



Third Sector Research Centre

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Accommodation for ex-offenders: Third sector housing advice and provision

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Abstract

Links between homelessness and offending are well-established in literature with about a third of offenders being without a home either before or after imprisonment. Housing has been recognised as one of the key factors that can reduce re-offending and is one of the seven Reducing Re-Offending Pathways established by the Reducing Re-Offending National Action Plan in 2004. The identification of housing as one of the Pathways and the move towards partnership working with third sector organisations (TSOs) to reduce re-offending have led to a number of initiatives which involve housing-related TSOs. These organisations are typically contracted into prisons to provide housing advice and support, or provide offenders with access to temporary accommodation in short-stay hostels and Approved Premises. Despite the involvement of housing-TSOs, offenders and ex-offenders still face numerous challenges when trying to secure accommodation. The prescribed criteria for assessing homelessness, local nomination and allocation policies and the presence of a criminal and prison record are all factors which can delay or prevent provision of housing for ex-offenders. This paper draws on a qualitative study in eight prisons and one probation area and a short survey of 680 offenders to examine the role of the third sector in assisting offenders and ex-offenders to find suitable accommodation. The results show that there have been several positive developments in the last ten years, with many prisons now having a dedicated housing advisor and important links with TSOs and housing providers. There remain, however, numerous barriers to effective housing advice and provision. Factors include: lack of available housing stock; difficulties of partnership working, where partners differ on whether they view housing for ex-offenders with urgency; restrictions on the types of offenders likely to be prioritised and local exclusion policies. The paper also discusses the limitations of recent policies to increase the use of the private rented sector in housing homeless people, and the limitations of Social Impact bonds and Payment by Results. It emphasises the need for a more transparent housing priority assessment system in increasing housing opportunities for marginalised groups, such as short-sentenced prisoners and young offenders, but notes that provisions for greater flexibility, discretion and conditionality in social housing lettings following the Localism Act move things in precisely the opposite direction.

Keywords

Third sector; housing; resettlement; offender; prison; probation.

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Introduction

A growing body of evidence has demonstrated a close link between homelessness, crime and imprisonment (Homeless Link, 2010; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002, Seymour, 2006). Housing has been identified as one of the key factors that can reduce re-offending rates, by as much as 20 per cent (Home Office, 2001), as it can provide the stability necessary to enable individuals to address their offending behaviour and to access a range of other services such as a GP and community mental health services and to gain employment (CASS, 2011; Crisis, 2011). The vital role that housing plays in reducing recidivism was recognised in a landmark report by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in 2002 on 'Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners'. This report led to the establishment of Seven Reducing Re-Offending Pathways (one of which is housing), formulated by the Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan (Home Office, 2004), to guide service provision to offenders. Since that time, various initiatives and policies have been introduced in an attempt to improve housing advice and provision to offenders, particularly those released from prison, including working in partnership with third sector organisations (TSOs) such as housing associations (HAs). This paper draws on a qualitative interview study of the role of third sector organisations in criminal justice and a short survey of 680 offenders to examine the role of the third sector in assisting offenders and ex-offenders to find suitable accommodation. It explores the barriers to such assistance including definitions and interpretations of priority need and the operation of partnership working between local authorities, criminal justice and third sector agencies. The effects of recent spending cuts on third sector housing services for offenders are also discussed.

Background

The SEU (2002) report detailed the extent and nature of housing problems among offenders and ex-offenders. It identified that:

- as many as a third of prisoners lose their housing on imprisonment
- around a third (35 per cent) of prisoners have nowhere to stay on release
- short-term and repeat prisoners are more likely to be homeless when they leave custody

There are two key reasons why prisoners tend to lose their housing while in prison. First, they often fail to communicate with their landlord or the bank and this often leads to the loss of their tenancy or mortgage. Second, Housing Benefit rules allow prisoners to retain the right to benefits only if their sentence is not longer than 13 weeks, unless they are on remand, resulting in many prisoners losing their accommodation and being left to secure alternative provision on release (SEU, 2002). Prevention of the loss of housing on imprisonment is therefore an important part of the answer to prisoner homelessness, as nearly 70 per cent of offenders are in permanent accommodation prior to incarceration (SEU, 2002). Ideally, offenders should be assessed for housing needs just after reception to prison to enable short-term prisoners and those on remand to keep the accommodation they have and to improve communication between tenants/owners and housing/mortgage providers.

The improved offender resettlement agenda (MoJ/NOMS, 2008a) and the move towards partnership working with third sector organisations to reduce re-offending (MoJ, 2008; MoJ/NOMS, 2008a; MoJ/NOMS, 2008b) have led to a number of initiatives in the criminal justice system involving housing-related TSOs. Such schemes involve both specialist TSOs that work with offenders and ex-offenders, such as Stonham and more general organisations, such as Shelter. In the majority of prison establishments in England and Wales, TSOs are contracted to provide housing advisors whose role is to help offenders keep their accommodation while in prison, assist them in securing housing on release and liaise with landlords, banks and building societies, local housing authorities, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Benefits Agency (BA). Housing TSOs are involved in the Social Impact Bonds scheme at HMP Peterborough¹ and some manage various forms of temporary accommodation, including short-stay hostels and Approved Premises, which provide support to offenders and run offending behaviour programmes. HAs and charities may also provide their own housing for this client group. Finally, some TSOs provide floating support services to help ex-offenders sustain a tenancy and provide advice and information and education and employment training (St Mungo's, 2011).

In addition to work with criminal justice agencies, housing TSOs working with offenders are also required to collaborate with local authorities (LAs) and other housing providers. Local homelessness strategies, introduced by the Homelessness Act (2002) were intended as primary frameworks for the development of partnership working between LAs, third sector agencies and housing providers (Housing Act, 1996, Part 7; Homelessness Act, 2002, Part 4). Many local strategies recognise that ex-offenders may have multiple needs which need to be addressed as part of a comprehensive support package and this may involve working with local criminal justice agencies in several different ways (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006a). Examples of such partnership working include offering support to homeless people who are in custody in police stations and prisons, providing advice and support services for ex-offender clients and those currently in prison, or sharing information with other agencies on risk of harm, potential homelessness and vulnerability.

