

A sense of place: A study of accessing housing for women exiting prison – housing first not housing last

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Research paper 2016/02

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to research the barriers in finding homes experienced by women leaving prison and to explore the benefits of women-only housing provision through a locally driven initiative 'Housing First' (HF). The specific objectives were to:

- Research the barriers experienced by women in prison accessing homes.
- Explore current support frameworks from custody to community for housing needs.

- Identify and challenge post supervision term solutions against the need for long-term housing for women.
- Evidence the emotional impact of the fears that women in custody experience about where they will live on release.
- Examine and evidence the use of hostels for women exiting custody.
- Test the benefits of a HF home to reduce social and financial inequalities.

The study focused on twelve women who received a direct pathway for housing following their release from prison.

Findings

The study revealed, through the women's narratives, how a targeted focus on a need for a home improved the lives of, and produced positive outcomes for, women leaving prison.

The majority of participants reported negative input from resettlement teams in prison and were unaware of the changes to probation as a result of the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms introduced in 2015.

Most responses to accommodation needs had previously been of a temporary nature, which did not address the long-term resettlement need.

Some accommodation providers place conditions on tenants, such as being free from substance abuse, but this study demonstrated that suitable housing can help women to begin to reduce substance abuse and to move forward.

The case studies in the report demonstrate that a joined-up approach from a multi-agency team responding to needs, both prior to leaving prison and afterwards, could provide a useful mapping tool for future practice.

None of the twelve participants within the housing project were subject to breaches of post-prison licence conditions, as contact from probation officers and responsible officers was consistent and home visits were undertaken.

Participants reported that, in having a home, they were treated as members of society in control of their own lives. They were able to identify as women and mothers, rather than as ex-offenders. For women to achieve their sense of place, there has to be a different understanding of what 'resettlement' means.

Recommendations

- Women should be allocated a dedicated housing adviser at first point of entry into the criminal justice system. A dedicated housing adviser as part of the Liaison and Diversion Service would be able to implement early interventions and action resettlement planning.
- Pre-sentence reports (PSRs) should identify and record the housing status of people. PSRs are vital to identify the challenges faced by women including their child care responsibilities and arrangements.
- The Basic Custody Screening Tools (BCST) should identify any issues with housing and trigger action that should be used at resettlement planning stage. Where a tenancy is unavoidably surrendered while a person is in custody, the final BCST should identify this and form part of the resettlement planning.
- Further consideration should be made by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) working with trusts, charities and other providers in the sector to establish a fully evaluated pilot project using the HF model.
- A national housing strategy should be developed, led by the MoJ with cross-organisational responsibilities from the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government, probation trusts, PRS-accredited associations and voluntary sector organisations.
- Funding should be ring-fenced for women-only housing provision.
- To improve knowledge of housing need and provision, and to clarify responsibilities, the National Probation Service should commission training on the issue for all resettlement staff.
- The routine use of expensive hostel accommodation to meet long-term housing need should be reduced and replaced by the provision of more suitable, economically viable housing provision.