

Approved Premises – a key aspect of public protection

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Lead on approved premises for The Probation Chiefs Association

Their proper title is approved premises although they are still commonly called bail hostels. But whichever name they go by, they tend to attract controversy.

Hopefully, Probation can shed some light rather than heat on the subject. There are 100 approved premises in England and Wales, providing 2,200 bed spaces. All but 11 of them are run by Probation in our capacity as a law enforcement agency whose primary job is to protect the public and reduce reoffending.

Approved premises are an important means of managing risk in the community. They are funded by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), of which Probation forms a part and they must comply with a specific set of regulations. This gives them authority to enforce requirements on those who must reside there as a condition of their bail, community supervision, or post-custody licence.

For many offenders, approved premises offer a staging post between prison and the community. The majority will have been released from substantial prison sentences on licence and be subject to Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements.

Since 2001 approved premises have been used primarily for those who pose a risk and require an increased level of monitoring in the community. Most remain situated in residential areas, reflecting the importance placed on re-integrating offenders back into their communities.

The change in the risk profile of offenders being



accommodated has occasionally provoked a public outcry, particularly in relation to sex offenders. So it is a tribute to staff that all approved premises have continued to operate safely.

They have excellent relationships with the police. Links with schools, nurseries and places of worship have been strengthened to ensure vulnerable individuals are kept safe and that there is an open dialogue about the work of the approved premises and the nature of the offenders housed. Some approved

premises have 'house committees' comprising neighbours who meet to discuss concerns and developments.

Offenders are required to pay their rent and their regime is carefully structured. Indeed, some offenders leaving open prisons complain that it is more restrictive than where they were before.

Breaches of rules, or behaviours/activities indicating an escalation of risk, even if they are not in themselves an offence, are dealt with swiftly - ultimately by recall to prison. For example, a child sex offender whose room was found to contain a large selection of sweets was returned to custody.

Approved premises offer links to education, training, employment and offending behaviour programmes. Reducing the risk of dangerous offenders is not just about containment and surveillance. It is also about, wherever possible, working in a structured way with offenders to enable them to lead law abiding independent lives.