Difficulties securing housing provision on release from custody

Despite the considerable involvement of the third sector in providing housing advice and support to offenders and ex-offenders, securing housing provision remains very challenging. Due to their criminal record and prison history, ex-prisoners may be automatically excluded from some private rental properties and even housing association and supported accommodation provision (Homeless Link, 2011). A large proportion of offenders are also unsuccessful in accessing public or social housing. When assessing an application by a person who claims to be homeless, local authorities must consider several key factors including their eligibility, whether they are homeless or threatened with homelessness within 28 days, are intentionally or unintentionally homeless, have a local connection with the area and are deemed to be in priority need (Homelessness Act, 2002). Based on the

¹ This 'payment-by-result' scheme operates at HMP Peterborough and is run by Social Finance. Using investment from private and charitable sources, 3,000 short-term prisoners are to receive 'through-the-gate' support services from TSOs, including those involved in housing such as St Giles Trust and the YMCA. Investors will receive recompense if recidivism among the prison leavers falls by 7.5 per cent or more (Social Finance, 2010).

candidate's overall assessment score, the councils will make a 'homeless decision'. If they agree that a person is homeless and eligible for housing, the council then owes them a statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation until suitable 'settled' housing becomes available, which may be found either by the applicant or by the local authority. There are a number of reasons why ex-offenders are not judged to be eligible for a full duty of homelessness.

First, offenders are frequently not deemed to be in 'priority need' for housing. Several categories of priority need are defined in the Homelessness Act (2002) including pregnant women, people with dependent children and those who are vulnerable due to various contributing factors including physical and mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems and having been in custody (UK Parliament, 2002). However, it is a matter of the LA's judgement as to whether or not the circumstance of having been in prison makes an ex-prisoner vulnerable and therefore in priority need.

Although priority need includes those with dependent children, women offenders with children may be ineligible for housing if they fall into the situation of not having their children with them when they apply for housing (if, for example, they were being looked after by local authorities while the mother is in prison) and are not able to get them back unless they can demonstrate that they have appropriate accommodation. Women without children living with them are unlikely to be considered in priority need (HM Prison Service & Women and Young People's Group, 2006). This, along with the fact that a female prisoner's family is considerably more likely to lose the family home when she goes to prison (as she is more likely to be a single mother), may explain why as many as 60 per cent of women offenders have no accommodation to go to on release (HM Prison Service Custody to Work Unit, 2003), despite the fact that accommodation can have a significant bearing on the woman's ability to re-establish links with her family, more specifically, her children.

Second, intentional homelessness can also prevent ex-offenders from being owed a homelessness duty, if, for example, they had previously failed to inform their landlord of their custodial sentence, or it is argued that they became intentionally homeless by virtue of committing an offence and being sent to prison. Research conducted by Shelter has found that it is becoming increasingly difficult for homeless people to get a homeless decision by a local authority. The number of households which have been assessed by the local authorities as 'intentionally homeless' and therefore ineligible for social housing has doubled since 1997, most likely in an attempt to reduce the pressure on housing providers (Grannum, 2005).

Third, the need for a local connection should also not be overlooked, as ex-offenders are unlikely to be eligible for accommodation in an area other than the one from which they come, even if imprisoned in another area, unless they can make a strong enough case as to why they wish to leave their area of origin (Homelessness Act, 2002). Some ex-offenders may struggle to show strong evidence of any local connections if they have been homeless for a long time prior to imprisonment, or have moved around considerably. Finally, under section 160A of the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities may decide that an applicant can be treated as ineligible for housing if they or a member of their household has been found guilty of unacceptable behaviour, a clause which could be used to exclude ex-offenders from housing provision.

Guidance to local authorities on homelessness has, since the early 2000s, highlighted the importance of inter-agency partnerships to tackle the causes of homelessness and the inclusion of criminal justice agencies in such partnerships. For example a good practice handbook published by Department for Communities and Local Government in 2001 in preparation for the 2002 Act duty to produce local homelessness strategies, includes a section (6.9) covering 'prisoners and other people in contact with the criminal justice system'. It advises close joint working with the probation service, support to people in custody, court diversion schemes and outreach advice and support and case work in prisons and nominated local authority officers to liaise with prisons and the probation service (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2001). Evidence presented later in this paper suggests that these good intentions have not been universally effective and that the impact of TSOs working with ex-offenders has been limited as a result.

Nomination and allocation

If an LA agrees that they owe an ex-offender the full homelessness duty, but they have no suitable accommodation, they then nominate the applicant to housing providers, including third sector organisations (TSOs) such as HAs. However, several organisational factors may prevent LAs or their representatives from nominating ex-offenders to be housed. First, housing for offenders is often given little priority within Local Area Agreements (LAAs) (Homeless Link, 2009); although local homelessness strategies should cover ex-offenders (DCLG, 2001). For example, a study of accommodation provision for ex-prisoners in the South West found that, due to a low likelihood of being accepted, few offenders made an application for housing to their local authorities (Maguire et al., 2007).

Second, some local authorities seek to impose local lettings policies in their areas (for instance in order to reduce the number of people with a record of anti-social behaviour) leading to some or all groups of offenders being less likely to be eligible for housing in that particular area (Pawson and Mullins, 2003).

Even if they are nominated, ex-offenders still face several difficulties in obtaining social housing. First, the high demand for social housing and long waiting lists mean that even if deemed to be in priority need, there is no guarantee that an applicant will get a social housing place (Crisis, 2011). There are only a finite number of places and one may not be available in the right area at the right time. Second, the allocation policies and criteria for different housing providers will vary according to the goals of the organisations and can be markedly different from the criteria for the 'homeless decision'. Although some organisations such as Stonham specialise in providing accommodation for ex-offenders and may choose to house those who are not statutorily homeless if this fulfils their charitable objectives, others do not and have been found to apply 'unfair and restrictive allocations policies' (Shelter, 2006:16), which may include the exclusion of offenders from their provision. In sum, homeless decisions do not automatically ensure access to housing.

Finally, although evidence in this area is limited, there is some suggestion that poor communication between different public sector institutions such as prison and probation services, Job Centre Plus, Department for Work and Pensions, the Benefits Agency and LAs can lead to considerable delays in finding housing for offenders and even in the loss of potential housing opportunities (Homeless Link,

2009). This also suggests that the impact of local homelessness strategies (DCLG, 2001) has been patchy and their intended impacts have not been fully realised.

How can ex-offenders access accommodation?

Prisoners who do get an opportunity to be housed are likely to then negotiate access via two dominant systems: the Choice-based Lettings model and the Pathways model. The former is now the main route into mainstream 'general needs' social housing in most parts of the country, while the latter is of more limited extent and concerns access to support and housing options mainly for single homeless people.

