

Homelessness Prevention Taskforces

Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) started establishing "Homelessness Prevention Taskforces" (HPTs) across regions in England and Wales as the COVID-19 outbreak began in March 2020.

Thousands of prisoners are released into homelessness each year. This programme was the first time that HMPPS received funding to provide accommodation for prisoners upon release. Under HPTs, if prison leavers do not have suitable housing, they are offered temporary accommodation (up to 56 days) while a more permanent solution is found.

Who was involved?

During the early stages of the pandemic, HPTs were designed to be part of an "early release scheme" of prisoners to support prisons to manage the risk of COVID-19 in custody. HMPPS had worked with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to establish whether they could fund the scheme under pre-existing homelessness initiatives. However, emergency funding was secured separately by the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS to support HPTs to deliver a new scheme, given the public protection and public health risks involved.

During the establishment of HPTs, MHCLG continued to offer advice and learning from their own experiences in the policy area, and the Welsh Government played a similar role with relevant teams. This included advice on how to engage effectively with local authorities and introducing teams to housing options they had previously used in different regions.

"We engaged MHCLG about how to communicate effectively with local authorities and they sent across relevant contact details. They helped us a lot with that." – Graham MacKenzie, Head of Policy in the Ministry of Justice

Staff were redeployed within HMPPS to establish HPTs in different regions, helping find accommodation options for homeless prisoners upon their release. Collaborating with local authorities was vital, as they have a pre-existing legislative requirement to intervene and prevent homelessness in their area. If a local authority was unable to source accommodation the HPT would temporarily house someone through a private provider or a hotel while they found a more permanent solution. They worked with Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), private landlord associations, public health teams, the Department for Work and Pensions, the police, and voluntary organisations, such as Clinks who helped with the marketing and positioning of the scheme.¹

How were decisions made?

The taskforces were centrally driven by HMPPS via a tiered, internal meeting system. Individuals from across HMPPS teams attended either a bronze, silver or gold meeting based on their seniority. This allowed HPT leads to share good practice, resources and discuss problems in their region with peers. One person would attend two meetings and act as a link so issues could be escalated, as well as creating a feedback loop between local and central teams. Specialist teams within HMPPS were also

¹ Clinks promotes and represents the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system. To find out more visit their website: <https://www.clinks.org/>

created to focus on specific issues, such as mothers being released from prison which could involve further collaboration with social services.

In the North West, the HPT started hosting weekly meetings with CRC colleagues and senior commissioners, to discuss housing solutions for people who were proving particularly hard to house. By bringing together partners with the appropriate authority to make decisions, they were able to talk through cases and find an immediate solution. The success of these meetings was shared with other HPT leads in their weekly meeting who subsequently replicated the approach in their areas.

“It was solution focused and quick. We unpicked cases where there were no pathways and unblocked pathways. We had joint diagnostics of issues and joint solving of solutions.” – Matthew Ashworth, Senior Operational Manager in the HMPPS

What has been the impact?

The primary impact of HPTs has been housing people who would otherwise be homeless with wide ranging outcomes. For example, in one case temporary accommodation allowed a mother to gain access to her children in social services, while another person was made comfortable and safe after being released from prison while they were seriously ill.

Overall, the focus on housing prisoners has led to an increase in the number of “*duty to refer*” applications made by offender managers - who process prisoners upon their release - to local authorities over the past year.² This has resulted in an increase in prison leavers being permanently housed by their local authority. An official evaluation of HPTs is ongoing, but previous research shows a stable environment is vital to rehabilitation, and those properly housed are less likely to reoffend.

In securing better outcomes for prisoner leavers, HMPPS was also able to build better relationships with partners including:

- **Better working relationships with local authorities:** In offering temporary accommodation for 56 days, HPTs gave local authorities more time to source a permanent solution for individuals in their area. This created the environment to build relationships, and for constructive dialogue about how HMPPS can help the local authority to find a solution for those more challenging to house.
- **New accommodation pathways:** The funding has meant HPTs have been able to build relationships with private landlord associations to increase the supply of housing available to prison leavers. They have hosted regional events to explain the scheme and will continue to build relationships with the private sector.

