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Meg Hillier MP
Chair of the Public Accounts Committee

BY EMAIL

15 December 2023

Dear Chair,

Thank you again for the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee on 4 December on the Government's work to reduce the harm from illegal drugs. I committed to write to you in more detail in relation to support for prison leavers. Sir Chris Wormald is writing to you separately on the questions for the Department of Health and Social Care on the treatment and recovery portfolio.

Q107: We have talked about prison leavers generally and had the Ministry of Justice here. At the moment the 84-day housing target is being met well by the Ministry of Justice, but clearly if someone had drug issues and treatment is continuing after those 84 days there is significant drop off about moving into permanent housing. Is that something you are looking at across the strategy and how are you working with Ministry of Justice to make sure that doesn't happen?

The Government's Drugs Strategy 'From Harm to Hope' recognises the high rates of substance misuse among offenders and sets out the ambition to support them into treatment and recovery. This includes ensuring prison leavers stay engaged in treatment and wider support, such as housing and employment. This response sets out the relevant action Government is taking to support prison leavers with substance misuse problems into accommodation and treatment in order to reduce reoffending, homelessness and further substance misuse.

The Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) Prisons Strategy White Paper includes plans to improve prison leavers' access to temporary accommodation. This includes delivery of the transitional accommodation service, known as Community Accommodation Service – Tier 3 (CAS-3). This provides prison-leavers with a stable base on release, improving their opportunities to engage with community support services and find employment. CAS-3 was launched in July 2021 in five probation regions, providing up to 12 weeks accommodation on release with support to move to settled accommodation. The service has now been expanded to all probation regions to support the thousands of offenders who are at risk of leaving prison homeless. Between 1st July 2021 and 31 March 2023, 5,796 individuals, who would have otherwise been homeless, were accepted on to CAS-3.

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While in CAS-3, individuals can access support with securing settled accommodation from their local authority. Since the Homelessness Reduction Act was implemented in 2018, councils have duties to seek to prevent or relieve homelessness for all eligible households, regardless of priority need or if they are intentionally homeless. This means more support is available for more people, and earlier, including for prison leavers.

More broadly, MoJ and HMPPS have a strong track record of supporting prison leavers into settled accommodation, maintaining performance at around 75% of prison leavers in settled accommodation at 3 months post-release. They have maintained this performance in the context of wider barriers to finding settled accommodation including general housing shortages, delays in obtaining benefits, high up-front rental costs impacting affordability, and landlords' unwillingness to house people with criminal records.

This success is welcome, but the Government continues to look for improvement. The MoJ has joined up, and works closely, with the Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to drive forward increases in the numbers in settled accommodation. DLUHC's Accommodation for Ex-Offenders (AFEO) scheme was launched in July 2021 and specifically focuses on supporting ex-offenders at risk of homelessness or rough sleeping, recognising that people with an offending history can face additional barriers in securing accommodation, particularly in the private rented sector. The funding allows schemes to provide a range of support typically consisting of one or more of the following: rental deposits and landlord incentives, as well as dedicated support staff including landlord liaison and tenancy support/sustainment officers.

The AFEO scheme has been committed up to March 2025, and so far over £27m has been paid out to 111 local authorities, across 84 schemes. DLUHC's latest data shows that this funding has supported over 3,100 ex-offenders into their own privately rented accommodation.

Alongside housing support, we know that keeping prison leavers with substance misuse problems in treatment is crucial to reducing reoffending, and MoJ works closely with health partners to strengthen continuity of care. MoJ has recruited Health and Justice Partnership Coordinators nationwide to improve links between prison and community treatment services, and are expanding the availability of secure video calling, so prison leavers can meet community providers before release. To enable probation to support attendance at treatment appointments, the Probation Notification and Actioning Project (PNAP) is being rolled out nationwide, which will make probation offender managers aware of prison leavers who were in treatment in prison and have been referred to community treatment., so that they can support them to engage.

The latest data shows that we are making progress, with continuity of treatment for prison leavers reaching a record high of 48% in September this year. This represents a 10-percentage point improvement over the past 12 months. The Joint Combating Drugs Unit will continue to work with departments to drive forward focused work to improve this through the drugs strategy.

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I hope this clarifies the action the Government is taking to support prison leavers with substance misuse problems into support services.

Q125: Drug testing on arrest and synthetic opioids.

I also commented on the capability of the drug testing on arrest technology to test for certain opiates during the evidence session. I have asked Home Office officials to seek further information on this point from the suppliers of the technology and I will update the Committee when we have it.

Yours sincerely,



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Lead Permanent Secretary for the 10-year Drugs Strategy