

Prisoner Pathways

**Evaluation of homelessness services
to adults in the secure estate**

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Background

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 reformed homelessness law in Wales and placed a stronger duty on local authorities to prevent homelessness.

These prevention duties applied to all people at risk of homelessness. However, the duties to secure accommodation only applied to people who were regarded as being in priority need.

Since 2001, prison leavers in Wales had automatically been given priority need status.

However, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 removed this status. Instead, prison leavers had to be assessed as “*vulnerable as a result of their time in custody*” - or had to meet any of the other criteria for being in priority need.

It was anticipated that approximately 70% of those prisoners who had previously been entitled to a housing duty would no longer be eligible for those duties (Welsh Local Government Association, 2014).

Several organisations raised concerns about this change and the impact it would have on both prison leavers and communities.

Development of the Pathway

As a result of concerns about the potential effects of this change, the then Minister for Housing and Regeneration established the Prisoner Accommodation Resettlement Working Group (PARWG) to explore processes to ensure prison leavers' needs would still be adequately addressed.

PARWG developed 'the National Pathway for Homelessness Services to Children, Young People and Adults in the Secure Estate'.

The Pathway aimed to prevent prison leavers from becoming homeless, thereby improving their resettlement into society and reducing their risk of reoffending.

The Pathway seeks to consolidate existing processes for providing services to prisoners with housing related needs and describes the systems for managing communication and relations between the agencies providing relevant services

Key aspects of the National Pathway include designated tasks allocated to particular agencies at key points in a prisoner's journey through custody and back into the community.

Evaluation of the Adult Pathway

The evaluation was conducted by Wrexham Glyndŵr University and the University of Salford.

The research objectives were:

- To assess how the changes to legislative duties towards those leaving custody have been implemented by Local Authorities, prisons and probation providers both in prison and in the community.
- To undertake an initial assessment of the impact of these changes on ex-offenders.
- Identify areas good practice and areas for improvement.

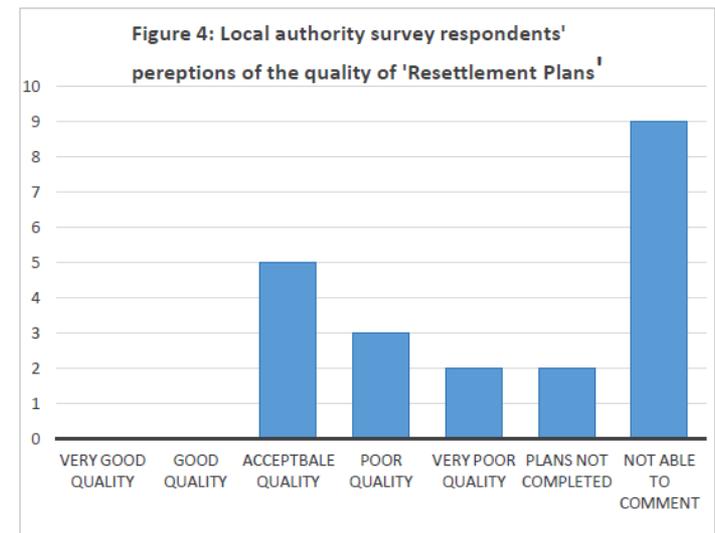
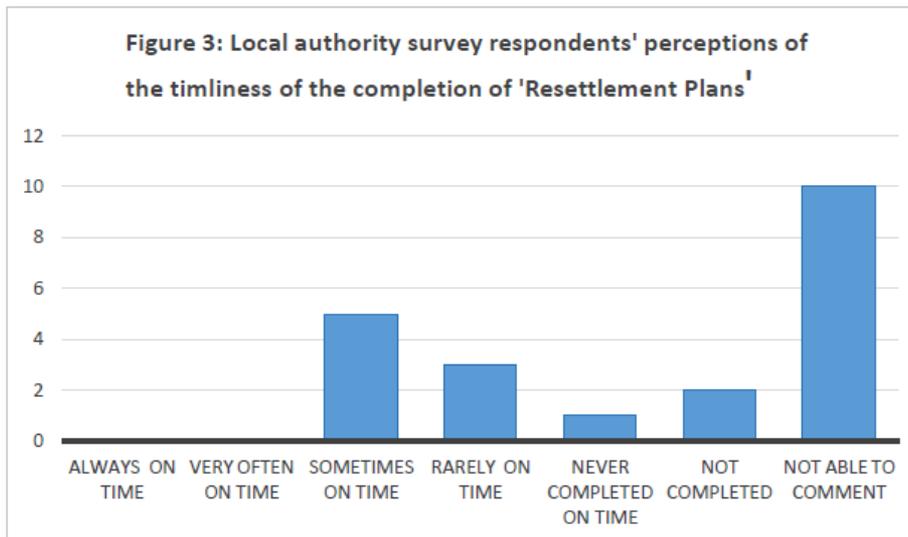
The study involved 189 respondents and 211 interviews across five stakeholder groups:

