Housing ex-prisoners: the role of the third sector

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the paper is to examine the contribution made by housing-related third sector organisations (TSOs) in assisting ex-prisoners to find housing, and the barriers they face in doing so.

Design/methodology/approach – An offender survey was used to measure awareness of and engagement with TSOs in eight prisons, alongside qualitative interviews with prisoners, criminal justice staff and TSO representatives.

Findings – Despite the involvement of TSOs, securing accommodation for ex-prisoners remains complex and difficult, largely due to high service demand, housing shortages, budget cuts, and needs assessment and allocations systems which reduce the responsiveness of housing providers to the reducing re-offending agenda.

Research limitations/implications – The research benefited from a mixed-method approach which captured the perceptions of service users and professionals. The response rate for the offender survey was low (12 per cent), and the survey findings should be treated with caution.

Practical implications – Local authorities and other housing providers need to be more willing to accept ex-prisoners as potential service users, and better links need to be made between local homelessness strategies, choice based lettings systems and prisoner resettlement programmes. Providing support services to ex-offenders may encourage such acceptance and help to maintain the motivation to desist from crime.

Originality/value – Previous research has paid little specific attention to the role of TSOs in (ex)offender housing. This paper addresses this omission by drawing on original empirical research to examine the value of their work in securing accommodation for ex-prisoners and helping to reduce re-offending.

Keywords Ex-prisoners, Housing, Homelessness, Re-offending, Resettlement, Third sector organisations, Ex-offenders, United Kingdom, Social care problems

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Many research studies have identified a close link between imprisonment, homelessness and re-offending (Carlisle, 1996; Homeless Link, 2011; Seymour, 2006; Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 2002). In the last ten years, the enhanced offender resettlement agenda and the move towards partnership working between criminal justice agencies and third sector organisations (TSOs) in order to reduce re-offending (Ministry of Justice (MoJ)/National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2008) have led to a number of initiatives involving housing-related TSOs to improve housing advice and provision to offenders. Drawing on a survey of 680 offenders and a qualitative interview study in eight prisons, this paper will examine the contribution made by TSOs in assisting (ex)offenders to secure suitable accommodation, the barriers they continue to face and their role in other developments to reduce re-offending including social impact bonds (SIB) and integrated offender management (IOM).
Homelessness and re-offending

Links between homelessness after prison and re-offending have been confirmed in recent research which found that prisoners who needed help with finding somewhere to live after release were more likely to be reconvicted (65 per cent) in the first year, than those who did not need this help (45 per cent) (Williams et al., 2012). Homelessness may lead ex-prisoners to offend in the form of “survival theft” or commit more serious offences related to low esteem or the desire to get off the streets (Homeless Link, 2011). Stable housing is therefore often seen as a “cornerstone for beginning a life free from crime” (Shelter, 2010, p. 1), which is said to be able to reduce re-offending by up to 20 per cent (SEU, 2002). Good accommodation can provide the stability necessary to enable individuals to address their offending behaviour, to maintain or create strong family relationships, gain employment and access a range of other services such as General Practitioners or drug treatment (Crisis, 2011; NOMS, 2006). Reflecting this, housing is one of the seven “pathways” in the Reducing Re-offending Action Plan (Home Office, 2004), and since 2002, local homelessness strategies which provide a mechanism for partnership working between local housing authorities and partners such as criminal justice agencies have also been expected to include support for (ex)offenders (Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 2009).

The SEU (2002) identified several key issues relating to housing problems amongst prisoners. It found that:

- as many as a third of prisoners lose their housing on imprisonment, with remand prisoners more likely to lose their homes than sentenced;
- around a third (35 per cent) of prisoners have nowhere to stay on release; and
- certain groups, such as short-term and repeat prisoners, are more likely to be homeless when they leave custody.

Prisoners may lose their housing while in prison due to family breakdown or the failure to communicate with their landlord or mortgage provider leading to the loss of their tenancy or mortgage. Under housing benefit rules, prisoners can claim payments for 13 weeks only if their sentence is no longer than 13 weeks, unless they are on remand when they can claim for up 52 weeks. This results in many losing their accommodation and being left to secure alternative provision on release (SEU, 2002). As nearly 70 per cent of offenders are in “permanent” accommodation prior to incarceration (SEU, 2002), it is important to prevent the loss of housing on imprisonment. Ideally, housing needs assessments should take place just after reception into prison to allow communication between tenants/owners and housing/mortgage providers, to enable short-term prisoners and those on remand to keep the accommodation they have, and to give longer term prisoners the opportunity to terminate a tenancy with the minimum of arrears.

