

Exploring the impact of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 on women involved in the criminal justice system

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Abstract

In 2014, legislation was introduced in Wales that placed new obligations on local authorities to prevent homelessness. However, the Act removed priority need status for prison leavers.

This research project aimed to explore how the Housing (Wales)

Act 2014 impacted on women involved in the criminal justice system (cjs) who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The report is based on qualitative interviews with 32 stakeholders, including women in prison who were homeless or at risk of homelessness, as well as the practitioners working with them.

Findings

- The research revealed barriers to successful implementation of the Act: resources and capacity; understanding women's needs and capabilities; attitudes and judgments; approach and managing expectations; and problems with multi-agency working.
- There was widespread recognition that a lack of resources hinders proper implementation of the Act generally and specifically in relation to women involved in the CJS.
- Interviews with women prisoners and staff across probation and charities exposed the perception that local authority assessments around priority need – and understanding of complex needs – vary from person-to-person and area-to-area.
- A key problem discussed across all sectors was the lack of resources to support women who face multiple disadvantage.
- The Act was packaged as a framework for 'doing things differently' yet a recurrent theme which emerged from the interviews was that there had been resistance to change.
- For the Act to work well for women in the CJS, communication and information sharing across agencies is key. Feedback on multi-agency working varied from area to area. There appeared to be a disparity between multi-agency working at a strategic level and the extent to which this information-sharing trickled down to people working on the ground.
- While there tends to be agreement among interviewees that the previous system was not working for all people, the removal of priority need status for prison leavers remains a source of vast disagreement between local authority staff (who broadly agreed with the decision) and staff from frontline charities and probation.
- Local authority and probation officers interviewed tended to agree that if processes were followed and resources allowed then the new system could work. However, most identified barriers to this happening in practice, including issues in relation to: the referral process; identifying and responding to priority need; and working with women pre-release.

Recommendations

- For the legislation to be effective adequate financial resources must be in place across all sectors.
- The legislation should be amended to restore priority need status for prison leavers.
- Training should be provided for staff within local authority housing departments. This should be comprehensive face-to-face training about the experiences, vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms, as well as the needs and capabilities, of women involved in the CJS.
- Local authorities should publish a clear summary of how vulnerabilities could be evidenced for priority need assessments. This should be tailored to women involved in the CJS, taking into consideration the likelihood of multiple disadvantage.
- When possible, priority need assessments for women in prison should be carried out face-to-face. Where not possible, video conference calls should be made.
- Routine training for private rental sector (PRS) landlords around issues such as domestic abuse, mental health issues and substance use. Importantly, local authorities should combine this with practical measures around how PRS landlords can be supported if they accept tenants involved in the CJS.
- Targeted support and advice should be provided for women involved in the CJS around how they can access the PRS.
- Meetings with women involved in the CJS should take place in private.
- A multi-agency working group, made up of frontline staff working in the field, should be established to discuss how the referral and assessment process could be improved for women on short sentences.
- There should be regular multi-agency meetings or conference calls between housing and probation to discuss referrals, assessments and pre-release planning for women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Prisons should not release Welsh women on Friday afternoons, considering the distance they may need to travel and subsequent risk of housing offices being closed when they arrive.