- Local authority stakeholders
- Prison based stakeholders
- Community based stakeholders
- Prison leaver respondents
- Responsible officers

Findings: Reception

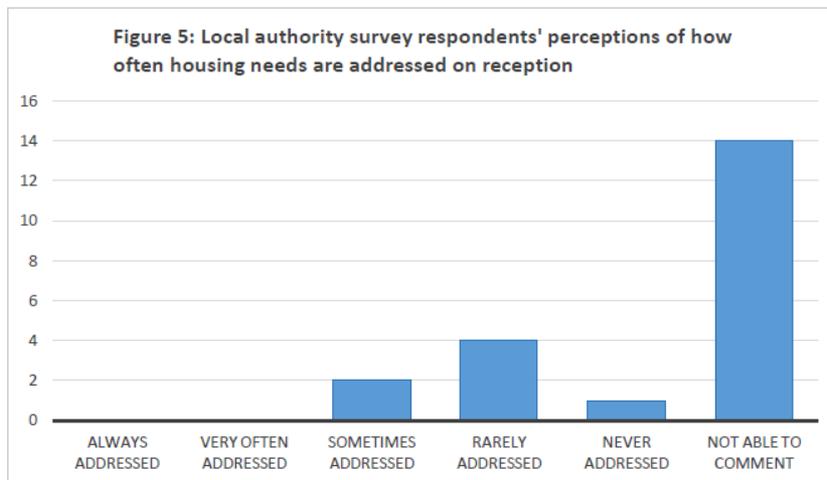
Helping prisoners maintain accommodation on reception into prison was assessed as being important and associated with positive outcomes for prison leavers on release.

Local authority stakeholders, however, were frequently unable to assess and evaluate the range and quality of work that went on to prevent homelessness when people were sentenced to custody. Those that could, tended to be sceptical as to whether the necessary activities were taking place.



Findings: Reception

It is clearly problematic that local authorities are unsighted on how well, if at all, assessment and prevention related activities are undertaken in prisons. Welsh Government and individual local authorities are not in a position to quality assure and develop practices with prisoners who may face or experience homelessness without access to data on the extent, range and outcome of activities undertaken with them.



“It is very rare that any housing plans are shared with this Authority, so the only conclusion I can reach is that either plans are not being made following reception or that they are made, but not referred/reported.” (LA stakeholder)

“It could be that they are doing something that were not aware of but then when we are not aware of it, it might look like nothing is being done from our perspective, because no one is feeding back and going “this month this amount of people came into prison and this number of tenancies were saved as a result” and “they didn’t come to you because they were dealt with by us.” (LA stakeholder)

Findings: Reception

Prison based stakeholders reported that activity to prevent homelessness usually took the form of helping new prisoners apply for housing benefit or close down tenancies if they were going to be in custody for longer than the benefit could be paid:

There were very few references to prison based staff engaging in more varied preventative practices such as mediation with local authorities, families, private landlords or hostel staff about maintaining tenancies or accessing discretionary payments where a housing benefit shortfall might occur.