The Choice-based Lettings (CBL) model was designed to integrate access to social housing in LA areas (DCLG, 2007) and avoid unfair, bureaucratic allocation of social housing among housing providers and councils. Through the CBL scheme tenants have a greater role in deciding where they wish to live and when they want to move (Brown et al., 2003). Under the scheme candidates nominated by LAs become registered applicants who can bid for the homes, which are typically provided by housing associations (HAs) and advertised by the local council and housing associations. Three-quarters of these housing associations have seen ex-prisoners in their service and 10 per cent cater almost exclusively for this population (Homeless Link, 2010). However, there are several reasons why offenders may fail to obtain housing through the CBL scheme. Although HAs have long had a duty to co-operate with local authorities to meet housing need (Withers and Randolph, 1994), there have also long been contests around 'exclusions', independent allocations policies and access to support packages for vulnerable tenants (Pawson and Mullins, 2003; Office of the Deputy Minister, 2004). HAs which are financially independent from LAs or registered charities are more likely to exercise greater freedom away from the prescribed CBL criteria, and assert their own priorities more strongly and allocate their properties independently in order to meet their charitable objectives. This means that certain groups of people can be excluded from the allocation process, despite receiving a nomination from an LA. For example, people who have complex/multiple needs and lack a suitable support package in health and social care are less likely to be considered by HAs, and offenders typically tend to fall in this category. Offenders are, however, also vulnerable to exclusion due to poor previous tenancy records (for example, if an offender failed to inform the landlord that they were in prison), rent arrears, or a history of anti-social behaviour (Pawson and Mullins, 2003).

Pathways programmes have been developed in many areas to provide assistance to people who have multiple needs such as mental health/drug misuse needs to gain access to appropriate support alongside housing (Homeless Link, 2011). The model is typically aimed at people who are undergoing treatment or receiving aftercare in the community such as those who have left prison or residential rehabilitation, or young offenders. The Supporting People programme came into operation in 2003 and aims to provide a single framework for the delivery of housing related support through commissioned services from third sector and housing associations (DCLG, 2006a). Through this programme, people can receive a wide range of support and services, such as treatment for substance misuse or employment training, in a hostel or in sheltered housing or other supported accommodation. Ideally they will be helped to live independently and to sustain their own tenancy at the end of their pathway (DCLG, 2006a). No blanket exclusions to accessing services, for example, for people with a record of

arson or sexual offences, are permitted and access to the service must be based on an individual risk assessment process linked to the eligibility criteria (Nottinghamshire Supporting People, 2010).

If accepted on to a Pathways programme, an ex-offender is likely to be offered a short-term place at an Approved Premises² before then being offered supported accommodation with 24-hour access. From there they are likely to move to accommodation with low-level support and then helped to sustain a tenancy of their own through resettlement support and crisis intervention (Nottinghamshire Supporting People, 2010). Typical providers of housing under the Pathway model are TSOs and HAs, including those who work specifically with offenders, such as St Giles Trust or Stonham and those who do not, such as Place for People. Third sector organisations such as Nacro and St Mungo's also offer advice and support within the Pathways model, as well as emergency shelters and temporary accommodation. However, the recent removal of the ring-fencing of the budget for Supporting People (DCLG, 2008) could significantly limit its remit in the future. This may lead to a loss or redirection of funding and to some particularly excluded client groups, such as offenders, missing out. Supporting People had increasingly funded floating support services, for people living in 'ordinary' social housing, private sector accommodation and private homes (Nottinghamshire Supporting People, 2010). This form of support is also threatened by the end of ring-fencing and subsequent budget cuts are likely to affect ex-offenders who may only be able to get the much-needed support in Approved Premises for a very short time, until moved to more permanent alternatives.

Private rented sector

Due to the shortage of social housing, it has been argued that the private rented sector may be the best option for many ex-offenders, provided that they are able to obtain high quality, sustainable accommodation and are properly supported (Crisis, 2011). There are, however, several noteworthy factors that can prevent ex-prisoners from accessing private sector rental housing. First, some landlords do not accept Housing Benefit claimants and the delays that local authorities can take to process the benefit claims can exacerbate this reluctance (SEU, 2002; Shelter, 2008). Second, the majority of private landlords require a deposit and a month's rent in advance, which is often well beyond the means of a person recently released from prison. On certain occasions, it is possible for ex-prisoners to get part of the necessary funds from the local authorities, the Probation Service or third sector agencies, but these are often not sufficient to cover the entire amount that is required. Furthermore, private rented accommodation can be of poor quality, particularly at the lower end of the scale, with little incentive for landlords to undertake repairs. Along with harassment from other tenants and inadequate regulation of houses in multiple occupation, this can result in such tenancies becoming unsustainable, leading to further homelessness (Shelter, 2008). The suitability of the private rented sector is therefore questionable, particularly for those who have addictions or who do not have

² Approved Premises (formerly known as probation hostels) are those approved under Section 13 of the Offender Management Act 2007. The term applies to 100 former Probation and Bail Hostels, providing over 2,000 bed spaces, managed by the Probation Service or by third sector organisations. They are mainly aimed at offenders requiring intensive supervision and support, such as certain categories of serious offenders or long-term prisoners. The majority of ex-prisoners, however, do not fit these criteria which is why this option is often considered the last resort (SEU, 2002).

any resettlement support. Such individuals may not be able to negotiate with landlords and are most likely to end up in the poorest quality accommodation (Shelter, 2008).

Private rental landlords and agencies may also be reluctant to take on people with a history of anti-social behaviour without a support needs assessment and package to help them live independently in the community (Pawson and Mullins, 2003). Private sector assistance in housing ex-offenders is likely to be successful only if ways are devised of 'encouraging good landlords with decent properties to take on the extra risks of accepting offenders as tenants' (Maguire et al., 2007:8).

Recent policy and financial context

The housing options for ex-offenders are currently subject to a number of further changes reflecting reductions in public expenditure, reforms in access to housing and homelessness provisions in the Localism Act 2012, welfare reforms affecting entitlement to and levels of housing benefit (Mullins, 2012) and recent funding cuts to the criminal justice system. For example the Localism Act provides greater flexibility for authorities to exclude new applicants and ends the requirement to consider tenants and new applicants on the same basis. It also enables authorities to meet their homelessness duties by housing applicants in the private sector even where this is against their wishes. Housing benefit caps for single room rents have been extended to households under 35, making it potentially difficult for ex-offenders to secure affordable accommodation. Furthermore, recent funding cuts to the criminal justice system may also reduce prison-based housing advice and provision.

Gaps in research

Despite the increased involvement of the third sector in helping offenders and ex-offenders to secure accommodation and the contribution made by Local Homelessness Strategies, Pathway and the CBL schemes to improving opportunities for housing of ex-offenders, much of the research on offenders and homelessness (for example, Ramsay, 1986; Carlisle, 1996; Nacro, 1999), was conducted before these initiatives were introduced. Even the more recent research, such as that by Homeless Link (2011), has not examined the perceptions of criminal justice and third sector staff working in this field or the experience of those who use their services. Some of the most pertinent questions that remain unanswered include:

1. Has access to housing for offenders improved since the SEU report and what role have third sector organisations played in any improvement?
2. How are partnerships between criminal justice agencies, housing associations/other housing TSOs and local authorities working in reality?
3. Which groups of offenders are currently less likely to be prioritised for housing?
4. How have recent public spending cuts affected the availability of housing advisory services and housing provision for offenders?

