



Nacro briefing to the Justice Select Committee
14th May 2020

Nacro is a social justice charity committed to giving people the best chance at a second chance. We provide a range of resettlement support including help for people leaving prison to find somewhere to live, finance benefit and debt advice and employment support. Our Resettlement Advice Service supports hundreds of individuals with housing, employment and disclosure enquiries to ensure they can access what they need on release.

Below we have summarised the main issues we are experiencing.

Housing for prison leavers

Prior to Covid-19, data showed that around a thousand people are released from prison homeless a month. As an organisation supporting people to find somewhere to live as they leave prison, we know how difficult this can be. People leaving prison face many barriers securing accommodation such as challenges in accessing the private rented sector including the money needed for a deposit and the need for a guarantor; challenges with local authority support such as being deemed intentionally homeless due to their crime or something prior to their time in prison; not being deemed as priority need and/or not having local connection.

Earlier in the Coronavirus crisis as a result of the welcome drive to house rough sleepers, we experienced some positive changes in many areas, working with local authorities to find accommodation and accessing hotel and other accommodation for prison leavers where there were no other options. This was very welcome. We were however still finding significant barriers for some people in some areas, for example:

- Local authority refusal to house prison leavers due to their past history. In one case where this happened, we challenged the local authority's decision and they accepted they would place the service user in temporary accommodation but wouldn't do so immediately leaving him homeless for the first few days of release
- Hotels being used to house people who were rough sleeping were not all accepting people with substance misuse problems – whilst that might be a sensible decision for a specific venue, if there is nowhere else for the service user to be housed they still face homelessness
- People slipping through the net – we were aware of some cases of people who moved away from the prison area and therefore did not access the local community resettlement team. They slipped through the net in their new area and didn't receive any resettlement support, leaving them homeless and unsupported in the community

We were concerned about these examples from the start of the crisis, but a change in approach over recent weeks has made it far more difficult to secure accommodation. Over the last few weeks we have experienced a rising number of local authorities turning down applications and stating that they have been informed they should revert to 'business as usual' and that all newly released prisoners will need to meet the same vulnerability criteria as prior to COVID-19, the only exceptions to this rule are those with symptoms/confirmed COVID-19. With even more limited access than usual to independent supported housing and private rented accommodation, there are few options in terms of sourcing non-local authority accommodation provision at this time. We believe that having somewhere to live on release from prison is crucial at any time, but at a time of a global health pandemic when people need to stay indoors as much as possible to protect their own health and that of the wider population it is even more critical. This change in approach is leaving far more prison leavers at risk of rough sleeping and homelessness and we are urging the Government to provide an urgent response to ensure everyone has somewhere to stay on release. .

Release pack

We believe everyone leaving prison needs to leave with the essentials – somewhere to live, medication and access to health services, food and other essentials. In line with an increased discharge grant, we are calling for the government to ensure everyone leaving prison has what they need, particularly during this pandemic. Now more than ever it is critical that prison leavers can receive the support they need to move forward.

We welcomed the Government's announcement to increase the discharge grant for people released from prison from £46 to £80 but were then disappointed to find out this was only for people released under the early release scheme. Regardless of whether someone is released early or on their scheduled release date, they need sufficient money to buy essentials to give them a start outside of prison, often while they wait for benefits to be processed or to start a job. This is true at any time but even more so during the Coronavirus crisis where getting the essentials and the basics in place is even harder than usual. This is the case for everyone released from prison and we urge the Government to increase the discharge grant for everyone released from prison at this time, not just those on early release.