“We’re trying to maintain tenancies whilst they are in here so that involves county court action, making sure housing benefit claims are in place and liaising with landlords trying to sort out when some tenancies, unfortunately, have to be closed down.” (Prison based stakeholder)

“She contacted the council, I enquired first when I came in, one of the officers from Shelter [PLC] came over to see me ..., and I asked to sort my rent out and ...and she sorted it out for me.” (Prison leaver respondent)

“They just said ‘have you got an address on the outside’ and I just said ‘I was renting a place’, they said ‘are you likely to go back there?’ I said ‘perhaps but I am not too sure on the circumstances’ and I never heard anything back on that.” (Prison leaver respondent).

Findings: Reception

Some prison based stakeholders and Responsible Officers suggested not everyone who needed a housing intervention on reception would receive such a service.

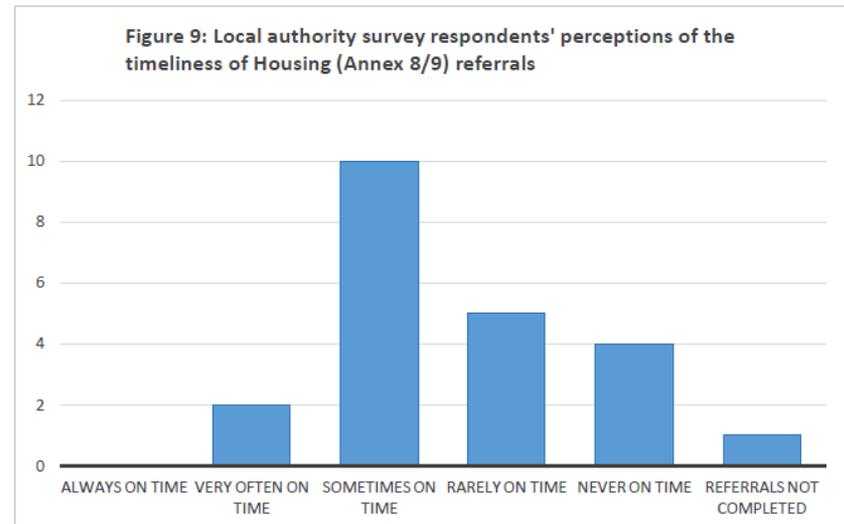
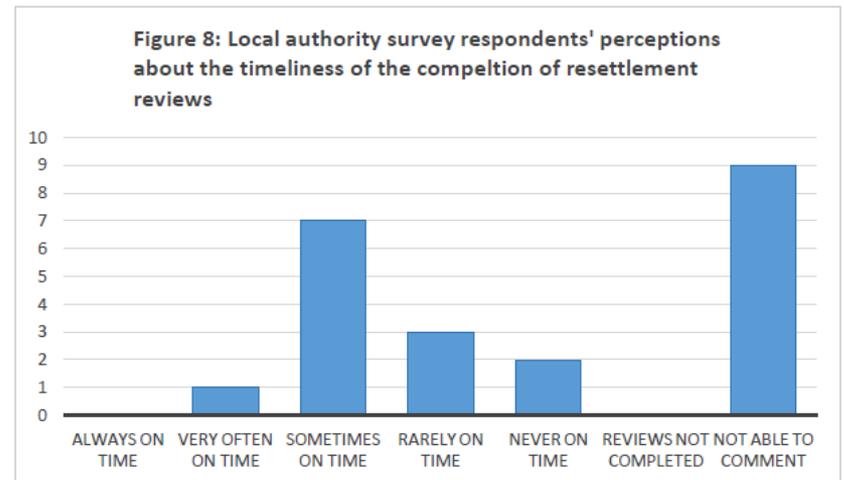
Suggested reasons included:

- Assessments were not being completed to a high standard.
- Initial reception into custody was often on remand – so prisoners were asked about their accommodation status at a time when they might be unclear about their future.
- Resettlement Plan was not automatically re-done after each remand hearing or following sentence.
- Some prison based stakeholders doubted that those new to prisons were in a position to communicate effectively about their circumstances.
- Issues with staffing capacity.
- Practical barriers such as PLC staff not having access to prison keys - this made arranging to see relevant prisoners difficult.