Such questions arose during a broader programme of research into the role of third sector organisations in the criminal justice system, based at the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC). The study aimed to examine the role and impact of TSOs in resettlement, to critically evaluate the effectiveness of their work with (ex)offenders and their families and to examine the impact of volunteering on empowering offenders and ex-offenders to desist from crime.

The research study

Research sites and sample

The research was conducted in eight prisons and one probation trust across England. The prisons were chosen to represent the diversity of the prison estate in terms of the population held, the function of the prison, geographical location and the prison provider. The probation area was selected so as to have a mixture of urban and rural probation offices. It is not possible to name the prisons for confidentiality reasons, but Table 1 gives details of their function and the category of prisoners they hold.

Table 1 Description of case study sites

ID	Description of prison ³	
	Population	Type ⁴
1	Female	Closed
2	Male	Open, training
3	Male	Closed, local
4	Male juvenile	Closed
5	Female	Open, training
6	Male	Closed, training
7	Male young adults	Closed
8	Male	Closed, local
9	Mixed	Probation Trust

The research process consisted of two stages:

1. 292 qualitative semi-structured interviews (individual or in a focus group) with resettlement/offender management and associated staff in prisons and probation (n=80), third sector agency representatives (n=92) and offenders in contact with third sector organisations (n=120) to examine the value and impact of third sector involvement in resettlement of offenders;
2. a short survey of offenders distributed at each research site (n=680) to examine offender awareness of, and involvement with, TSOs.

The current paper will focus predominantly on the findings from the qualitative interviews with criminal justice and third sector staff and offenders, but will be supplemented by findings from the offender survey. For details of the survey methodology, see Gojkovic et al. (2011a).

Qualitative semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in person, with the exception of a small number of staff interviews which were conducted by telephone or via an email-based questionnaire. The interview schedules were designed to cover the most current themes with regards to the role of the third sector in criminal justice, which had been identified in the first phase of the research (Meek et al.,

³ Two of the prisons were privately run. These are not identified as such here, as to do so would reveal the identity of the prisons.

⁴ Local prisons hold those on remand, on short sentences or those at the beginning of their sentences. They are usually situated close to the courts that they serve. Training prisons hold longer-sentence prisoners.

2010), but were flexible so as to give the interviewees an opportunity to identify and discuss topics which were pertinent to them. The interviews took between 15-30 minutes and were audio-recorded or extensive notes were taken. Interview transcripts were analysed using framework analysis, a form of content analysis where the coding scheme is designed to reflect the dominant themes presented in the text (Richie and Spencer, 1994). Despite housing not being one of the original topics covered in the interview schedules, it became clear from the analysis of the interview data that it was of considerable importance and relevance to the interviewees. The most prominent housing-related topics that emerged from the interview transcripts are discussed below, with verbatim quotes included for illustration.

Findings

The majority of prisons that took part in the study worked in collaboration with a number of housing agencies (see Table 2 below). Housing support to offenders from TSOs in prisons revolved predominantly around housing advice, that is, help to keep the offender's current premises and/or referrals to LAs for social housing, with links to a small number of local housing providers.

Table 2 Housing-related provision at the research sites

ID	Description of housing-related provision
1	Prison-employed housing advisor Peer advisors Claims to have links to 2–3 social housing providers for women who resettle in particular parts of the country and for women under 25
2	Peer-advisors trained by a TSO
3	Externally provided housing advice Claims to have links with 3–4 social housing providers in the region
4	Externally provided housing advice Claims to have links with 2–3 TSOs which also act as housing providers to young people
5	Externally provided housing advice Claims to have links with 2–3 social housing providers in the region
6	Externally provided housing advice Claims to have links with one supported accommodation provider Claims to have links with 4–5 social housing providers in the region + surrounding regions
7	Externally provided housing advice Claims to have links with 10–15 social housing providers
8	Externally provided housing advice Claims to have links with one local social housing provider for people on remand and serving short sentences
9	Externally provided housing advice Claims to have links to 1–2 social housing providers Claims to have links to 1–2 supported housing providers

Access to housing advice and provision and the role of TSOs

A small number of interviewees acknowledged that the provision of housing advice in prison has improved considerably in recent years. In prisons which reported the existence of partnership arrangements with housing providers, prisoners were often more positive and less concerned about their prospects on release:

In 2001, I was sent to prison for 12 months, I got out, my flat had been given away and I was straight homeless. But nowadays you get emergency shelter and housing when you get out, they put you in a bedsit, which the prison arranges for you. There is [sic] agencies out there and now they're starting to filter through into the prison system, it's working a lot better, because people are actually getting the access now that they need to get things sorted out for when they're released. [Prisoner, prison 3]

Some criminal justice staff were also very positive about the work of housing TSOs and the difference they make to offenders' chances of accessing housing:

Last week we had [name of housing association] and they came and delivered over four weeks' pre-tenancy training and the lads love it, because it's actually something that they want and it's basic living skills. [Member of prison staff, prison 3]

In addition to finding housing after release, interviewees recognised that TSOs played a significant role in helping offenders to keep their accommodation by liaising with landlords, social housing providers and the Benefits Agency. The general consensus among interviewees, however, was that despite the paramount importance of housing in reducing the chance of re-offending and the increasing involvement of TSOs in offender housing services, the housing needs of offenders are still not being suitably addressed. According to a number of interviewees, this has led to the 'conveyor belt' or revolving door problem, with offenders being released out of prison without suitable accommodation. In some cases, this may lead individuals to feel that they have to re-offend in order to meet their accommodation needs:

If you take an individual from out of the community and you put them in prison, what society doesn't understand is that he's probably had a job, he's probably had transport, he's probably had a flat. You take him out, put him in prison, he loses all of that. Now if he was having problems before, could you imagine the amount of problems he's going to have when he's now released and he hasn't got nothing [sic]... And then they wonder why do people commit crimes in a certain time after they leave prison? [Prisoner, prison 6]

Such findings are supported by recent research conducted by Homeless Link (2011) which found that homelessness had a major impact on the likelihood of offending, be it in the form of 'survival' theft or more serious offences related to low self-esteem or the desire to get off the streets.

Some interviewees confirmed that even vulnerable and high-risk offenders are sometimes leaving prisons without suitable accommodation due to not being granted a homelessness duty and the lack of provision, with the potential for this to contribute to re-offending:

I think the work that we do is so difficult because you can do a lot of work and not get any outcome for it. You can refer somebody to loads of different places, but if they're not in priority with the council, they can't accommodate them. Even if they are, you can refer them to five or six hostels and if there's no beds available on that day, that person will still leave prison homeless. [Third sector representative, prison 6]

I'm classed as a high risk to the public [...] I need resettlement to help me get back, integrate me gradually back into society and no-one's helped me since. Basically as it stands, on X date when I am released I'll be high risk to the public, one of these people you read in the Sun and all that and I won't have no licence, I won't have no ties or anything over me.

