

## **RR3 Recommendation: Lifelines for all prison leavers**

**14 May 2020**

### **Introduction**

We welcome the increased discharge grant and resettlement support for people being released from prison either as part of the temporary early release of pregnant women and new mothers or as part of the temporary early release of people coming to the end of their sentences in response to Covid-19. These have been vital lifelines for people leaving prison into a very different world from the one they knew before entering prison. However, as the RR3 recommended from our first meeting and repeated at subsequent meetings, we would like to see the increased discharge grant and additional resettlement support (including access to mobile phones and phone credit) being extended to all people leaving prison at this time due to the additional financial, practical, emotional and health challenges they will experience on release.

We understand the reasoning to limit it to the early releases was they will not have had as much time to prepare for release as those at the end of their sentences. Whilst this is true, we would contend that no-one leaving prison at this time has had opportunity to fully prepare for a release into a 'Covid-19 world': where previous face to face support services are now only offered virtually or over the phone; employment opportunities have drastically diminished; libraries offering internet access are closed; children are not at school; food prices have increased; there is reduced access to public transport; the processes for applying for ID and open bank accounts (in order to receive Universal Credit) have been delayed and food banks and charities are facing drastic increases in demand.

Although welcome efforts have been made to secure Universal Credit for prison leavers through provision of a specialist phone line, many are still falling through the gaps and are finding £46 can barely last days, let alone the weeks it can take to receive a first payment. This can increase the risk of re-offending and recall, and in turn, increases the risk of Covid-19 entering the prison system through the churn of new entrants and increased overcrowding. Therefore these vital lifelines need to be available to all as part of the 'recovery plan' for the criminal justice system in order to ease pressure and ensure those leaving prison have the best possible chance to stay safe and healthy, abide by the lockdown rules and not re-offend.

Organisations working on the front line with people leaving prison at the end of their sentences in recent weeks have witnessed the increased financial hardship of many of their service users as usual avenues of help, such as [food banks](#), have been reduced due to exceptional increased demand. As a result, these organisations have had to increasingly use their own funds to provide vital lifelines. This has included provision of mobile smart phones and tablets, phone credit and internet data, transport from prison to accommodation, support with vital utilities, support to obtain bank accounts and ID, supermarket vouchers, clothing and items for babies and children. Given the financial difficulties many charities are facing, due to Covid-19 reducing their income and increasing their demand, this is not sustainable and government support is urgently needed to ensure no-one leaving prison falls through the gaps at this time.

Attached are a number of case studies to highlight the financial and practical hardship many being released from prison at this time are experiencing, and for whom the additional discharge grant and support on release would have been a vital lifeline. We would be grateful if the decision to only extend the additional discharge grant and resettlement support to those leaving on early release could be

reconsidered as a matter of urgency, in order to ensure no-one falls between the gaps during these unprecedented challenging times. We look forward to discussing this issue with you in more detail.

### **Case study one**

R was released from prison to London without a working bank account at the end of April. The bank account set up in prison was rejected (this happens often and the bank has the right not to disclose why) and his old bank account was closed down when he was in prison. He therefore currently has no income or bank account. He is staying in an Approved Premises so has necessities to buy. With increased food and mobile phone costs his £46 release grant went pretty quickly. His Universal Credit payment isn't until 8<sup>th</sup> June. His Universal Credit is going to be paid into his brother's account. His mentor is apprehensive about this arrangement as he's had a very rocky past with his family and it is unclear whether he will be able to securely and consistently access his money from his brother's account. He only has licence papers as ID to try to set up a bank account. The organisation ordered and paid for a birth certificate but, due to Covid-19, the time it takes to receive ID has increased, which makes it an even slower process to apply for a bank account. R has been completely reliant on his family, with whom he has a difficult relationship, to feed him as he has no cash. R received £30 in supermarket vouchers, an oyster card and £5 phone credit from the organisation supporting him, so will be able to feed himself independently and coordinate his own appointments for the time being.

### **Case study two**

A heavily pregnant woman released at the end of her sentence during the lockdown was given the standard discharge grant of £46 and no phone. When she did get a mobile, she spent £30 within days on calls and data trying to apply for Universal Credit as there was no support given to start this process before she left custody and there are no face to face support services able to offer her support currently due to Covid-19. This has still not been resolved as the only contact she and the organisation supporting her have been given for arranging her Universal Credit is on annual leave until 19<sup>th</sup> May and they haven't yet been able to find anyone to deal with this in their absence. The woman is due to give birth within days, and has been housed in a single room in a mixed hostel in a city she doesn't know. She was given nothing for her baby, and has to walk 40 minutes to a pharmacy daily to collect her medication, and 40 minutes to go to a food bank to feed herself.

### **Case study three**

A particularly vulnerable new mother was released at the end of her sentence without a phone to a Progressive Care Unit where she has very limited access to a landline. She was given a £46 release grant and was unable to transport several of the baby items she had in prison. The organisation supporting her sourced and provided replacement baby items for her, as there was no way she could have afforded these. Without a personal phone and the money she needs to pay for credit, her ability to make crucial calls to family and agencies involved in her support is extremely limited.

### **Case study four**

One organisation has provided six smart mobile phones and six tablets to service users who have been recently released from prison. They have helped two people with essential utilities support and 12 with food. They are particularly worried about what will happen to people who have been housed in temporary housing after the lockdown finishes and are concerned they will find themselves on the street. They are also working with service users who have new or exacerbated existing mental health difficulties which makes accessing support via a phone or online, with sufficient data or credit, even more important.