Resettlement

Local authority stakeholders suggested that housing referrals were usually submitted late, giving them insufficient time to engage with prison leavers prior to release. This tendency was described as particularly acute in relation to referrals from prisons dealing with a large number of reception and resettlement cases

“We are having to chase people constantly for information, we are getting the Annex 8 sometimes 2 weeks before discharge, sometimes a day before discharge and we have had them the day of discharge. We are still getting same day presentations.” (Local authority stakeholder)

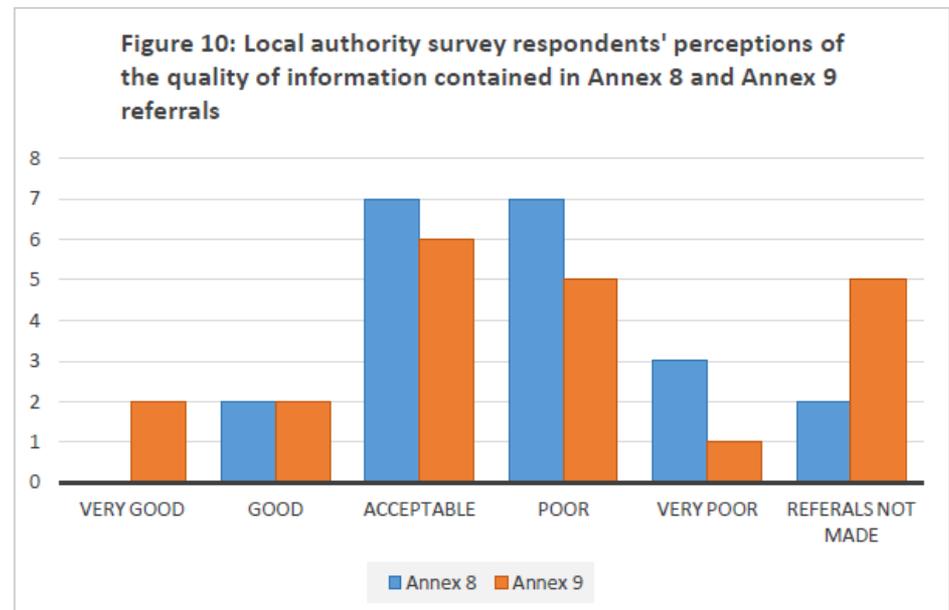


Resettlement

A number of LA respondents regarded the quality of the information in the referrals as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Suggested reasons for poor quality included:

- Forms being completed by prisoners or by one of their peers
- Not enough time to properly assess a person's need during short sentences
- Lack of alignment with other processes e.g. requests for licence conditions
- Up-to-date information not being available