The role of TSOs in housing (ex)offenders

According to the 2008 National Survey of TSOs, 4,525 TSOs work with (ex)offenders in the field of accommodation (Gojkovic et al., 2011a). This figure includes general advice and advocacy providers, such as Shelter, and more specialist TSOs that work predominantly with offenders and ex-offenders, including housing and support providers such as Stonham. A recent survey found that 130 out of 137 prisons in England and Wales have access to a housing advice service (Shelter, 2010). Many of these are run by TSOs and help offenders keep their accommodation whilst in prison, assist them in securing housing on release and liaise with landlords, mortgage providers, local authorities and other agencies. In some cases, housing advice is given by peer supporters trained by TSOs or the prisons themselves.

A housing TSO, St Giles Trust, is involved in the SIB scheme at Her Majesty’s Prison (HMP) Peterborough to prevent re-offending through access to stable housing. TSOs also run various forms of temporary accommodation, including short stay, direct access hostels and approved premises, which provide specialist support to offenders, including offending behaviour programmes and preparation for independent living. Additionally,
accommodation-based support and floating support services to help ex-offenders sustain a tenancy and other facilities such as education and employment training and opportunities are often provided by TSOs (St Mungo’s, 2011), and funded by Supporting People grants.

**Securing housing**

Despite the number of TSOs working with (ex)offenders, securing housing on release from prison is a difficult and complex task. To be eligible for social housing, and where necessary, for temporary emergency accommodation, offenders must be owed a statutory duty of homelessness by a local authority and overcome four main hurdles as set out below.

First, they must be deemed to be in priority need. The Homelessness Act 2002 included those who are vulnerable as a result of having served a custodial sentence or spent time on remand on the list of groups classed as being in priority need. In reality, however, few ex-prisoners are deemed to be in priority need, with homeless ex-prisoners making up just 0.6 per cent of total homelessness acceptances in 2005/2006 (NOMS, 2006), as who is classed as “vulnerable” is a matter of judgement for the local authority. Offenders with high support needs are more likely to be prioritised than who are better able to function independently, reflecting this “vulnerability” criteria (Fitzpatrick et al., 2009). Priority need also includes those with whom dependent children reside or might reasonably be expected to reside (DCLG, 2009), but women offenders with children often fall into the “Catch-22” situation of not having their children with them when they apply for housing (if, for example, they were being looked after by foster carers while the mother is in prison), but are unable to get them back unless they can demonstrate that they have appropriate accommodation (Maguire and Nolan, 2007).

Second, applicants must be considered “unintentionally homeless”. Some local authorities have argued that ex-prisoners become intentionally homeless by virtue of willfully committing an offence and being sent to prison, causing them to lose their housing or by failing to inform their landlord of their custodial sentence; an argument which Cowan and Fionda (1994) suggest effectively punishes offenders twice.

Third, applicants need to prove they have a local connection to the area in which they wish to live. This may be particularly problematic for long-term prisoners or those who were homeless before imprisonment as they may struggle to show evidence of local connections. Ex-prisoners may not wish to return to their home area as it may reinforce old behavioural patterns if they are unable to get away from former criminal associates (Maguire and Nolan, 2007). Fourth, under section 160A of the Homelessness Act 2002, an applicant can be treated as ineligible for housing if they or a member of their household have been found guilty of unacceptable behaviour, a clause that can be used to exclude ex-offenders from housing provision.