Interviewer: Do you have a house to go back to?

No. I've got nowhere to live. The only way I can go back and carry on is basically go back and be a gangster. [Prisoner, prison 8]

The current research suggested that not only are some local authorities reluctant to house offenders, but this was the case even where housing was provided and paid for by an independent housing provider, as illustrated below:

Sometimes we have to go to city councils and explain to them why we want to house women ex-offenders in their areas and because the feelings about this are very mixed and we told them that these women came from those areas anyway, so we were really just providing a house for them at our own cost, without any cost to the council so that's kind of the rationale that we use to explain our existence to the city councils. [Third sector representative, prison 1]

Housing support to offenders can then in reality be very limited. Local authorities are often very restrictive in their assessment in an attempt to control the volume of referrals for housing (Grannum, 2005). According to the third sector interviewees in our study, this is a particular issue with local authorities in London. This may be due to the acute lack of available housing or may be the result of local lettings policies which are exercised in some boroughs (Pawson and Mullins, 2003) or the individual authorities' preferences. In all cases, the impact of TSOs' work in offering housing advice and support to offenders is likely to be limited.

Another group of offenders for whom the efficacy of TSO advice and support is likely to be restricted are those who do not have 'a local connection' with the area where they are imprisoned, but do have one in a different part of the country (DCLG, 2006b). This is because housing advisors in prisons often only have links with the local area of the prison:

They've [local authorities] got like waiting lists for weeks and weeks for areas and if the offender or prison doesn't have links with the council, they won't be a priority unfortunately. It's just the way it is. [Third sector representative, prison 3]

This is particularly likely to be a problem for female and juvenile prisoners, who are more likely to be kept a greater distance away from their home areas due to the smaller number of establishments holding them (NOMS, 2006) and for offenders who come from rural areas, or are serving a sentence in England and requiring re-housing in Wales. Many interviewees expressed concerns over getting offenders' accommodation in the area of choice, because the prison-based housing advice services lacked close links with local authorities other than where the prison is based. It is unlikely that offenders will get any help to move away from their home area, despite the fact that returning there may reinforce old behavioural patterns, particularly if they are unable to get away from criminal associates and may thus increase the risk of re-offending. A number of our offender survey

respondents therefore emphasised the need for prisons to have better links with housing organisations throughout the country, especially those which cover areas outside large cities (Gojkovic et al., 2011a). Unlike the Prison Service, whose remit is national, Local Homelessness Strategies and housing providers often operate at a local governance level, particularly in relation to lettings, nominations and support services. While offenders can be moved to a suitable category of prison far away from home, local authorities manage homelessness only in their local area. Consequently, housing advisors and TSOs may be further limited in what they can actually do.

Limited expertise and advice

Both probation staff and offenders on probation acknowledged that little was done to help them find housing. They did not have access to housing advisors and any help that was available was limited to a small number of hostels and social and supported housing projects and referrals were dependent on the local knowledge of the individual offender manager:

The thing is that here in X Probation Trust we don't actually have a housing advisor. Offender managers refer people to hostels or to private landlords if they know of any, but we don't actually have any dedicated person to deal with this. I suppose offender managers are not always aware of what housing opportunities there are and beyond referring to a hostel they can't actually help very much. It is in the back of our minds to hire a housing advisor... [Member of probation staff]

A lot of PSOs [Probation Service Officer] haven't got a clue about housing organisations, even if you ask them, like 'Do you know who can help out with this?', they'll just say, 'No idea, sorry.' I mean since I can't do anything without my PSO's knowledge anyway, why not make things simpler and let PSOs have a list of approved organisations they can refer you to. [Offender on probation]

Although offender interviewees suggested that a list of landlords, particularly social landlords would be useful to them, they acknowledged the need to find providers who were happy to take ex-offenders. A number of interviewees under probation supervision also raised concerns around temporary housing. Following the period of temporary accommodation in a hostel that was offered to them on release from prison, they were unable to secure more permanent accommodation, because of a lack of assistance from probation or third sector organisations in finding private accommodation. TSOs who could offer help were only of limited use and where they did not fulfil their promised remit and this could increase the likelihood of re-offending:

If you are hiring a flat from a landlord, which you have to do eventually because you can't get supported housing, then obviously you need money for the deposit. So you go to one of these charities which help you with money and you say that, for instance, you need £550 by the end of the week. And they say, 'Yeah, no problem. Come tomorrow.' So you go tomorrow and they give you £250, saying that's all they got. So where does that leave you then? Then the probation really has a high-risk situation on their hands because there is this half-crazed frightened person running around the streets trying to find another £300 to cover the deposit. [Offender on probation]

Partnership working

Increasingly housing and support provision for single homeless people with support needs is co-ordinated as part of local homelessness strategies using 'pathways' models which are complex and timely to implement (Nottinghamshire Supporting People, 2010) and mainly for those assessed as being in priority need.

In general, criminal justice staff also saw working in partnership with third sector housing advice and support organisations as a positive move which could actively improve the chances of obtaining housing for offenders on release:

The housing officer comes from X [housing TSO], he's working in partnership with us. That means that the prison is meeting its KPTs [Key Performance Targets] on housing. It's a win-win situation because the panic of going out homeless can cause prisoners while they're in here to do all sorts of stupid things. But [you can tell them] 'you will see someone, we're aware of when you're going out, [name] will come and see you,' and when he does and they realise he's got all the details, he knows exactly what's going on. It's very reassuring. [Member of prison staff, prison 6]

However, in order to secure housing for ex-offenders criminal justice agencies need to work in partnership not only with the third sector, but also with local authorities and other housing providers (NOMS, 2006). In the present research, these relationships were seen as less well established and much more uncertain, affecting any impact that housing advisors in prisons could have:

I don't really think that it matters what housing advisors you have in, who's actually doing that kind of role, because essentially regardless of who it is they're still fairly reliant on local authority housing providers when people get outside and that's the key problem. [Member of prison staff, prison 1]

This evidence suggests that despite the nominal importance attached to including prisoners' housing needs within local homelessness strategies (DCLG, 2001), the impact from the perspective of prison/TSO advice staff and prisoners themselves is often quite limited. Moreover, there are underlying issues that may explain why partnership working alone may not result in improved access to social housing for ex-prisoners.

