

## South West Accommodation Gateway

The South West Accommodation Gateway (SWAG) project is managed by the Exeter-based South West regional office of the National Offender Management Service. NOMS is part of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) which was formed in May 2007.

Working with Her Majesty's Prison Service and the National Probation Service, NOMS aims to bridge the gap between custody and community – to punish, support and reform offenders so that they turn away from crime. NOMS aims to reduce re-offending by 10% by 2010.

Central to NOMS' operations are contestability and commissioning, in which NOMS selects the best possible service providers from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, co-ordinates their services and manages their performance through service level agreements and targets. Across England and Wales, NOMS funds over 1,100 service providers.

### Regional commissioning

NOMS has devolved responsibility for reducing re-offending and managing offenders to nine regional offices in England and one in Wales.

"With regionally-based commissioning, there's a short and direct line between regional governance and local provision," says Regional Offender Manager (ROM) South West, Kevin Lockyer. "We can target a service such as SWAG where we know there's a local need, working through existing and new providers to tailor services accordingly."

"SWAG is proving a good opportunity for NOMS South West to demonstrate its capacity to commission and deliver innovative, new services within the region," says SWAG Project Manager, Ruth Power.

### SWAG explained

SWAG is a two-year project, funded by the MoJ until March 2008. Its overarching aim is to reduce re-offending and crime, which is achieved by preventing and reducing the homelessness of offenders in the community and on release from custody.

A study from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that prisoners leaving custody homeless are twice as likely to re-offend in the following two years as those with settled housing.

SWAG seeks to:

- improve offenders' access to settled accommodation and their ability to sustain that accommodation
- develop effective working relationships between housing, prison and probation services in each Gateway area
- ensure that an understanding of offender housing need informs local and regional Supporting People and housing/homelessness strategy.

Reducing the homelessness of offenders benefits the wider community as well as the individual offender since it can enhance community safety and promote public protection. Access to stable accommodation facilitates the engagement of offenders in interventions to address their offending behaviour, and where necessary the effective monitoring of offenders. NOMS chose the South West of England for the Gateway pilot project because of the region's housing affordability challenges, the opportunities presented by the region's well developed partnerships and the availability of data on offender housing needs from NOMS South West's SWing project.

"The South West's housing affordability issues – which are second only to those in London and the South East – and previously patchy accommodation provision for offenders give us a real opportunity to model new approaches to service design and delivery," says Kevin Lockyer. "The lessons learned from SWAG will help to inform a sustainable model for getting more offenders into stable accommodation."

In addition to establishing a commissioning, performance management and evaluation framework for the project, SWAG has so far established:

- three community-based Gateway services that provide a single point of access to supported housing, private rented housing and other local accommodation for offenders in each Gateway area (Gateways opened in Plymouth and Dorset in September 2006, followed by Bristol in February 2007)
- more streamlined referral processes, including the piloting of a common referral and assessment form for offenders in need of accommodation and the development of a tailored IT system to facilitate the quick matching of offenders with vacant bed-spaces

- strategic relationships with housing providers and housing support providers – including local authorities – at a local and regional level, resulting in improved offender access to accommodation and better integration of offender need into partners' policy and commissioning.

SWAG delivery is led by the local probation offices in Plymouth (Devon and Cornwall Probation Area) and Dorset (Dorset Probation Area), and by Bristol City Council in Bristol. However, in both Plymouth and Bristol, a local voluntary sector agency is a critical delivery partner.

### **Consultation and communication**

From the start, NOMS South West engaged with local partners to understand their aims and activities and to ensure that SWAG services are relevant to local needs, circumstances and opportunities.

"We've built consultation into the Gateway development process, so the services we specify are informed by stakeholders," says Ruth Power. "In addition, we've established three local Gateway Partnership Boards to ensure ongoing communication with local stakeholders who can both support and inform the delivery of Gateway services.

"One of the benefits of regional commissioning is that we're 'close' enough to service delivery to ensure that our learning can quickly be used to inform and adjust the service as the pilot progresses."

### **SWAG experience**

NOMS South West is using its SWAG experience to develop its understanding of the potential of Gateways and improve its understanding of the link between accommodation status and re-offending. "We're continually learning about the Gateway model, referral processes and the potential for increased partnership outside the Criminal Justice System," says Ruth Power.

The pilot will inform future decisions on how best to target resources in the South West and other NOMS regions. It also contributes to the understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different delivery mechanisms and partnerships that may be available to NOMS as a commissioner.

"We've certainly seen the benefits of SWAG having staff with prison and/or probation experience working together with others that have experience as accommodation providers and/or commissioners of housing-related services from the voluntary and public sectors," says Ruth Power. "It has also been interesting to see how the choice of delivery partners has influenced delivery in each of the Gateway areas.

"SWAG has also been able to play a greater role in helping to achieve Accommodation Pathway sub-group objectives than expected, particularly raising the profile of offenders and NOMS in regional housing strategy and various regional forums."

### **SWAG outcomes and the future**

"Our committed team set up SWAG within a tight timescale and has managed a heavy caseload since," says Ruth Power. "We've been pleased with the number of offenders accommodated – more than 250 to March 2007 – our successful role as catalyst in developing new partnerships in the housing sector, and the willingness of local and regional housing partners to engage with us."

The final evaluation report, due by March 2008, will be a key resource and will include an estimation of the financial costs and benefits associated with the pilot.

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### **Executive summary**

NOMS South West is managing the South West Accommodation Gateway (SWAG), a two-year pilot project to reduce re-offending and crime by preventing and reducing the homelessness of offenders in the community and on release from custody.

The SWAG project has included three new community-based Gateway services that provide a single point of access to local accommodation for offenders in Plymouth, Dorset and Bristol. NOMS South West has been pleased with the results so far, over 250 offenders having been accommodated between September 2006 and March 2007.

