies is intrinsic to this.
- **Role of “peer advisers.”** Housing Rights has trained prisoners to be “peer advisers” and offer initial advice and signposting to prisoners approaching release. This work is highly valuable, both to prisoners approaching release who have access to initial information and advice in advance of release, and to the peers themselves, who gain skills and knowledge which can assist in their own rehabilitation upon release, and can also lead to community placement opportunities for these peers on release.

There are areas, however, where the Prisons Service could improve further on its achievement of resettlement and rehabilitation for prisoners on release:

- **Consistency of practice.** Housing Rights advisers have extensive experience of good practice in relation to rehabilitation and resettlement each of the three prisons: for example, in Hydebank Wood College, advisers have been permitted to take clients to view potential homes in advance of release. Whilst acknowledging that the different locations, due to their prisoner populations, may have different levels of flexibility, Housing Rights would encourage the Prisons Service to consider how instances of flexibility and good practice and creative thinking that assists resettlement can be proactively encouraged across all institutions.
- **Remand prisoners' access to resettlement and rehabilitation services.** In the experience of Housing Rights advisers, it can often be the case that remand prisoners can be precluded from accessing some of the key resettlement/rehabilitation services which are available to sentenced prisoners. In the absence of a defined release date, remand prisoners – who are occasionally detained for significant lengths of time – have no date to “work towards” in terms of the development or delivery of specific services.

Housing Rights has had clients who have spent significant time on remand, and are then either found innocent or released on the basis of time already served: in these instances, the client can exit custody with little or no engagement with key resettlement and rehabilitation services, with significant negative impacts on their

ability to transition back to independent living. Housing Rights would encourage the Prisons Service to consider how best to ensure that those remand prisoners who are held for substantial periods of time are better able to access these key services.

- **Outcomes-based funding of external partners.** Housing Rights would encourage the Prisons Service to continue development of commissioning and funding external partners on an outcomes basis.

Outcomes-based delivery and monitoring is currently employed by Housing Rights; we have developed a “Theory of Change” which precisely outlines the impact our prisons advice will seek to have, and will be undertaking an impact analysis of our work on this basis in 2017.¹ Delivering and monitoring services on the basis of outcomes and impact is, however, vital to ensure that resources demonstrably make a positive impact in the resettlement and rehabilitation of prisoners.

¹ See page 7 below for further detail.

NI Prisons Service: Transition from custody to community

In discussing the role of the Prisons Service in supporting people's transition from custody to community, Housing Rights feels it is important to emphasise that this is never purely a Prisons Service responsibility: numerous stakeholders across the public and voluntary sectors will have a role to play.

Given the significance of bodies other than the Prisons Service, Housing Rights would encourage the Prisons Service to consider further development of co-operative working arrangements:

- **Housing Advice in Prisons protocol.** The Housing Advice in Prisons Protocol – led by the Housing Executive and co-developed and signed by the Prisons Service, Housing Rights, Council for the Homeless, NIFHA, the Probation Board and NIACRO – is an excellent example of good practice in public and voluntary partners effectively and co-operatively supporting people's transition from custody to the community. The shared development and delivery of this protocol means accountability is shared by the signatories, whilst there are also clearly defined outcomes which the protocol seeks to achieve. This protocol is currently under review to ensure it responds effectively to emerging challenges, including the roll-out of Universal Credit. This protocol received a CIH Highly Commended Award as an example of "Working Together" in 2017. The Prisons Service may wish to consider utilising a similar model of co-design and accountability in other areas relevant to prisoners on release, for example in relation to health.
- In addition to this, the **ongoing work between the Prisons Service, Housing Rights and the NIHE Causeway "Housing Solutions" team** is a positive partnership, which significant potential to deliver positive outcomes for clients, if this work is effectively undertaken.
- **Information-sharing protocols with relevant/"trusted" partners.** Housing Rights appreciates that issues relating to confidentiality and Data Protection will be a factor in this regard; however, there is significant potential for the Prisons Service to ease the transition for individuals if there are practically effective protocols, possibly on a "trusted partner" basis with (for instance) Universal Credit, Health & Social Care Trusts, Social Services and others.