“It has been an incredibly positive experience working with Local Authorities. Through this work, we have set up four regional boards across Wales and each of those are responsible for the local authorities in those areas. Both sides have really improved our communication over the past year.” – Judith Magaw, Head of Reducing Reoffending for the Probation Services in Wales

² “Duty to refer” is a legal obligation on specified public authorities (in this case HMPPS) to refer service users who they think may be homeless or threatened with homelessness to the local authority.

Challenges for collaboration

Structures

- **Internal systems** differed between local authorities. This meant HPT teams were often unaware of how an individual local authority approached housing in their area or the processes they were required to complete to make a housing application on behalf of a prison leaver.

Relationships

- HPT teams were sometimes **unaware of the support they could receive** from local authorities as they lacked experience engaging with them about housing options. As they built relationships through the pandemic, they realised they could benefit from the positive relationships that councils had already built with housing providers in the region.

Enablers of collaboration

Motivations

- There was a **shared purpose** between organisations as each partner recognised the immediate need to prevent the prison service from being overwhelmed during the pandemic. This supported open conversations about how local authorities and private landlords could help HPT teams.

Structures

- HPTs were established regionally, which allowed for **local ownership**. The central team gained insight from staff on the ground who were able to build relationships with local partners.
- **Dedicated and flexible funding** was essential to the success of the scheme. Without additional funding from the Treasury, it would not have been possible for HPTs to pay for 56 days of accommodation. However, initially it was unclear whether funding would continue beyond the pandemic. This uncertainty prevented regional teams from doing more long-term strategic planning with their funding allocation.

Relationships

- A dedicated funding stream meant HPTs could adopt a **solutions-focused tone** with local authorities. This was particularly important where local authorities were unable to provide immediate housing to an individual, as HMPPS were now able to offer support. There was also greater flexibility in how the funding could be used e.g. as a deposit or rent advance in the private rental sector, opening up new accommodation pathways with private landlords.
- Extra resourcing meant teams had the time to **maintain open, frequent communication** with local authorities to understand the challenges they faced and develop a tailored approach to achieve better outcomes for prison leavers.

“Temporarily redeployed central resources meant that we were able to task one dedicated manager with delivery of a programme of 32 borough-based meetings. This enabled us to reset and strengthen local relationships between probation teams and local authority housing options services and form some new agreements about future joint working arrangements.” – Karen Tipping, Head of Community Integration for London

Table 1: Summary of challenges and enablers

	Challenges for collaboration	Enablers of collaboration
Motivations		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shared purpose
Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Internal systems and bureaucracies ● Uncertainty about future funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Local ownership ● Dedicated and flexible funding
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited awareness about the role of other organisations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Solutions focused tone ● Open and frequent communication

Lessons learned for collaborative leadership

The overarching lesson was that something could be done to prevent prisoners from being released into homelessness. There was a determination to never return to a situation where people might “slip through the gaps”. In recognition of the success of the scheme, additional funding has been announced to continue HPTs in parts of the country.

Additional learning to carry forward includes:

- **Maintain a solution-focused tone.** Sharing solutions rather than problems changed the tone of the relationship between HPTs and local authorities. This reduced disagreements about who was responsible for housing specific individuals and the additional funding eased the pressure to find permanent accommodation immediately.

"The people we manage often present with complex issues, and it is a positive outcome of the scheme that we are becoming more empowered to have a joint conversation with local authorities and accommodation partners and find solutions." - Jennet Peters, Senior Contract Manager at HMPPS

- **Reframing the language around accommodation for prison leavers.** In the past, discussions were driven around accommodation being needed for local “protection reasons”, which portrayed prison leavers in a negative way. During the pandemic this has shifted to positive discussions about the “public health reasons” for housing prison leavers and the potential benefits to communities, such as how housing supports rehabilitation and reduces reoffending. Moving away from the negative language of “risk” is seen as a way of increasing the availability of accommodation by encouraging partners to offer their properties to prison leavers. By focusing on public health and rehabilitation, partners can see the benefits of supporting former prisoners without focusing on negative associations or stereotypes.