Even if accepted by a local authority as eligible for housing, (ex)offenders still may face considerable difficulties accessing accommodation. The allocation policies and criteria for different housing providers vary according to the goals of the organisations and can be markedly different from the “homeless decision” criteria. Some organisations such as those which specialise in providing accommodation for ex-offenders may choose to house those who are not statutorily homeless if this fulfills their charitable objectives, but others may apply “unfair and restrictive allocations policies” (Shelter, 2006, p. 16), despite the Homelessness Act (2002) prohibiting “blanket” exclusions on housing offenders. In a time of high demand for social housing, long-waiting lists, and shortages of housing, particularly in South East England, there is no guarantee that an eligible applicant will get a social housing place (Crisis, 2011); a situation which is likely to be exacerbated by government spending cuts. Additionally, poor communication between different public sector agencies such as prison and probation services, local authorities, the Department for Work and Pensions and Benefits Agency can lead to considerable delays in finding housing for offenders and even in the loss of potential housing opportunities (Homeless Link, 2009). Most social housing is now allocated through “choice based lettings” systems which require applicants to select and bid competitively for available properties; this procedure may lead to further barriers for ex-prisoners especially where they are seeking housing in an area distant from the prison.
Furthermore, an increasing emphasis on homelessness “prevention” has led to increasing numbers of applicants being “assisted” to access private tenancies rather than being housed in social housing (Pawson, 2007), and the Localism Act 2011 now allows authorities to discharge homelessness duties in this way even without the applicant’s agreement (Mullins, 2012). The impact of the prevention agenda on offenders has not been researched, but obtaining private housing is fraught with difficulties, particularly for ex-offenders. Private landlords may not wish to accept those with a criminal history (Homeless Link, 2011), or housing benefit claimants (SEU, 2002; Shelter, 2008). Most will require a deposit and a month’s rent in advance, which is often well beyond the means of recently released prisoners. Private rented accommodation can be of poor quality and, along with harassment from other tenants and inadequate regulation of houses of multiple occupations; this can result in such tenancies becoming unsustainable (Shelter, 2008). Private sector assistance in housing ex-offenders is therefore unlikely to be successful unless good landlords are encouraged to accept the extra risks of having offenders as tenants (Maguire and Nolan, 2007), for example, through rent guarantees or bonds.

Aims and methods of the study

Despite the increased involvement of the third sector in helping offenders and ex-offenders to secure housing, previous research has paid little, if any, specific attention, to the role of TSOs in helping to secure housing advice and provision. Working in partnership is recognised as essential in order to help offenders access and sustain accommodation (DCLG, 2009; Homeless Link, 2011; Maguire and Nolan, 2007; NOMS, 2006), but such partnerships are generally conceived of as being between criminal justice agencies and local authorities/housing providers. Housing-related TSOs may perform various functions such as offering advice, conducting assessments and providing accommodation. This paper aims to examine the role that they may play in assisting ex-prisoners to keep and/or secure suitable accommodation, and therefore to potentially reduce recidivism, without comparing third housing sector services directly with those in the private and public sector. It draws on research conducted as part of a two-year project to examine the role and effectiveness of TSO work with ex-offenders and their families, based at the Third Sector Research Centre, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Office for Civil Society and Barrow Cadbury Trust. The key aims of this research were to:

- examine the role, prevalence and effectiveness of TSOs working with offenders, with particular reference to the resettlement of offenders;
- critically evaluate the “added value” of third sector work with (ex)offenders and their families; and
- examine the impact of volunteering on empowering offenders and ex-offenders to desist from crime.

The research was conducted in eight prisons chosen to represent the diversity of the prison estate. It is not possible to name the research sites for confidentiality reasons, but Table I gives details of their function and the category of offenders that they held.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID number</th>
<th>Offender population</th>
<th>Description of the prison/site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Open, training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Closed, local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male juvenile</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Open, training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Closed training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male young adults</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Closed, local</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At each site the research process consisted of two stages:

1. Qualitative semi-structured interviews \((n = 254)\) with resettlement/offender management and associated staff in prisons \((n = 74)\), third sector agency representatives \((n = 78)\) and offenders in contact with TSOs \((n = 102)\), to examine the value and effectiveness of third sector involvement in resettlement of offenders.

2. A short anonymous offender survey \((n = 680)\) to examine offender awareness of, and involvement with TSOs, including housing-related organisations.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in person, or where this was not possible, by telephone. Interview schedules covered various key themes, such as the strengths and limitations of TSO work with offenders, the “added value” TSOs can bring to their work and the barriers and challenges to TSO service provision, but were flexible enough to give the interviewees an opportunity to identify and discuss other topics if they wished. 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). Housing was not one of the original topics on the interview schedules, largely because the study aimed to produce a more general picture of the role and effectiveness of TSOs working with offenders, rather than focusing on individual services or areas of provision. However, semi-structured interview formats allow respondents to bring up topics of importance to them rather than focusing solely on the researchers’ pre-defined priorities (May, 2001). During the interviews and the process of open coding the data, it became clear that housing was of key significance to interviewees from each of the respondent groups, and thus warranted further analysis and discussion. Data related to housing were coded as such and then analysed and compared for patterns, themes, contrasts and contradictions. As housing-specific questions were absent from the interview schedule, it should be noted that not all interviewees spoke about this topic and this might limit the representativeness of the data.