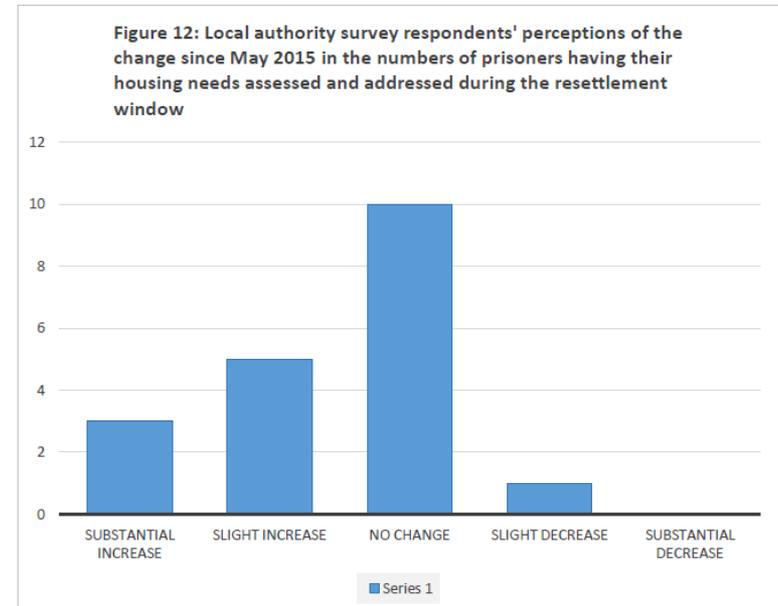
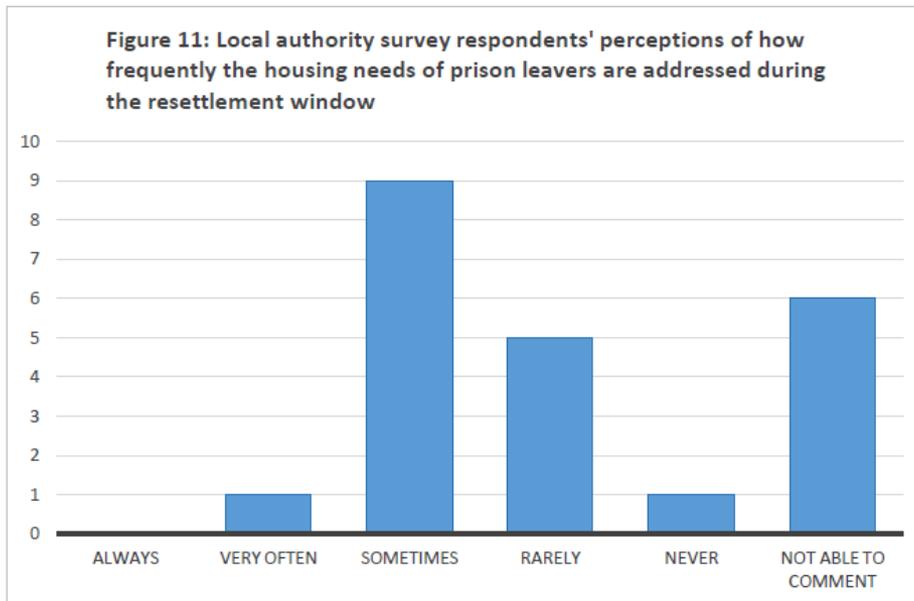
“Forms are sometimes completed very basic and not giving us as a local authority much information. Many of the forms are completed and say the same thing.” (Local authority stakeholder)



Resettlement

When asked about how frequently the housing needs of prison leavers are assessed during the resettlement window, the majority of LA respondents selected 'sometimes', 'rarely' or 'not able to comment'.

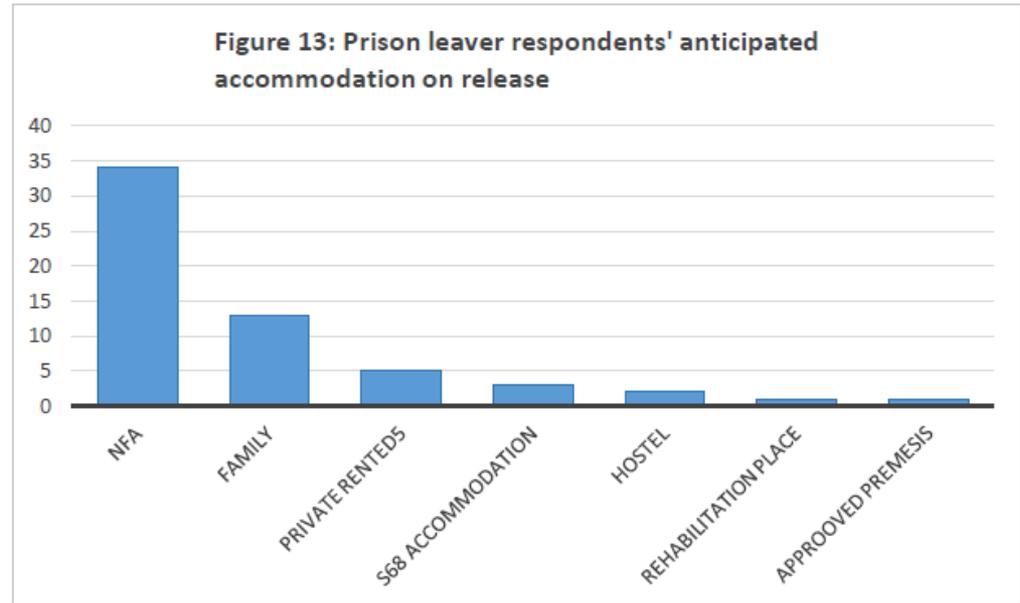
When asked about how the numbers of prisoners being assessed had changed since May 2015, 10 of the 19 respondents said 'no change'. However, 8 respondents perceived there to be a 'slight' or 'substantial' increase.



