Wales Community Rehabilitation Company (Wales CRC) response to Welsh Government Rough Sleeping Action Plan.

Wales Community Rehabilitation Company (Wales CRC) was formed on 1 June 2014 as part of the government’s reform of probation services. We provide rehabilitation and offender management services to around 10,000 low and medium risk offenders in Wales. We work with those sentenced by the Courts to Community Orders and those released from prison under licence supervision. Following legislative change in 2014 almost all prisoners sentenced to more than one day imprisonment are subject to licence supervision for 12 months. Previously supervision was only for those sentenced to over 12 months imprisonment.

Wales CRC welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Welsh Government Rough Sleepers Action Plan.

We have also had the opportunity to provide a written and oral submission, to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Inquiry into Rough Sleeping.

We recognise the concerns of Welsh Government in the rise in rough sleepers. A snapshot of homelessness among our service users found 88 who identified themselves as rough sleepers from 635 who identified as homeless on a data capture on 31/01/2018. We have canvassed our offender managers across Wales, and spoken to our accommodation advice workers, some of whom have worked for a significant period in the same geographical areas. They report a rise in rough sleepers although we do not have precise data to confirm this. In their view this rise is most marked in the past 12-18 months.

There are a group of service users who can be described as entrenched rough sleepers. In our experience they commonly have complex support needs, including substance misuse, mental health problems and health issues. Their needs may not be supported due to limited or no access to services such as GPs or CPNs. We recognise that this group may include those who are hard to reach and who may have exhausted all other options of support.

In addition service users end up rough sleeping due to a change in circumstances, the breakdown of existing accommodation or due to additional barriers. An example from Dyfed Powys area which illustrates this is of a male service user who had stable accommodation but lost it when he was remanded in prison for 7 months as a result of housing benefit being limited to a maximum of 6 months. He was sentenced to a Community Order and lived initially with his mother. Unfortunately this arrangement broke down. He had nowhere to go and informed his offender manager that he was ‘sleeping under a bridge’. He attended the Homelessness Persons Unit in Llanelli but was told that he was not eligible for emergency accommodation told us he had ended up sleeping in McDonald’s toilet floor.

While some areas, notably Cardiff, are well served with emergency accommodation, in other areas it is insufficient, unsuitable or does not exist. In some areas this accommodation is only available during the winter months, often provided by local Churches or charities. There are barriers to access, for example, in Newport where the Night Shelter offers a first come first served service and moves
every night to a different location. Keeping track of this is difficult for service users who already have a very chaotic lifestyle and possibly face additional barriers such as substance misuse. There are some areas, such as Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen and rural areas where there is none.

Although Wales CRC have no statutory duty to provide accommodation services, we recognise the link between accessing and sustaining suitable and safe accommodation and desistance from offending. Our Through the Gate work in custody, which starts on entry to custody and is continued in the last 12 weeks before release, includes early identification of accommodation needs and liaison with community based offender managers and local authority housing services in line with the National Pathway for Homelessness Services to Children, Young People and Adults Leaving the Secure Estate. We also commission an accommodation support and advice service from Justice Cymru, a pan Wales consortium of expert advisers who provide bespoke provision and support through direct delivery, utilising their extensive network of community partners. We are committed to working in partnership with agencies to address the accommodation needs of our service users, including rough sleepers.

Rough Sleeping Action Plan 2018 – 2010

Prevention

We support the proposal to promote early identification of those at risk of rough sleeping and would wish to work together to ensure routes to services are widely known among our prison based Through the Gate staff and our community based offender managers.

We welcome the recognition of the need to provide emergency housing arrangements. This would benefit our prison leavers and and those supervised in the community who have complex needs and limited family or friendship support. The benefits increase if such accommodation is available over a wider geographical area than at present. In our view the removal of automatic priority need for men and women leaving prison has impacted significantly on their access to accommodation. The application of priority need has not resulted in prison leavers being assessed as vulnerable and are therefore not able to access accommodation so may be more reliant on emergency accommodation.

Support

We welcome the acknowledgement that rough sleepers often have multiple and complex needs which can present as additional barriers to accessing services. Our offender managers work in partnership with outreach services to identify service users who require bespoke support. There are many examples of our offender managers providing practical help for service users themselves such as warm clothing, toiletries and food.

Outreach

For those cases where emergency accommodation is not available, the provision of outreach services, including food, warm clothing / bedding and also access to showers is critical in terms of basic humanity but also in terms of engagement and assisting the rough sleeper to access accommodation at a later stage. Our offender managers have commented on the reality that, if a person in unable to wash, that person is unlikely to be able to access support and accommodation. Provision of outreach support appears geographically patchy. Access to GPs, and substance support services are also a key element of the required outreach package of support.

Emergency Accommodation
In addition to the comments above, emergency accommodation, as well as geographical variation and paucity in some area, is in some areas weather dependent. The apparent increase in rough sleepers has not necessarily been matched with an increase in provision. While not all apparently homeless people on the streets are actually homeless, we recognise a picture of increasing homelessness and rough sleeping amongst our service users which includes some of the most alienated and vulnerable citizens in Wales. We would therefore welcome the consideration to amend secondary legislation to modify priority need groups, including rough sleepers and which also may include persons released from prison.

Joint Working

We are committed to continuing to work in partnership with Welsh Government and other agencies to overcome barriers for service users. As a previous member of the Prisoner Accommodation Resettlement Working Group (PARWG) we would welcome the reformation of this group as a vehicle for working together.