Offender surveys were distributed to respondents by including them with weekly menus or placing them under the cell doors, and collecting them seven days later. The questionnaire provided respondents with a list of TSOs concerned with resettlement, including housing-related organisations, that operated in their prison. For each organisation, they were asked to indicate whether or not they had heard of or engaged with it and if not, they were asked to indicate why. Respondents were also asked open-ended questions such as whether there were any services which would be helpful to them. The average response rate was 12 per cent of the total offender population in each site. Compared to customary return rates for self-completed prisoner surveys (Fazel and Danesh, 2002), this rate is fairly typical, but it means that only a small minority of prisoners’ contact with TSOs was recorded. Nevertheless, the survey produced a wider picture of the involvement of TSOs with offenders and supplemented the qualitative interviews. The data collected from the questionnaires was entered into SPSS 17.0 statistical package and double-checked for errors.

Findings

Awareness and use of third sector housing services for (ex)offenders

Across the eight prison sites, links with 37 housing-related TSOs were identified. These organisations provided housing advice and made referrals \((n = 7)\), or were local third sector social housing providers, including housing associations \((n = 30)\) (Table II).

Some of the social housing providers had links with more than one prison in the sample. A small number of providers of more general prisoner resettlement services also offered housing advice but this was done on a case by case basis and as their core business was not housing, they were not included in the figures here, although data from interviews with representatives from these organisations was included in the qualitative data analysis. As can be seen from Table II, virtually all prisons had TSOs providing housing advice and these were typically large, national housing-related organisations. Over 85 per cent of the
organisations providing housing on release were regional/local in character and very few prisons, aside from the ones situated in large cities, had links with housing providers in other parts of the country.

Awareness of housing services amongst prisoners was, however, limited, with only 21 per cent of prisoners in the survey having heard of at least one of these organisations (Gojkovic et al., 2011b). This may be due to poor publicity or confusion amongst prison staff about the TSOs working in the establishment (particularly if they were only on short-term contracts) with a consequent effect on referrals. It is also possible that prisoners may not become aware of third sector social housing providers until they are about to be released, and this may not have been picked up by the survey.

Only 4 per cent of prisoners in the survey had used third sector housing services. Even after accounting for the low response rate, this is a surprisingly small proportion of prisoners, particularly as nearly 10 per cent of survey respondents identified a lack of TSOs specialising in accommodation as a key area for improvement (Gojkovic et al., 2011b). The only other area of improvement identified by a larger number of respondents was education and employment with 25 per cent of survey respondents arguing in favour of more employment, training and voluntary and paid work placements for prisoners. Usage rates may be low because the demand for services is so high, and only a small number of prisoners can be seen. Respondents from closed establishments were more likely to work with accommodation TSOs ($\chi^2=34, p < 0.01$) than respondents from open establishments (Gojkovic et al., 2011b), suggesting that TSOs may be more focused on keeping accommodation or closing tenancies rather than resettling longer term prisoners. Third sector housing providers often also have very strict eligibility criteria which could hinder access by certain groups of offenders, such as those not from a tightly defined local area. Women respondents ($\chi^2=33, p < 0.01$) and those from non-British Black, Asian and mixed ethnic backgrounds ($\chi^2=41, p < 0.01$) reported significantly less engagement with accommodation TSOs, and young and juvenile respondents reported less awareness of and less involvement with accommodation TSOs than adult respondents ($\chi^2=45, p < 0.01$) (Gojkovic et al., 2011b), although this may also be due to the under-representation of housing organisations offering housing to these sub-populations of offenders (Gojkovic et al., 2011a). Despite the higher risk of re-offending amongst short-sentenced prisoners (SEU, 2002), interviewees noted that short-sentence prisoners and prisoners on remand are less likely to obtain housing on release, either in temporary/emergency accommodation or medium-term supported housing, due to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Description of housing-related provision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Prison-employed housing advisor and peer advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims to have links to two to three social housing providers for women who resettle in particular parts of the country and for women under 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Peer-advisors trained by a TSO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>TSO-provided housing advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims to have links with three to four social housing providers in the region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>TSO-provided housing advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims to have links with two to three TSOs which also act as social housing providers to young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>TSO-provided housing advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims to have links with two to three social housing providers in the region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>TSO-provided housing advice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims to have links with one supported accommodation provider</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims to have links with four to five social housing providers in the region + surrounding regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>TSO-provided housing advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims to have links with ten to 15 social housing providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>TSO-provided housing advice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claims to have links with one local social housing provider for people on remand and serving short sentences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II: Housing-related provision at the research sites
uncertainty of release dates and the short time in which to get housing provision organised. For some short sentence prisoners, the best that could be done was to give them a list of contact details for hostels and B&Bs in their area.