Resettlement

People's experiences of resettlement support were varied, and 34 of the 59 prison leavers who were due for release expected to have no fixed address.

*“There was a fantastic resettlement officer ...and we just joined efforts and we fought really hard and she got a xxxx place. They are like gold dust, she was really lucky to have it, she settled in so well, she's starting to integrate into the community, but the support she has from is phenomenal, just excellent.”
(Prison leaver respondent)*



*“I'm trying to keep in touch with everyone all the time and let them know, I have phoned this person and say “this is “what's happening on this date” and “I'll let you know blah blah blah”. There's no communications, basically you're just being left on that wing just thinking “I'm going to be homeless they haven't sorted anything out for me.”
(Prison leaver respondent)*

Assessment of vulnerability

Local authority survey respondents perceived that a link existed between serving a lengthy sentence, institutionalisation and subsequent vulnerability. However, many of the prison leaver respondents interviewed at wave 1 were serving shorter sentences and presented themselves to researchers as being institutionalised and physically frail, mentally disturbed or substance dependent. Very few of these prisoners suggested that they had been given priority need status.

Local authority stakeholders suggested that being designated 'vulnerable' primarily rested on the ability to provide written medical evidence of physical or mental ill-health. This is despite the fact part 7 of the National Pathway places expectations that undiagnosed as well as diagnosed mental and physical health needs are taken into account when considering post release services.

However, LAs also described difficulties in accessing the appropriate information to make a judgement on vulnerability.

Quite a few, certainly the majority of the people I work with have got mental health issues, yet when we're flagging this up to the Local authority, it doesn't really seem to make much of a difference (Responsible Officer).

Findings: Resettlement

A number of barriers were raised in the stakeholder interviews, including:

- Prison based stakeholders were critical of the LA homelessness services provided to prison leavers prior to their release - referrals were not assertively acted upon and so prison leavers were frequently being released as homeless.
- Some LA activity regarding reasonable steps appeared to be generic/standard – instead of meeting specific needs of person
- However, LA stakeholders described practical difficulties in producing personal housing plans as they had no access to prisoners before release
- Prison leaver respondents were denied access to the means to become active in finding solutions to their own homelessness e.g. information, phone, newspapers
- Some references were made to courses that used to be available to prison leavers and related to 'being a good tenant', but they had been discontinued.
- Other barriers to resettlement included landlords being reluctant to hold accommodation for someone approaching release (due to loss of rent) and landlords being reluctant to house ex-offenders.

Findings: Post-release

Some LAs understood release as a change in circumstances and prompted a new assessment – others interpret it as the duty has been delivered.

Some community based stakeholders referred to prison leavers being required to attend housing offices on the day of release and if they failed to do that, their cases would be discharged.

Considerable variation between Local Authorities in terms of the types of accommodation available e.g.: hostels, core and cluster models and floating support with varying staffing levels and cover arrangements.

All local authority stakeholders referred to prisoners potentially having help to access the PRS and some access to bond and advance deposit schemes.

Two local authorities provided temporary accommodation to all prisoners for 14 days where the need arose. That is to say they had access to a shared facility that only housed ex-offenders. Another referred to 'floor space'.

In areas where such provision was absent, and the alternative was street homelessness or using night shelters.

Release on a Friday led to problems accessing housing departments.

Findings: Post-release

Of the 22 prison leaver respondents who were interviewed 15 referred to having some contact with the local authority housing team after they were released from custody.

9 of the prison leaver respondents said a housing organisation/helping agency had also become involved with them and helped them find accommodation.

