

Current practice in housing sex offenders

The question of how society handles the rehousing of sex offenders has raised considerable anxiety among professionals and the public. This research looks at the different ways in which social housing providers in three areas attempted to meet the challenges posed by the allocation of social housing to sex offenders whilst best providing for community safety. In particular, the role of housing professionals in multi-agency partnerships was examined, and the research considered the factors which support and inhibit their involvement. The research also puts forward pointers to good practice in involving housing providers in risk assessment and the role of housing in managing sex offenders in the community.

- f** Most professionals in the study areas accepted the importance of stable housing in managing risk, although the role of housing management in this process was often not clearly defined.
- f** Local authority housing officers were working in a variety of multi-agency partnerships.
- f** Information sharing was regarded as a key to multi-agency partnerships. A Common Housing Register was one way through which the sharing of information was facilitated.
- f** Multi-agency partnerships could give housing providers confidence in other agencies' risk assessments and meant that housing providers were less likely to consider excluding people from housing.
- f** Registered Social Landlords tended not to be involved in multi-agency partnerships involving statutory agencies. This could cause tensions in the nominations process.
- f** Housing officers' role in the assessment of risk was uncertain and practice differed between the study areas.
- f** Few multi-agency partners had developed a plan to manage emergency situations such as the media revealing the identity of individual sex offenders.

Background

There are 260,000 convicted sex offenders not in prison and of these 110,000 have victims who are children. Previous research suggests that lack of stable housing may be a risk indicator for reoffending. Following the implementation of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 and the Housing Act 1996 some local authorities refused to house this type of offender, though it is likely that they already had in the past. But social housing offers more security of tenure than the private rented sector and bed-and-breakfast accommodation. In all housing tenures there has been vigilante action forcing offenders to leave their homes.

Drawing on interviews with a wide variety of professionals in three study areas, each of which had divergent practice, the research focused on the issues social housing providers face in fulfilling their commitment towards greater community safety as well as meeting the housing needs of offenders. In two study areas, the issues were also discussed with a small number of members of tenants' associations.

Multi-agency partnership working

Local authority landlords in the study areas were working in a variety of multi-agency partnerships to explore issues and facilitate the rehousing of sex offenders. These included 'public protection panels', sometimes known as 'risk management panels'. In all of the study areas, the panels had a core membership drawn from the police, probation and social services. Housing officers were also panel members, but their involvement varied, for example, from being invited to join a panel to consider an individual case in which a housing issue arose, to being a key member with responsibility in all cases.

In one study area, these partnerships were working within protocols intended to be used consistently across a region of the country. These protocols included practical guidelines for landlords.

Multi-agency partnerships gave local authority landlords confidence in rehousing this type of offender and conveyed a feeling of shared responsibility. Multi-agency working also gave local authority landlord participants confidence in the assessments conducted by other agencies of the risks posed by individuals to the community. Where this confidence did not exist, either in respect of individual applicants or more generally, housing providers had more often considered exclusion.

As a result of the partnerships protocols concerning information-sharing between agencies, and in some cases within agencies, had been developed in all the study areas. Landlords had developed methods of keeping sensitive information confidential while ensuring that those with proven need to know have access. Most landlords were operating systems of confidentiality already used frequently in housing when dealing with sensitive tenant information.

Registered Social Landlords had not been involved in these partnerships in the study areas, even though they might find themselves rehousing sex offenders. This was because they are non-statutory agencies and other agencies expressed concern about widening the circle of those with information. However, many such landlords had developed their own networks with probation and social services which allowed for the referral of sex offenders directly from those agencies.

Risk assessment

Most sex offenders, particularly those released from prison, will be assessed as to the risk of their reoffending. Different agencies used different methods of assessing this risk, although this did not inhibit multi-agency discussion. There was considerable uncertainty in the study areas concerning the proper role of housing officers in risk assessment. In some of the areas studied, housing was regarded as a key part of the risk assessment process, and housing officers were therefore valued members of multi-agency panels. In other areas, housing authorities might well be excluded from the process.

In the study areas, those agencies or panels which compiled risk assessments commonly passed information to housing providers. Such a risk assessment was regarded as vital in shaping the decision to rehouse, as well as the choice and location of property.

In some of the study areas, housing providers had negotiated a referral document which contained the relevant information from the risk assessment and was designed to facilitate the statutory assessments for homelessness and the housing register.

Risk management

In the study areas, the risk assessment was generally regarded as essential to effective management of the

risks posed by sex offenders. Housing providers were playing a role in risk management, although this was done in partnership with other agencies. Housing providers' role varied across the study areas and depended upon the view taken about the objectives of housing management. For example, housing providers had different views on whether or not they should be monitoring individual tenants.