In considering what the Prisons Service could "do differently to better support people's transition", it is also important to acknowledge what is currently working well, and/or examples of good practice which could be considered for further development or expansion:

- **Beyond the Gate.** As detailed earlier, Beyond the Gate works with those individuals on release who are identified as having particularly complex needs, and works to establish stable accommodation for these clients, and consequently establish initial key support networks to ensure that these clients' resettlement is successful and sustainable. This model of working is naturally resource-intensive and can

occasionally require dual working, and is thus limited in numerical scope; typically two staff will deal with between 70 and 80 clients per year.

- **Peer advisers.** The training of “peer advisers” as part of the Housing Advice in Prisons project is an excellent working example of good practice in supporting transition from custody to community. Peers offer an initial point of contact for prisoners approaching release, and the initial transition; in addition to this, the peers themselves gain excellent knowledge and skills which are valuable upon their own release, and can lead to increased employability and placement prospects. One peer adviser who was in custody for 6 years has recently completed Housing Rights’ “Housing Advice Training Programme” accredited qualification, and several other prisoners on release have volunteered for Housing Rights. In our view, there is potential for this model to be valuably expanded to increase the scope and impact, both upon prisoners receiving assistance from the peers, and upon the peers themselves; consideration could also be given to training peer advisers in areas additional to housing.

Outcomes to be provided by voluntary & community sector, to assist with resettlement and rehabilitation

Housing Rights feels that provision of specialist advice in housing can deliver outcomes which contribute to successful and sustainable resettlement of individuals, which in turn can serve as a precursor to effective rehabilitation. Through our Housing Advice in Prisons and Beyond the Gate projects, Housing Rights advises and support clients through their release and initial resettlement and transition.

Housing Rights has recently undertaken specific work to clearly establish the outcomes which these projects seek to achieve, and the data indicators which will demonstrate the extent to which these are being achieved, by developing a “Theory of Change” for each of the Housing Advice in Prisons and Beyond the Gate projects. These are included as an appendix to this response, with the “Ultimate Goals” – the impact each project aims to have on clients – listed as follows:

| ULTIMATE GOALS | |
|---|---|
| Housing Advice in Prisons | Beyond the Gate |
| Clients are able to sustain their tenancy or existing accommodation | Clients are able to sustain their accommodation |
| Clients are prevented from homelessness | Clients are prevented from homelessness |
| Clients are better able to meet their housing costs | Clients are better able to meet their housing costs |
| Clients feel less stressed about their housing situation | Clients feel they have a better quality of life |
| | Clients live in better quality housing |

Consequent to these outcomes, Housing Rights is reviewing our data collection procedures to ensure that progress towards these ultimate goals for clients is accurately measured. In a broader sense, Housing Rights is establishing an Impact Reference Group with the overall purpose of “maximising the impact of Housing Rights’ work”, by reviewing data collection procedures in relation to impact, and explore how Housing Rights’ outcomes link to Programme for Government and Departmental objectives. It is envisioned that funders will have a vital role to play in this Reference Group, and Housing Rights would be eager to have the Prisons Service as members of this group.

Both within the context of Housing Rights and more broadly, by using an outcomes model to establish the need for voluntary sector input, commission this input and finally monitor and evaluate this, the Prisons Service can ensure that any resource committed can be clearly tracked to identifiable impacts and outcomes for clients.