The effectiveness of third sector housing services

Prisoner respondents who had used third sector housing services were often positive about the help they received in trying to keep or secure accommodation, and recognised that housing services for prisoners had improved considerably in recent years:

In 2001, I was sent to prison for 12 months. I got out, my flat had been given away and I was straight homeless. Nowadays you get emergency shelter and housing when you get out, they put you in a bedsit. . . There are agencies out there and now they’re starting to filter through into the prison system (Prisoner, prison 3).

Criminal justice staff also viewed the introduction of third sector housing advice and support organisations into prisons as a positive move which could actively improve the chances of obtaining housing for prisoners on release:

It’s a win-win situation because the panic of going out homeless can cause prisoners 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 (Prison staff, prison 6).

The role of TSOs in helping offenders to keep their accommodation where possible by liaising with landlords, social housing providers and the Benefits Agency was also noted. However, despite recognition of the importance of good housing in reducing re-offending, the general consensus was that the housing needs of offenders were still not being fully addressed. Third sector representatives highlighted various barriers which could hinder their ability to help. These included high demand and minimal staffing of services:

There’s just me that works here for [name of TSO] and often prisoners are really surprised by that. So when they say “I’ve put in 15 applications to see somebody from [name of TSO]” and it’s like, “This is it! There’s just me!” (Third sector representative, prison 3).

Perhaps unsurprisingly the two most significant barriers identified were the difficulty of getting local authorities to accept (ex)offenders as in priority need, even where they were vulnerable, and the lack of suitable accommodation:

You can refer somebody to loads of different places, but if they’re not in priority need 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 . . . , that person will still leave prison homeless (Third sector representative, prison 6).

In order to control the volume of referrals for housing, local authorities could be highly restrictive in their assessment of priority need and this was identified as a particular issue with local authorities in London. This may be due to acute housing shortages or local lettings policies which are exercised in some boroughs and may exclude certain groups of applicants from some housing provision (Pawson and Mullins, 2003). Although local homelessness strategies, introduced by the Homelessness Act (2002), were designed to develop partnership working between local authorities, TSOs and housing providers (Homelessness Act, 2002, part 4), and examples of such collaboration to increase the capacity and diversity of housing options for ex-offenders do exist (DCLG, 2009), in the present research there was little evidence that these relationships had been effectively established, thereby reducing any impact that housing advisors in prisons could have:

I don’t really think that it matters what housing advisors you have in . . . because essentially they’re still fairly reliant on local authority housing providers when people get outside and that’s the key problem (Prison staff, prison 1).

The best intentions of criminal justice agencies and housing TSOs could be thwarted if local authorities were reluctant to prioritise the housing of ex-offenders despite the importance of housing for successful resettlement and reducing re-offending. One TSO representative recounted an incident where a women who was vulnerable due to a history of abuse but who
also had a history of violence was deemed by the local authority to be too high a risk for accommodation. The TSO then asked the local authority for a list of temporary accommodation providers such as B&Bs for the woman and was told that she was too high a risk to even be given such a list. The TSO suggested that the local authority wished to dissuade this ex-offender from settling in the local area, although there may have been other explanations for its actions. In such instances, it can appear that crime control concerns take precedence over housing need and attempts to reduce re-offending if offenders are perceived as posing a threat to community safety (Harding and Harding, 2006). This could even be the case 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, 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 (Third sector representative, prison 1).

