

LEAVING PRISON

When you are in custody and already have accommodation that you are renting, there are steps you should take to try and ensure that you do not lose this accommodation.

If you will be homeless when you leave prison, you should start exploring your housing options as soon as you know you are going to be released.

We have specialist officers who will work with you to try to prevent you from becoming homeless before leaving prison or to relieve your homelessness if you are released with no accommodation available to you.

We can help with:

- supporting you to have accommodation to return to you
- try to prevent you from becoming homeless
- look at alternative housing options

You should get in touch with us at the earliest opportunity if you are in custody or are likely to be remanded in custody <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/identifying-your-need-for-housing>

If you are in Prison:

The Prison is required to notify us if they consider you to be homeless or threatened with homelessness <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/duty-refer>. With your consent, they can make a referral to us providing details of how we can contact you.

Once we receive a completed referral our Shelter team <https://england.shelter.org.uk/> will contact you to provide you with the appropriate advice and assistance.

Other relevant information

If you receive Housing Benefit (help to pay your rent):

You must tell the Housing Benefits Team if you are:

- remanded into custody
- sentenced
- released

You will only get Housing Benefit to help towards your rent if you intend to return home when you are released from prison. You may get it you are remanded into custody, sent to prison or given home detention curfew.

How long you get Housing Benefit for depends on your circumstances.

On bail: If your bail conditions mean you have to live elsewhere, you may be entitled to Housing Benefit to help pay the rent on your normal home until your court hearing for up to 52 weeks.

If you are serving a prison sentence, your partner can claim Housing Benefit to pay the rent on your home if they are living in the property.

If you are not in receipt of Housing Benefit, you will need to make a new claim.

<https://www.westminster.gov.uk/guide-housing-benefit-and-council-tax-support>

If you receive Universal Credit (*this is being rolled out to replace Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-Related Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit, Child Tax Credits and Working Tax Credits*):

While you are on remand, on bail or sentenced you can continue to get the housing cost element of Universal Credit for up to 6 months.

Once you are sentenced however, you will not get Universal Credit if you are likely to be in prison for more than 6 months - including time already spent on remand/awaiting sentencing

Also, you will not get help with housing costs if they were not included in your Universal Credit claim before you were sentenced.

<https://www.westminster.gov.uk/universal-credit>

Whilst in Prison:

You should continue to pay your rent and other essential bills such as Council Tax.

If you need advice and assistance to find accommodation when you leave prison you should contact us immediately <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/identifying-your-need-for-housing>

You can also tell the prison staff so that they know that you may be homeless when you are released and they can, with your consent, contact us on your behalf.

<https://www.westminster.gov.uk/duty-refer>

If you are released on licence:

You might be given accommodation in a probation hostel if:

- your sentence was for 12 months or more
- you have multi-agency involvement (MAPPA) with your case

The Probation Service should arrange your probation hostel in time for your release. Even if you are not required to live in a probation hostel you may have license conditions that restrict where you can live or visit. You should ask the Probation Service about any restrictions that apply to you.

Housing Options in Westminster

Finding accommodation: Finding suitable accommodation in Westminster can be very difficult given the high cost and lack of available places. It can be particularly difficult if you are trying to find a place for the first time. You will need to know how much you can afford to pay in rent (with the assistance of Housing Benefit if you are not working, or have a low income) and where possible, money to cover any deposit due upfront when renting a home. You need to be realistic and consider:

- How **much** you can afford to pay each week
- What **facilities** you want (e.g. central heating, a telephone, a garden)
- What **size** property you need (e.g. bedsit or a two-bedroom flat)
- The **location** (e.g. somewhere close to public transport, shops, friends, etc.)
- **Who** you want to live with (e.g. whether you want to be a lodger in your landlord's home, live on your own, or have flat mates).

You need to think very carefully how much you can afford to pay and realistic. Do not overstretch yourself because you will have other bills to pay for apart from your rent.

Financially, it may be better for you to share the cost of accommodation with others. However, you need to decide if you can live in accommodation where you have your own bedroom, but will have to share the lounge, bathroom and kitchen with others. If you flat-share, you need to be aware that one of your flat-mates might move out. If this happens, the full rent will still have to be paid.

To check your eligibility for housing and any other benefits you should visit: www.dwp.gov.uk/benefits

Staying with family or friends: If possible, ask your friends or relatives to support you in keeping your home whilst you are in prison to prevent you from becoming homeless when you are released. If you do not have accommodation, living with family or friends is the cheapest form of accommodation. It may also give you the opportunity to save money towards a deposit. If your relationship with family and friends has broken down we can arrange mediation to help rebuild your relationships. If this is a temporary solution we can continue to explore your other housing options and help you to move in a planned way.

Private Rented Accommodation: You should consider the size and type of accommodation you need for your household and how much rent you can afford. You should also consider whether the accommodation is suitable for your health needs.

To check the amount of rent a private landlord is asking for is reasonable, you can check what the Local Housing Allowance amount is. This is the maximum Housing Benefit you will be allowed to have for the property size you need, if you are eligible for it. <https://www.gov.uk/housing-benefit/what-youll-get>

Transfer Homes: If you are a Westminster Council tenant or a tenant of another council, or a tenant of a Housing Association, you can apply to transfer or exchange to alternative accommodation. You may also be able to receive a cash incentive to give up your current accommodation and obtain an alternative elsewhere.