Prison/TSO staff and prisoners alike identified the fact that housing providers are often reluctant to take on offenders who may have complex needs even after the homeless decision has been reached by the LA. This problem is particularly prominent where housing providers are independent of LAs. Third sector representatives also pointed out that the lack of partnership working between different agencies on the ground could affect offenders' chances of securing appropriate housing and thus of desisting from offending behaviour. Accommodation provided by local authorities could be unsuitable if it was too far away for offenders to attend meetings with support agencies, go to work or interact with pro-social peer groups. This in turn could, for example, lead to a loss of housing benefits or an increased risk of recall to prison as a result of missing probation appointments:

[We were] working very intensively with a guy who was supported by a social network of individuals that were actually good for him. They were probably doing more to keep him out of jail than any state agency could. And because he was homeless, he was relocated by the council to an area where he couldn't get that. He was put on top of a hill in the middle of nowhere, because he was a bad lad and they didn't know what else to do with him. And consequently he got back into crime. [Third sector representative, prison 3]

Furthermore, other agencies also demonstrated a lack of understanding about the importance of trying to resolve housing difficulties:

And I do find sometimes that agencies don't work as well together as they could. Sometimes I'm required to ring the DWP [Department for Work and Pension] and I'll say, 'This guy's got an appointment with the housing department and he's homeless.' And they would sort of say, 'Well, if he doesn't turn up, he might lose his benefits.' We're all working to the same end. It costs the taxpayer a lot more if he doesn't get to his money, because he'll just go and rob somewhere. [Third sector representative, prison 6]

The Government's plans for reducing re-offending rates (MoJ, 2010) currently focus on providing Integrated Offender Management (IOM). IOM is a framework that allows and encourages local and partner agencies to work together to ensure that repeat offenders are managed in a coordinated way. Until, however, ex-offenders are accepted as potential service users by all the agencies which need to be involved in IOM, including housing providers, and until the numerous gaps in housing provision and the existing barriers preventing the accommodation of offenders are addressed, such plans are unlikely to produce the desired results.

Categories of offenders less likely to be considered a priority for housing

Research interviews also revealed that some groups of offenders are considerably less likely to receive housing provision on release from prison than others. Prison staff interviewees noted that short-sentence prisoners and prisoners on remand are less likely to obtain housing on release either in temporary accommodation such as night shelters and emergency accommodation, or medium-term supported housing. They are particularly unlikely to benefit from the partnership work described above around local homelessness strategies and 'pathways' models. Short-sentence prisoners are often released sooner than referrals can be made, or their release dates are unexpectedly pushed forward. Prisoners on remand may not know their date of release and may be released directly from the court with no time to make provision for them. Due to these uncertainties, many housing agencies are reluctant to deal with clients from these two groups, as illustrated in the quote below:

I would say remanded prisoners [are] much more difficult to make referrals for... because the agencies are wanting to know how long they're going to be here, and when they're on remand you don't have an idea. So if they're actually sentenced it's probably better for them [i.e. the agencies] to pick up the referrals. [Member of prison staff, prison 8]

Some interviewees noted that due to the uncertainties around the release dates, short-sentence offenders are often referred to housing advisors in the very last days of their sentence, which makes it difficult if not impossible for the advisors to provide suitable housing in such a short space of time, even if they have specific support needs:

Interviewer: Do you find it difficult to arrange something for short sentences?

Respondent: Yeah, very, impossible nearly. We get prisoners saying, 'I'm out in five days' and it's not possible. All you can do is give them a list of homeless places to go, depending on whereabouts they are from...So at least they've got some information or telephone numbers and addresses to go to, to turn up and say, 'I'm homeless, please re-house me. Or you could write a letter out, I suppose, saying that he's come out of prison. He might be a priority for housing, because he might be disabled or have mental health problems, but more often than not, you will see them a few days later homeless somewhere on the street. [Member of prison staff, prison 3]

Despite the recognition in the SEU (2002) report that short-sentence prisoners are at a higher risk of re-offending, barriers continue to exist which make it difficult for them to obtain housing services, regardless of who is providing them.

A number of interviewees from all three groups noted that the level of need is key to prioritisation for housing. When a homeless decision is reached, offenders with high support needs are likely to be prioritised while the housing needs of offenders who are on a higher-functioning side of the spectrum are neglected (Fitzpatrick et al., 2009):

When I asked them to house me they said they can't because I don't fit the criteria. They said because I don't take drugs or I am not an alcoholic and all this other stuff, like sick, in debt and basically on the precipice, because I'm 100 per cent fit and healthy I come like bottom of the list. [Prisoner, prison 8]

The biggest challenge is particularly where people have really very low support needs and they have no fixed abode. They're reasonably young, fit and they have no mental health problems or substance misuse problems and it's really trying to find them accommodation. [Member of prison staff, prison 2]

In such instances, these offenders are unlikely to be deemed vulnerable and in priority need and may therefore be unable to access social housing provision. Where ex-offenders were given housing due to high support needs or their vulnerability, some third sector interviewees argued that the level of community support provided was often very low or non-existent, which often resulted in individuals returning to prison soon after release:

A lot of women are used to their routine life in the prison and they don't know how to behave outside. We had a tenant who told us a story that on her first day of living in a 'young' house she went to a supermarket and she just stood in the middle there because she didn't know what to do and she was all alone, no-one from the housing association was there to help her on her first day out. They just don't perceive it as their job. [Third sector representative prison 5]

Just as some housing providers may be reluctant to accept ex-offenders with high support needs if support packages are unavailable (Pawson and Mullins, 2003), the fact that such needs remain unaddressed may also contribute to the exclusion of ex-offenders from future housing provision:

We get so many here that are just in and out of prison constantly... Mainly because they've got mental health issues, drug issues, alcohol issues and they're never out of prison long enough to sustain any stable accommodation or address any of those needs... And there's a lot of people, that, because they've been round the system so many times, they're now excluded from so many housing projects because of their behaviour or because they haven't engaged with staff and they won't attend appointments. Every time they've come back in, their options are limited further and then that just gets cut down and cut down until they've just got no options left. [Third sector representative, prison 3]

Despite the changes instigated by the Homelessness Act (2002) prohibiting 'blanket' bans on housing offenders, they may still be used to avoid offenders who have a poor tenancy history or are deemed 'unsuitable' due to their history of anti-social behaviour. Respondents identified two other groups of offenders who are not likely to be identified as priority for housing, namely women offenders and young offenders. This is perhaps somewhat surprising as both are likely to be especially vulnerable

and in the case of female prisoners, there may also be children involved. Third sector interviewees identified women with a history of violence and women who were vulnerable due to their mental health problems as less likely to have suitable accommodation arranged on release, despite meeting the homelessness priority need criteria:

Partly local councils are the key barrier rather than the prison itself because they're often very unwilling to engage with women. They tend to pass them on from pillar to post, they're very reluctant to provide any kind of funding for them [and] suggest they're simply too high a risk to receive any kind of accommodation placement, especially women with a history of abuse or women with a history of violence. In some cases boroughs are simply so reluctant to engage with these vulnerable women that they're deemed too high a risk even to give them a list of B&Bs to just go there and sort out their own accommodation. [Third sector representative, prison 1]

Some third sector interviewees noted that women with children are likely to be overlooked as potential candidates for accommodation, partly due to the lack of suitable accommodation, but also because they often require extensive support and a level of engagement which housing providers are often unable to offer. As discussed earlier, particular problems are faced by women seeking to reunite their families after release (HM Prison Service & Women and Young People's Group, 2006).