Few multi-agency partners had drawn up a plan that could be speedily used to manage risks in a situation of crisis.

Property types and location

A full range of property was being offered to offenders in the study areas. There was a tendency for all professionals, including housing ones, to see blocks with concierge/CCTV as the best solution where this was available. Where it was not available, housing officers were often left in a quandary. Use of this accommodation raised issues about how many offenders could be housed in each block and could raise problems about the impact of 'bunching' offenders. Housing officers also had some concerns about the reputation of their estates, particularly in areas where they were trying to reinvigorate demand.

Housing providers in the study areas commonly relied on other agencies' assessments as to the area and type of property to offer. However, they could find it difficult to make offers of accommodation which always complied with those assessments. For example, guidance that this should be in areas of lower numbers of children or not located near to schools or playgrounds was not always possible to fulfil. In itself this did not inhibit offers of accommodation but there was greater reliance on the level of support other agencies could offer to the tenant.

There was concern about the supply of certain accommodation in the study areas. In particular, there was a general lack of supported/monitored housing in areas with lower numbers of children. This meant that statutory agencies relied on some areas more than others because of their supply of certain types of accommodation. Where there was a shortage of secure temporary housing, the problems were exacerbated.

Support and monitoring

Housing offers in the study areas were often made on the understanding that support was offered to the tenant and that the monitoring of that tenant would

be undertaken by other organisations with proven expertise in these matters.

The vague boundaries to the role of 'housing management' made the limits to housing officers' role in support and monitoring unclear. Roles and relationships between housing providers and other relevant support agencies were being discussed and developed in the study areas.

Information handling

Local authorities and other housing providers in the study had developed effective systems to manage sensitive information. These systems tended to cover all sensitive information, not just in relation to sex offences. Those who needed to know information were directed to a particular housing officer, who dealt with applications for rehousing from sex offenders.

In one study area, information-sharing between housing providers, particularly regarding nominations from the local authority housing register to Registered Social Landlords, was facilitated by the development of a Common Housing Register.

A communication breakdown could be the cause of inappropriate allocation and a failure of risk management.

There was particular concern in certain areas that insufficient information was made available at an early stage of the rehousing process. This could lead to the inappropriate use of hostels and bed-and-breakfast as temporary accommodation.

Conclusions

From their study the researchers conclude that:

- If stable housing is seen as a factor in managing the risks posed by sex offenders, then the social sector clearly has an important role. However, the provision of bricks and mortar may be only part of the solution. For this reason it is vital that multi-agency partnerships are formed to own the problem and the solutions jointly. Moreover, there may be issues of monitoring and intensive support, which need to be negotiated as part of any housing package. Appropriate measures to ensure agency accountability are an essential part of any such package.
- Existing tenants do not always wish to have sex offenders excluded from social housing. A small

number of residents' association members interviewed for this project expressed mixed views, but were generally more concerned that any risks posed by sex offenders were actively managed by the responsible agencies.

- Where and how offenders live affects the assessment of the risks involved. Detailed knowledge of neighbourhoods can be important for both risk assessment and risk management. Housing providers often have this, but the role of housing management in the assessment and management of risk requires clarification. There is a need for national guidance to all partners, not just housing providers, which gives a consistent view concerning the role of housing.
- This study suggests that housing providers can usefully be brought into multi-agency discussions immediately after sensitive/forensic evidence has been dealt with. In the study areas, however, only local authority housing representatives were involved. Consideration should also be given to how Registered Social Landlords could be involved in multi-agency discussions.
- Joint training for housing providers and other agencies responsible for risk assessment and management could increase understanding of the role of housing among agencies responsible for sex offenders, as well as developing clarity and consistency of approach.
- The strategic, enabling role of local housing authorities means that they potentially have a role to play beyond that of housing provider. In drawing together their housing strategies, they could consider whether the present range of housing options is adequate for the emergency and permanent housing of sex offenders.
- There is a need for the multi-agency partnerships, and individual agencies, to develop plans to deal with situations of crisis, for example where an individual offender's identity is revealed by the media.

About the study

Three case study areas were selected. Two of these were single local authorities. The third area focused on the practice of four local authorities working to a regionally agreed set of protocols. Through interviews with participants in local multi-agency partnerships, housing professionals, and a small number of members of tenants' associations, the study explored the decision-making process in housing sex offenders.

How to get further information

The full report, **Housing sex offenders: an examination of current practice** by David Cowan, Rose Gilroy, Christina Pantazis and Mark Bevan, is published for the Foundation by the Chartered Institute of Housing (price £13.95, ISBN 1 900396 04 1).