Even after an (ex)offender is deemed eligible for social housing, prison and TSO staff suggested that housing providers can be reluctant to take on those with complex needs. Help such as support packages to enable them live independently may be necessary to convince landlords that they are able to sustain independent tenancies, both in the social and private housing sectors (Pawson and Mullins, 2003). If such needs remain unaddressed, the “revolving door” between the prison and the community is more likely to continue as they may be excluded 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… 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… Every time they’ve come back in, their options are limited further (Third sector representative, prison 3).

Even when housing was provided, the need to promote desistance from crime and reduce re-offending was not always considered in deciding the location of the accommodation, for example, if it was too distant from support agencies, a place of work or pro-social peer groups. This in turn could 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… And because he was homeless, he was relocated by the council to an area where he couldn’t get that… And consequently he got back into crime (Third sector representative, prison 3).

Difficulties working with local authorities are likely to be exacerbated for offenders who do not have “a local connection” with the area where they are imprisoned. TSO interviewees expressed concerns over securing offenders’ accommodation in the area of choice. A fundamental co-ordination problem occurred where prison-based housing advice services lacked close links with local authorities and TSOs providing housing advice and support services in areas other than where the prison is based.

> 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 offenders who come from rural areas (Meek, 2006), or are serving a sentence in England and requiring re-housing in Wales and 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). Several of the social housing providers with which the prisons had links had very strict engagement criteria, often as a condition of their funding, and only offenders from certain areas could use their services. Out of the survey respondents who identified accommodation as one of the key areas for improvement, nearly 50 per cent emphasised the need for better links with housing organisations throughout the country (Gojkovic et al., 2011b). However, such provision may be
complex and costly to prisons if it involves contracting several TSOs to be able to provide housing advice for different parts of the country. Reflecting this concern, third sector and criminal justice respondents were fearful of the effects of public sector spending cuts on housing services for prisoners, confirming that services had already been being reduced and more cuts were expected:

There are a lot of housing agencies that are up for new funding and it’s just not happening, so our problems are increasing with the recession (Prison staff, prison 7).

Social impact bonds

More recently, housing-related TSOs have been involved in SIB, which use “payment by results” (PBR) to address the resettlement of short-term prisoners. One of the advantages of PBR schemes is said to be the innovation and creativity that new independent providers such as TSOs can bring to such projects (MoJ, 2010). St Giles Trust is one of the key partners in the SIB scheme which is currently being piloted in HMP Peterborough. “Through-the-gate services” are offered to (ex)offenders to secure accommodation and undertake education and training. Some prison staff interviewees, however, expressed concerns about the PBR scheme, fearing it could lead to “quick fix” housing solutions, after which the ex-offenders in the community would fall “off the radar”:

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… We can measure how many people go into accommodation on release. But after that… where do these people end up… ? (Prison staff, prison 2).

Securing settled, long-term housing for (ex)offenders is notoriously difficult, but to evaluate the efficacy of housing TSOs working in the SIB scheme, it would be more useful to look at longer term outcomes of housing on reducing re-offending, rather than the proposed 12 month outcomes. Defining complex outcomes remains one of the key challenges of PBR schemes (Fox and Albertson, 2011), and most have settled for simple outcomes that are more related to future savings in public expenditure than long-term outcomes for individuals. Payment criteria are due to be tightened to take into account the type of offender, seriousness of crime and the level of long-term needs (MoJ, 2011). The evidence from the current research suggests that the success of the housing part of the scheme will depend not only on the effectiveness of the TSOs but also on cooperation from local housing providers and the available housing stock. This is an area that requires further research as SIB and PBR schemes develop.

Discussion and conclusions

The housing of ex-prisoners has been described as “one of the most important, yet most intractable, problems in the whole resettlement agenda” (Maguire and Nolan, 2007, p. 167). TSOs now work with many prisons in order to help secure existing accommodation and/or house offenders on release from prison. This is essential given that over 50 per cent of social housing is now provided by third sector landlords (Pawson and Mullins, 2010) and much of the essential housing advice and support services are also provided by TSOs.

To some degree, this appears to have been successful. In 2010-2011, the target set by NOMS to have 81.3 per cent of offenders in settled or suitable accommodation at the end of their sentence was achieved with 86.7 per cent of offenders (NOMS, 2011). However, the definition of “suitable accommodation” is somewhat unclear, and according to the offender survey, many prisoners remain unaware of third sector housing services or do not use them, although this finding should be treated with some caution given the low response rate. TSOs also face a number of barriers which affect their ability to secure accommodation provision.