Women just want accommodation suitable for their children. And there aren't [sic] many of those. [Third sector representative, prison 1]

Despite their complex and multiple needs, female offenders may not be referred for housing advice and support by criminal justice agencies due to the low level of risk associated with their offending (CASS, 2011). A previous scoping study of third sector agencies working across the seven resettlement pathways found that TSOs which offer housing to women offenders or young offenders were considerably under-represented, with only about a third of the number of TSOs offering services to women and young people in general (Gojkovic et al., 2011b).

In the offender survey (Gojkovic et al., 2011a), young adult and juvenile respondents reported less involvement with accommodation TSOs than adult respondents. Some of our prison staff interviewees attempted to explain why this might be the case by highlighting the relationship between Youth Homelessness Hubs and Children's Services. The Southwark Judgement (2009), which addresses youth homelessness, stipulates that juvenile offenders with no fixed abode are required to be referred to Children's Services by Youth Homelessness Hubs which are part of the local councils. Children's Services are then responsible for providing them with suitable accommodation in collaboration with local authorities. Youth Homelessness Hubs have provided an improved pathway for young people into decent housing and relevant support, enabled better coordination with TSOs and provided a vehicle for Children's Services to deliver their own remit. However, despite the process having a strong basis in policy, in practice, children and young people can sometimes 'fall through the gaps' in service provision. This is because securing accommodation for children under 18 is increasingly based on a complex triage system of needs assessment and support for independent living before moving them into low-support accommodation and then on to permanent housing, by which time they often reach the age of 18 and are no longer covered by the Children's Services (North Yorkshire County Council, 2011). Where this happens, TSOs can play a key role in joining up care provision as illustrated in the quote below:

It now means what I do is that, if I get any young person who comes in who's going to be under 18 and has no accommodation I then refer them straight to X [name of TSO] because social services are a total letdown... these people are paid to look after these children and they're quite happy for them to go out with no accommodation. I honestly don't know how I would survive without them [X]. Because we should never ever, ever have an under-18 going out there with no accommodation, never. [Member of prison staff, prison 4]

The problem of housing young adult ex-offenders (18–21 years of age) is equally complex. One in ten are released from custody without suitable accommodation (Puffett, 2011) and local authorities are often unwilling to engage with this population or lack suitable premises for them. This sometimes results in young people being housed with high-support ex-offenders, such as those with mental illness or a history of substance misuse, as the only solution to prevent homelessness:

My biggest thing is [that] we've got 18- and 19-year olds who go out [with] no fixed abode, because social services aren't obligated to do it. Local authority won't give us an address before they go out and then they just put them wherever they can because they haven't got suitable accommodation. And I think, well hang on a minute, these kids come in, we do what we can to reduce the risk of re-offending and then we put these guys in with these drug addicts and alcoholics and wonder why they re-offend! [Member of prison staff, prison 4]

Effects of the current financial climate

One factor that could put an additional strain on housing provision for offenders, which was recognised by both criminal justice and third sector staff in the study, is the current restrictive financial climate. The number of housing projects and housing advisors had already been reduced in many prison establishments, with the expectation that this was only likely to get worse:

So we are also involved with the X team that was part of X agency, they dealt with people who were under 12 months' sentence, but they are not going to be around for much longer because the funding has been withdrawn. [Third sector representative, prison 3]

I think they [resettlement services] are hindered an awful lot from becoming totally effective because of the lack of resources, lack of means. We've seen the cutbacks already biting us where we are thinnest and this is housing. Some prisons now don't have a housing officer and it is such a specialised role. We are going backwards unfortunately and who knows what will happen to these poor people... [Third sector representative, prison 5]

This was a particular concern in prison 5 as it was an open prison and, as such, concentrated on resettling prisoners back into the community. Reductions in housing staff numbers imposed by the Prison Service in order to save resources could also significantly affect the efficiency and quality of service offered:

Three years ago there were four housing officers, then there were two and now with the efficiency savings for 2010/11 it's been reduced by 39 hours a week, which is one more member of staff... Now we're down to one which is me, a prison officer, plus X [name of a person] who used to work for Y [housing agency]. So you've now got one who's got to do all the referrals to different hostels and different housing associations and also try and keep accommodation. And I still need to do my job as a prison officer! It's impossible. [Member of prison staff, prison 2]

Nevertheless, third sector interviewees indicated that there is still an overwhelming demand for their services, which they could rarely meet:

Whenever I see people, nobody ever knows there's just me that works here for X [name of organisation], and often prisoners are really surprised by that because I think they imagine there's this huge resettlement department with an army of X workers all working to help people get accommodation. But obviously there isn't, there's just me and so when they say I've put in 15 applications to see somebody from X I'm like, 'Well this is X. There's just me.' [Third sector representative, prison 3]

Despite housing being the best represented pathway in terms of the number of organisations with which the research prisons claimed to work in partnership, only 21 per cent of respondents in the offender survey reported awareness of any of the housing organisations operating in their prison and no more than 4 per cent reported engagement with any of them (only health-related organisations scored lower) (Gojkovic et al., 2011a). This low level of engagement may at least in part be explained by the low and decreasing numbers of housing workers in prisons.

As discussed earlier, the impacts of funding cuts on accommodation services within the criminal justice system are likely to be compounded by similar cuts to funding for housing advice and housing services, welfare benefits reductions and the increasing use of the private rented sector to house homeless people including ex-offenders. Not surprisingly, the growing crisis of access to housing for ex-offenders is leading to innovative approaches such as Social Impact Bonds, using payment by results to address resettlement of short-term prisoners.