### **Case study five**

J was recently released with a £46 discharge grant and used some of this to get to his probation appointment, as it was not close to the train station. J received a foodbank parcel in his temporary accommodation, but due to Covid-19 this was limited to a 3-day supply. He made a claim for Universal Credit and received an advance payment, however this was reduced as he'd had an advance payment previously. He later contacted his mentor and asked for support as he had no clothing, only what he was wearing. He needed underwear and if possible, a change of clothes. He had used his discharge grant on bus fares to collect his script in the next town. The mentor arranged for his script to be moved to a closer chemist and assisted him with a Discretionary Assistance Emergency Fund payment of £50. J was also able to contact a charity in the area to arrange for some underwear to be dropped off and as well as a further foodbank package.

### **Case study six**

K was released from custody with a £46 discharge grant and knew she would be accommodated temporarily by the local council as she had severe Deep Vein Thrombosis in both her legs and had limited mobility. Unfortunately, she was unsure where the accommodation would be. She also did not have an active bank account on release from custody and was unable to make a benefit claim for Universal Credit without this. K believed she may have an old inactive account with a bank, so a mentor assisted her in trying to resurrect this with the bank. Unfortunately, due to lack of ID, the bank refused.

K was keen to ensure she was accommodated so prioritised the housing appointment next, but by the time she had been allocated housing the jobcentre had closed. It was late on Friday and the K had spent most of her discharge grant on food and drink for the day and wanted to save some money for a top up credit on her basic phone. The mentor was able to arrange an emergency foodbank parcel for her to last the weekend until the K was able to get to the Jobcentre the following week. The mentor met with the K the following week and there were still issues in claiming benefits due to the lack of bank account. The mentor was able to obtain a letter from probation as a form of ID, which the bank reluctantly accepted and K was then able to receive an advance payment. As K had to use public transport to attend meetings, this advance payment was not going to last so the mentor arranged a further foodbank package for her.

### **Case study seven**

On his recent release from prison, M was given a £46 discharge grant. Later that day he visited housing, but was unable to obtain any form of accommodation and was subsequently street homeless. After attending the Jobcentre, M was notified that he was not entitled to an advanced payment as he had already had a payment on his previous release from custody and had not yet paid enough back to be entitled again. With his discharge grant, M purchased a phone with top up which came to a total of £10.99 to keep in touch with probation and other relevant persons. He had £35 remaining and decided that he wanted to stay in a B&B that night as it was his first night and it had been an overwhelming day. After some research the only local hotel was £34 a night, which meant that M now only had £1 remaining from his £46. He knew he would be street homeless from the next night and had only the clothes he was wearing. He had no jacket, no coat and nothing to keep him warm. Thankfully, on this occasion, M was able to get a grant from an organisation who were supporting him and a mentor was able to purchase a coat for him to wear to keep warm as he slept on the streets.

### **Case study eight**

A woman was released from custody who was over 60 years old with health conditions. Due to COVID-19 she was unable to receive face to face through the gate support and assistance to set up benefits. The woman was not confident with public transport due to unfamiliar surroundings, so a women's

centre supported her with taxi travel costs as this exceeded the travel warrant. She had her own property to return to, but struggled to make the £46 discharge grant cover food shopping and increased gas and electricity costs while she isolated at home, until she received her next benefit payment.

#### **Case study nine**

A woman was discharged from custody during the pandemic, unable to receive through the gate support due to COVID-19. She had attempted to independently complete a benefit claim online, unfortunately she applied for the incorrect benefit which caused delays in receiving her first benefit payment. An organisation provided her with food parcels and a mobile phone as her discharge grant had run out and she was unable to receive a back payment from the date she applied for the incorrect benefit.

#### **Case study ten**

A woman was recently released from custody who was returning to her family including two small children. To make her benefit claim over the telephone this meant she had to purchase credit for her mobile, which came from her discharge grant of £46. Making these calls left her with minimal credit to last until she received her Universal Credit payment and not enough money for food or other emergency items. The woman therefore had to access support in the community for food parcels.

#### **Case study eleven**

T was released in the middle of lockdown having been isolating in prison because of the high risk to him of Coronavirus. Released homeless, he got a cab to his Nan's house as he was afraid to use public transport, particularly as his Nan is unwell and he was previously her carer, to gather any papers he had there so he could make begin his housing assessment and benefit claims. That journey left him with only £5 left of his discharge grant. He had no ID, no bank account and no proof of address. This in turn meant he wouldn't be able to start his Universal Credit claim. His family had lost his Birth Certificate whilst he was in prison. An organisation supporting him paid for him to get ID and gave him £30 a week supermarket vouchers so he could survive until he receives his Universal Credit.

#### **Case study twelve**

D has supported 12 men through the gate since the start of the pandemic, all released with £46. Those working with the CRC have received a basic mobile phone from probation, but it doesn't have internet access. Those supervised by the NPS have not all received phones. D's organisation has been trying to source used smart phones from people who no longer need them through social media, but have not been able to source enough for all their service users to have one. One young man is in a hostel that doesn't have wi-fi and can't afford data to access the internet on his smart phone. D has asked if his organisation can help fund some phone credit or data, but the organisation doesn't have sufficient funds to do this. D has worked with local food banks to ensure they are fed, but many of the men he supports are in recovery from drugs and are struggling as they cannot access any of the support services which have now gone online. D explains that being able to access zoom recovery meetings, forums and AA meetings online is the difference between 'despair and hope'. He says this is particularly because the men are being released having not had access to the recovery group work in prisons they were used to receiving and have been in their cells for 23.5 hours a day, so their need to access virtual recovery support is critical to prevent relapse. D has lived experience himself, and says the role of peer workers at this time is more vital than ever in encouraging and supporting people to navigate services and processes that have now all gone online.