Under the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities must have a strategy to prevent homelessness which should be based on a review of homelessness in the district and include planning for the current and future housing needs of vulnerable offenders (DCLG, 2009). Offenders are likely to be an unpopular group who may be seen as “undeserving” of scarce accommodation (Maguire and Nolan, 2007), and policies designed to control crime
and anti-social behaviour may involve the formal or informal exclusion of ex-offenders from social housing. The apparent conflict between resettlement and housing policies therefore represents “a more fundamental difficulty” than improving the quality of housing advice in prisons (Harding and Harding, 2006, p. 147). The dislocation of the criminal justice and housing silos, which has become more apparent since the loss of direct access probation housing provision, along with the difficulties of securing housing provision for offenders who do not have a local connection in the area where the prison is located, makes an effective partnership approach between criminal justice agencies, third sector housing services and local authorities essential. To improve the housing of ex-prisoners, local authorities and other housing providers could be more willing to accept them as potential service users, and better links could be made between local homelessness strategies, choice-based letting systems and criminal justice resettlement programmes. The potential success of other initiatives that promote partnership working between local criminal justice and other statutory agencies, and TSOs, such as IOM is also called into question. IOM is a framework that seeks to ensure that repeat offenders are managed in a coordinated way through enhanced supervision and better access to services to address their criminogenic needs. Recent initiatives to increase the involvement of the third sector in IOM have strengthened links between third and statutory sector organisations (Wong et al., 2012), but until the numerous gaps in housing provision are addressed and ex-offenders are accepted by all the agencies which need to be involved in IOM, including housing providers, TSOs attempting to secure accommodation for (ex)offenders are likely to continue to face substantial difficulties.

The reluctance to accommodate ex-offenders felt by social and private housing providers may be overcome if they can secure access to support packages, or if their rental income is guaranteed, to reduce the perceived anxieties about the risks posed by this group (DCLG, 2009). However, in the face of recent budget cuts and the end of the ring-fencing of the Supporting People budget, TSOs working with offenders are likely to have very limited resources for such ongoing support, and further research is needed to examine the impact of these measures on housing outcomes for offenders. Prison-based third sector housing projects and advisors are also under threat. In one of the case study prisons, housing advice services had already been taken “in house” as the prison felt it could do a more cost-effective job.

Welfare reforms affecting entitlement to housing benefit, reductions in public expenditure, and reforms in access to housing and homelessness provisions in the Localism Act 2011 are all likely to change and potentially further reduce social housing options for ex-offenders (Mullins, 2012). The Localism Act, for example, ends the requirement to consider tenants and new applicants on the same basis and provides greater flexibility for authorities to exclude new applicants. Local authorities may also meet their homelessness duties by housing applicants in the private sector even where this is against their wishes. It has been argued that the private rented sector may be the best option for many ex-offenders, due to the shortage of social housing, provided that tenants are able to obtain high quality, sustainable accommodation and are properly supported (Crisis, 2011). Although concerns have been raised about the quality of private rental housing (Shelter, 2008), in the current economic and political climate TSOs attempting to secure housing for offenders are likely to find it necessary to build up links with private housing providers as well as public and third sector agencies, both within and outside their locality.

It is also worth noting that whilst stable housing plays an important role in helping to reduce the risk of re-offending, it cannot take place in isolation from other initiatives. Structural factors such as housing and employment may take away the economic need to commit crime, but desistance from offending is an active, continual process which requires ex-offenders to have the motivation not to re-offend. Initiatives such as mentoring schemes or floating support workers to help clients to manage their accommodation, or overcome crises that emerge (Maguire and Nolan, 2007) are already provided by some TSOs but could be expanded in order to enhance and maintain ex-offenders’ motivation to desist from crime.

This paper establishes a clear need for further research in this area, not only to evaluate schemes such as SIB and IOM, but also to consider the barriers which may hinder TSO work.
in this area from the perspective of agencies which were not included in this research, such as local authorities, and private and other social housing providers. Furthermore, in order to further evaluate the role of TSOs in securing housing provision, longitudinal research could examine what third sector housing support prisoners are given and follow them up after their release to ascertain their eventual housing outcomes and gauge the effectiveness of such support.

References


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