

HSHAWB 10 Prison Officers' Association

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Llywodraeth Leol a Thai | Local Government and Housing Committee

Bil Digartrefedd a Dyrannu Tai Cymdeithasol (Cymru) | Homelessness and Social Housing Allocation (Wales) Bill

Ymateb gan: Prison Officers' Association | Evidence from: Prison Officers' Association

Submission on Homelessness Following Release from Prison

By Paul Cotterell, Prison Officer and POA Representative, HMP Cardiff

Introduction

This submission is presented by Paul Cotterell, a serving Prison Officer at HMP Cardiff and a union representative for the Prison Officers' Association (POA). While the POA does not currently hold a formal national policy on homelessness after release from prison, this submission is based on my professional experience within the prison system and on data collected from official sources and stakeholders. The observations herein are intended to provide a front-line perspective on a growing and critical issue affecting both public safety and rehabilitation outcomes.

The Scale of the Problem

Homelessness among prison leavers remains a deeply concerning and worsening issue. In the period from April 2023 to March 2024, 13.1% of individuals released from prisons across England and Wales were homeless upon release—an increase from 11.3% in the previous year. In absolute terms, this translates to more than 9,200 individuals released into homelessness or rough sleeping during that year. On average, approximately 800 people each month leave custody without a place to stay.

Moreover, there has been a 45% increase in the number of individuals rough sleeping three months after their release, rising from 2,330 to 3,375. These figures, sourced from Ministry of Justice (MOJ) data and NACRO analysis, paint a stark picture of the systemic challenges faced by former prisoners in accessing safe, stable accommodation.

The Link Between Homelessness and Reoffending

The correlation between homelessness and reoffending is well documented. Individuals released into homelessness are at significantly higher risk of engaging in antisocial behaviour, theft, substance abuse, and other criminal activities. In my experience as a prison officer, I have personally encountered individuals who have stated that they committed offences specifically to return to custody, where they would at least have shelter, warmth, and regular meals.

One particularly distressing case involved a man with multiple medical conditions and a history of substance abuse, who wept upon release due to having no accommodation and fearing both for his life and for relapse into addiction. This example is not isolated; many individuals work hard to overcome addiction during their custodial sentences only to be released back onto the streets with minimal support, where relapse becomes almost inevitable.

Gaps in the Current System

Despite regional improvements—for example, in the Wales probation region, where 79.4% of ex-offenders were in settled accommodation three months post-release (a 1.5% increase on the previous year)—many still fall through the cracks. There is a critical shortage of suitable housing options, and current provision often fails to meet the needs of those leaving custody.

Privately run hostels, which are sometimes the only available option, are frequently described by former prisoners as unsafe and counterproductive, particularly for those in recovery. I have been told by numerous individuals that they would prefer to sleep rough than risk relapse or harm in such environments.

A Proposal for Transitional Accommodation

In response to this urgent need, I propose the establishment of supervised transitional accommodation—akin to bail hostels—operated by trained prison and probation staff. These facilities would serve as short-term, warded environments for newly released individuals with no fixed abode. They would:

Offer a safe, structured, and substance-free environment.

Include strict conditions such as curfews, no-drug/no-alcohol policies, and drug testing protocols.

Allow residents to voluntarily engage while receiving continued support from probation services, social services, drug and alcohol workers, and employment advisors.

Provide stability while individuals apply for benefits, secure long-term housing, or pursue employment or education.

Though requiring initial investment in infrastructure and staffing, such facilities would likely yield long-term savings by reducing rough sleeping, improving rehabilitation outcomes, and decreasing reoffending rates. It will also improve public perception of safety in cities and towns. Importantly, participation in this scheme would be voluntary, offering a choice for those who genuinely wish to reintegrate and rebuild their lives.

Conclusion

Homelessness upon release from prison is not just a housing issue—it is a public safety, public health, and human dignity issue. We must break the cycle of incarceration and homelessness through practical, humane, and evidence-based solutions. The implementation of supervised transitional housing, backed by experienced prison and probation staff, represents a promising and necessary step forward.

As a front-line prison officer, I urge policymakers to prioritise this issue with the seriousness it deserves. No one should be left to sleep on the streets after serving their sentence. True justice must include a path to reintegration, not a return to desperation.

Submitted by:

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