7 were steered into a hostel and then four onwards into supported accommodation and one into the private rented sector. Another prison leaver respondent was helped to access a bond to secure private rented housing.

Two prison leaver respondents specifically referred to being helped by the local authority by being placed in temporary accommodation. Three, however, suggested that the only help they were offered was in the form of a tent and sleeping bag.

Particularly difficult for people who had multiple experiences of homelessness, tenancy failure and imprisonment. They were prison leavers who seemed caught in a revolving door of serving short prison sentences followed by relatively brief periods in the community (often on the streets, sofa surfing or in hostels) before they reoffend and are recalled or imprisoned once again.

Women prison leavers

Professional stakeholders considered that engagement with female prison leavers was more assertive than with male prison leavers. This was associated with many female prison leavers having parenting or care duties, or vulnerabilities conferring priority need status upon a greater proportion of them.

Fewer female prison leavers were interviewed but those that were interviewed narrated histories involving more entrenched substance misuse problems and exclusion from properties

Whilst engagement with female prison leaver respondents seemed more fulsome, services to meet their needs were described as more limited.

Female prison leaver respondents often perceived themselves 'at risk' in a system that catered primarily for men.

There are no Approved Premises for females in south Wales, and only places for two females in north Wales.

*"I was in a hostel a couple of years back, I was put in the position where there was all men in the hostel, and probation put me in a vulnerable place."
(Prison leaver respondent)*

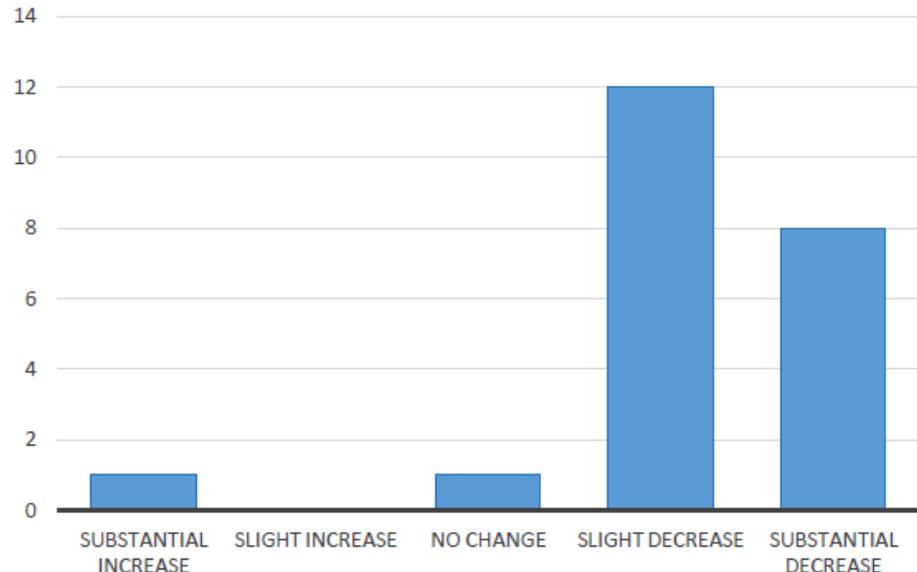
Priority need

Almost all local authority survey respondents considered that the removal of automatic priority need status had led to reductions in the number of prisoners eligible for temporary accommodation

Nonetheless, local authority stakeholders were mostly supportive of the decision to remove prisoners' automatic priority need status.