Appendix 1 Housing Rights Theory of Change: Housing Advice in Prisons

| <i>Inputs</i> | <i>Activities</i> | <i>Outputs</i> | <i>Outcomes</i> | <i>Outcomes' Indicators</i> | <i>Ultimate Goals</i> | <i>Ultimate Goal Indicators</i> | <i>HR impact</i> | <i>PfG Outcome</i> |
|--|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| HR Prison staff and supervision staff Project running costs | Specialist advice on housing issues | No. of HR prison staff cases | <i>Prisons clients:</i> have the information they need to make informed and appropriate housing decisions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of Prison cases with a positive housing outcome % of Prison clients who understand their rights and responsibilities better | <i>Prisons clients:</i> are able to sustain their tenancy/ existing accom. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of Prison clients supported to sustain existing accommodation whilst in custody | People in Northern Ireland live in safe, suitable and affordable homes which improve/ maintain their wellbeing | We care for others + we help those in need. We have a safe community where we respect the law and each other. |
| | Liaise with other agencies on clients' behalf | No. of peer cases | know where to go for help in the future | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of Prison clients who feel they now know how to seek help with future housing problems | are prevented from homelessness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of Prison clients with P1E outcome % of Prisons clients for whom appropriate accom. is secured | | |
| | Refer to other agencies/peers | No. of referrals made to other support agencies | access accommodation upon release | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of Prison clients who access suitable accommodation | are better able to meet their housing costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of Prison clients who feel advice they received has improved their finances % of Prison clients with improved financial situation | | |
| | Receive referrals from other agencies | | | | | | | |
| | Apply agreed protocol to referrals received | No. of induction info. sessions delivered | | | | | | |
| | Recruit, train and supervise peer volunteers | | <i>Peer advisers:</i> Peer advisers are more employable | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of peers who achieve a qualification % of peers who go into further volunteering/ education/employment/ training | feel less stressed about their housing situation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of Prison clients who feel advice they received helped to reduce their level of stress | | |
| | Hold induction sessions for all incoming prisoners | | Peer advisers feel more confident | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of peers who report an increase in their self-esteem | | | | |
| | Train prison staff in housing advice | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | |

Appendix 2 Housing Rights Theory of Change: Beyond the Gate

| <i>Inputs</i> | <i>Activities</i> | <i>Outputs</i> | <i>Outcomes</i> | <i>Outcomes' Indicators</i> | <i>Ultimate Goals</i> | <i>Ultimate Goal Indicators</i> | <i>HR impact</i> | <i>PfG Outcome</i> | |
|--|--|--|--|---|---|---|---|--|---|
| BTG staff and supervision staff Project running costs | Specialist advice on housing issues | Number of BTG cases each year | <i>BTG clients:</i> | | <i>BTG clients:</i> | | People in Northern Ireland live in safe, suitable and affordable homes which improve/maintain their wellbeing | We care for others + we help those in need. We have a safe community where we respect the law and each other. | |
| | Build relationship w/ client | Number of referrals made to other agencies | have the info they need to make informed + appropriate housing decisions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of cases with positive housing outcome • % of BTG clients who understand their rights + responsibilities better | are able to sustain their accom. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of BTG clients who sustain accom. for >3 mths • % of BTG clients who sustain accom. for >6 mths | | | |
| | Liaise w/ other agencies on clients' behalf | Number of clients engaged with an appropriate agency at case close | know where to go for help in the future | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of BTG clients who feel they now know how to seek help with future housing problems • % of BTG clients who are engaged with support agencies at case closure | are prevented from homelessness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of cases w/ P1E outcome • % of BTG clients for whom appropriate accom. upon release has been secured | | | |
| | Refer to other agencies | | | | live in better quality housing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of BTG clients whose quality of housing has improved • % of BTG clients who report advice helped to improve the quality of their housing | | | |
| | Receive referrals from other agencies | | | | are better able to meet their housing costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of BTG clients who feel advice improved their finances • % of BTG clients with improved financial situation | | | |
| | Apply agreed protocols to referrals received | | | know how to access accommodation upon release from prison | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of BTG clients access accom. upon release | feel they have a better quality of life | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of BTG clients who feel advice they received helped reduce their level of stress • % of BTG clients who have improved WEMWBS score at case close |
| | Support engagement w/ other support agencies | | | | | | | | |
| Develop effective working relationships w/ other support agencies/accom. providers | | | | | | | | | |

ⁱ All Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness (2017) 'Homelessness prevention for care leavers, prison leavers and survivors of domestic violence'

ⁱⁱ Department of Justice (2016) 'Adult and Youth Reoffending in Northern Ireland (2013/14 Cohort)', p3

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p6

^{iv} Work & Pensions Committee (2017) 'Support for ex-offenders', para 44-45. See also HM Inspectorate of Probation & HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2016) 'An Inspection of Through the Gate Resettlement Services for Short-Term Prisoners'

^v Ellison A, Pleace N & Hanvey E (2012) 'Meeting the housing needs of vulnerable homeless people in the private rented sector in Northern Ireland'