Social impact bonds

One of the key partners in the Social Impact Bond scheme which is currently being piloted in HMP Peterborough is St Giles Trust. As part of the Bond, the charity offers 'through-the-gate services' to ex-offenders by offering support in securing accommodation and with education and training. Some prison staff interviewees have, however, expressed concerns about the proposed 'payment-by-result' scheme, saying that it could lead to temporary 'quick fix' housing solutions, after which the ex-offenders in the community would fall 'off the radar':

If St Giles Trust, or whoever has a responsibility which is to house people or to support people when they are released from prison, then that's great. What worries me about a lot of these payment schemes is whether the objective is to house as many people as possible for a bit, or to house them properly....Because it's like, we can measure how many people go into settled accommodation on release. But after that, I don't know what happens and where these people end up... [Member of prison staff, prison 2]

In order to evaluate the efficacy of Social Impact Bonds in promoting the links between housing providers and prisons, it would be more useful to look at not only the proposed 12-month outcomes, but also the longer term outcomes of social housing on reducing re-offending. The Ministry of Justice (2011) has recently announced an intention to tighten the payment criteria to take into account the type of offender, seriousness of crime and the level of long-term needs.

Discussion and Conclusions

Overall there have been several positive developments since the publication of the SEU report almost a decade ago. Many prisons now have dedicated housing advisors and have formed important links with TSOs and housing providers in order to improve communication to help secure existing accommodation and facilitate referral processes. The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) has a target to ensure that 81.3 per cent of offenders are in settled or suitable accommodation at the end of their sentence. In 2010–11, this was achieved with 86.7 per cent of offenders reported to be in such accommodation (NOMS, 2011). However, as this research has shown, there are still a number of barriers to effective housing advice and provision, especially securing medium- and long-term accommodation. This is largely due to a lack of available housing stock and the difficulties of partnership working, where not all partners view housing for ex-offenders with the same urgency, as well as restrictions on what kind of offenders are likely to be prioritised for housing and specific exclusion policies. Recent funding cuts and the structure of the criminal justice system, particularly in relation to housing short-sentence prisoners and those on remand, add to these challenges. Allocation policies for social housing are likely to grow more stringent during the wider economic downturn as the local authorities become more pressed to provide housing for a growing number of people, and in such circumstances, offenders are even more unlikely to be treated as a priority for housing provision. Moreover, there is evidence that the greater flexibility given to local authorities under the Localism Act 2012 will lead to increasing conditionality in the allocation of social housing, linking eligibility to having a job or being involved in volunteering or not being involved in anti-social behaviour. This is likely to have a further adverse effect on the rehousing prospects of ex-offenders.

In this context, several recent policies to increase the use of the private rented sector may create particular barriers for ex-offenders. For example, the Housing Options approach, which has become increasingly central to how LAs carry out their homelessness assessments and duties, offers options to applicants, mainly access to private tenancies, before they make a formal homelessness application. This approach has been seen as steering people away from making homelessness applications and encouraging them to take up private tenancies (DCLG, 2008). The Localism Act allows local authorities to discharge their homelessness duty fully by offering a private rented sector tenancy of as little as 12 months, which the tenant will have no right to refuse (Crisis, 2011). Furthermore, as part of the latest policy on rough sleepers, which sets out a way for 'non-priority' groups of people at risk of homelessness, such as single ex-offenders, to secure accommodation, the Government has pledged to provide £10m to Crisis between 2011 and 2013 to fund third sector schemes and to improve access to the private rented sector for this population (HM Government, 2011). Crisis (2011) have argued that offender managers should be encouraged to work in partnership with such schemes to support offenders into stable private rented accommodation, but also that these schemes need to offer ongoing support for both tenants and landlords to ensure sustainable tenancies.

However, there are a variety of reasons why the private rental sector may not offer ideal accommodation for all ex-offenders, including the need for a substantial deposit, the poor standard of some rental accommodation and low levels of security offered by assured shorthold tenancies and the challenges of living with other tenants. Paying for private accommodation is likely to be increasingly

challenging with the capping of rents that can be met from housing benefit, including the recent extension of the Shared Accommodation Rate of Local Housing Allowance to claimants under 35. Research by Crisis (2011) suggests that sharing accommodation can be detrimental for those who leave prison as they often face limited options and may end up living in property where criminal activity or drug taking and dealing is taking place. Ex-offenders may also need to be given suitable support needs assessments and support packages in order to be considered by landlords, who can often be reluctant to house people with a known history of anti-social behaviour (Pawson and Mullins, 2003). Considering these problems, some private rented tenancies are likely to be unsustainable and may result in increased chances of re-offending.

This research has also shown that the relationship between third sector housing advice agencies and local authority and other local housing providers are paramount in effective service provision, as well as an apparent gap between the intention of local homelessness strategies to include prison resettlement and the experience of prison-based advice services. It also suggests that the success of these relationships will be affected by the degree to which housing providers view offenders as suitable tenants. Difficulties in partnership working between local authorities and the third sector are compounded by the variety of arrangements that exist in different local authority areas due to different infrastructure, different structures in the local authority, different funding arrangements with the third sector and even differing historical contexts (IVR, 2010). More research is therefore needed on these relationships between local authorities and TSOs, as the literature in this area is rather sparse and somewhat outdated, focusing predominantly on the early stages of the Partnership agenda (e.g. DCLG, 2006a), rather than on how relationships have developed since this was put into practice.

There is clearly an urgent need for a more transparent housing priority assessment system, including a push for housing providers to accept currently marginalised groups, including short-sentenced offenders, women offenders and young offenders. Further work is also needed in order to integrate housing providers better into the criminal justice system and vice versa and to provide a more joined-up approach to housing offenders around the country. One idea is to create an umbrella liaison body that would manage and address homelessness across the borders of local authorities and improve co-ordination between the prison service and the 'home' local authorities of prisoners. This would particularly benefit offenders who are serving their sentence far away from home. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the relationship between those involved in the housing of offenders such as local councils and housing providers should be seamless, with each having a nominated person who deals with the prison housing advisors (Nacro, 2005). The Social Impact Bond, despite concerns about organisations failing to engage with offenders with complex needs, may also prove to represent progress on the prison level, because it engages charities with an established record in housing offenders and the whole process of providing through-the-gate services to offenders is more transparent and measurable. However, concerns remain regarding the ability to secure long-term housing in a rapidly changing financial and policy environment and to embed the learning of 'pathways' approaches to resettlement through appropriate levels of support at each stage of the resettlement process.

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About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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Service Delivery

From housing, to health, social care or criminal justice, third sector organisations provide an increasing number of public services. Working with policy makers and practitioners to identify key priorities, this work will cut across a number of research streams and cover a series of key issues.

Critical understanding service delivery by the third sector is important to policy making as the third sector now provides a major - and very different - option for public services, which may be more responsive to the needs of citizens and service users. At the same time, there are dangers inherent in the third sector becoming over-dependent on funding from service contracts – particularly in terms of a potential loss of its independence. The centre's research will help to inform the debate on the way in which service delivery is developing, the potential role of the third sector in commissioning as well as contracting, and the implications of different approaches to service delivery on the overall impact of the third sector.

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