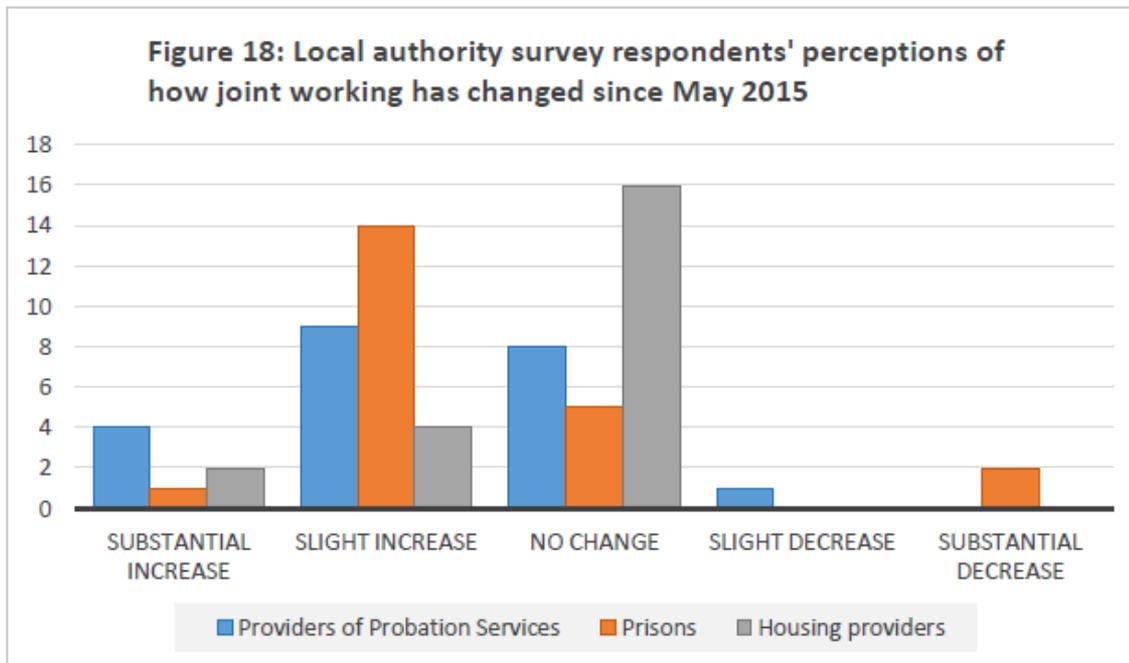
In contrast to this, prison based stakeholders and Responsible Officers were critical of the removal of automatic priority need status for prison leavers.

Figure 16: Local authority survey respondents' perceptions of the impact removing automatic priority need status has had on the numbers of prison leavers eligible for temporary accommodation in their area.



Information sharing

Professional stakeholders referred to problems with information flows between agencies. Nonetheless, they also referred to recent improvements in joint working between agencies engaging with prison leavers



*“Generally the feedback is information sharing services has got a lot better. The way in which Local Authorities and gate services are talking together they are much more closely linked now and the way in which they are working within the prison service before release is now working much better.”
(Local authority stakeholder).*

Good practice

In some local authority areas, adaptations had been made to the National Pathway some of which were funded from the Transitional Fund or Supporting People grant. Such adaptations were associated with perceptions of more positive outcomes for prison leavers.

- Prisoner Release Empowerment Project staff attend prisons to engage with prison leavers after it had been assessed they were not eligible for temporary accommodation on release. They provide support in finding accommodation and associated tasks such as sourcing bonds, furniture or references.
- Justice Cymru is a Wales wide initiative which embeds housing workers within CRC teams with a remit to take referrals and help offenders find and/or deal with accommodation issues.
- Single Point of Contact (SPOC) for prison leavers within a local authority housing team encouraged NPS staff to contact them in advance of an offender attending court and, potentially, being sentenced to custody.
- A housing SPOC meets with probation staff on a monthly basis to identify relevant cases due for release.
- An officer with the NPS had been designated the SPOC for housing issues. This officer received advance notifications from one prison of all prisoners from their area due to be released and who had been seen by the resettlement team.

Conclusions

Support for the Pathway in principle as a step in the right direction.

Issues with implementation, particularly communication and information sharing.

Issues with capacity of some organisations to meet demand along the pathway was understood to be limited, particularly CRCs and TTG providers

Local authority housing teams had more to do in terms of moving beyond a procedural and administrative approach to practice and engaging more assertively with prison leavers to help them secure accommodation.

Mixed views about priority need status.

Particular challenges for women prison leavers and people who have had multiple experiences of homelessness, prison and substance misuse.

The report includes a series of recommendations for:

- The Welsh Government
- Ministry of Justice and HMPPS
- Wales CRC and NPS Wales
- Local authorities