

Briefing: urgent action needed to support prison-leavers during Covid-19 crisis

23 March 2020

As five specialist small charities working on both sides of the prison gate, it is clear to us that prison-leavers must be recognised as a vulnerable group at **risk of severe illness from coronavirus** due to high incidence of underlying health conditions, homelessness and poor access to services.

In normal times people leaving prison struggle to access basic services like healthcare, housing and benefits. Without action, the **Covid-19 crisis will greatly amplify these problems**, increasing ill-health, homelessness, reoffending and risk of infection among the c.5,700 people released monthly.¹

There has been no MoJ/HMPPS guidance on **how probation, housing or welfare support for prison-leavers will be guaranteed** during this crisis. This is putting prison-leavers, and the wider public, at serious risk. We are already seeing people being **turned away from probation** due to staff shortages, leading to high anxiety about recall and even more limited support than normal.

Particularly if the government is looking at ways to increase releases, MoJ/HMPPS needs to take urgent steps to ensure people are **not released homeless and unable to access vital services**. Especially in London, where the virus is most widespread, we cannot continue to allow one in four prison-leavers to be released homeless during a pandemic.²

We are calling on MoJ/HMPPS to implement the following urgent measures to **ensure people in prison aren't put at even greater risk when they are released**:

- a. Provide a **basic smartphone** with credit for all prison-leavers to enable remote access to vital support services as physical offices become unreachable.
- b. Increase probation officer **discretion on reporting requirements for people on license** to reduce recalls, and associated anxiety, as attendance at meetings becomes impossible.
- c. Provide prison-leavers with their **license conditions** and a **staffed phone number of a named probation officer** at the point of release, rather than at probation appointments.
- d. Work with DWP to ensure **Universal Credit** claims are made by Job Coaches pre-release and paid on the day of release to avoid leaving people with just a £46 release grant to survive.
- e. Work with MHCLG to **secure accommodation** for homeless prison-leavers before release, incl. free access to hotels. Ensure **local authority housing services** are accessible remotely.
- f. Provide additional **mental health and wellbeing guidance and support** on both sides of the prison gate, as this will be a particular risk for prisoners and prison-leavers during this time.
- g. Prioritise **boosting prison and probation officer morale** in order that they can be equipped to provide the same to the people in their care at this time of high anxiety.

¹ Averaged from 69,000 annual releases

² Based on the proportion of 18-30 year old men supported by Switchback in the past 2 years who were homeless upon release.

Suggested questions for the Secretary of State for Justice

Support for prison-leavers

1. Will prison-leavers be considered a vulnerable group due to high prevalence of underlying health conditions? What is being done to guarantee access to vital probation, housing and benefits support during this period, which prison-leavers struggle to reach in normal times?

Probation

2. What plans are in place to ensure prison-leavers can maintain access to probation support remotely, and will the government consider relaxing reporting requirements so people on license are not at risk of breaching conditions due to factors outside their control?
3. As services become unreachable physically, will the MoJ consider providing smartphones for prison-leavers who need one upon release to give people ability to access vital support?

Housing

4. What plans are in place to ensure that no one is released homeless, placing people at even greater risk of infection and unable to self-isolate, particularly in London where as many as 1 in 4 are released homeless according to data from the charity Switchback? Will prison-leavers have access to emergency hotel accommodation being planned for rough sleepers?

Universal Credit

5. Will the Justice Secretary consider urgently accelerating plans to make sure people can be signed up for Universal Credit from within prison, and paid on the day of release, to avoid releasing people straight into poverty on day 1 during a pandemic, with only £46 to survive?

Mental Health

6. What plans are in place to provide extra mental health and wellbeing advice and support for both prisoners and prison and probation staff during this time of high stress and anxiety?

abandofbrothers (ABOB) works with young men involved in the criminal justice system, providing them with the support they need to make the transition to an adulthood free of crime. abandofbrothers.org.uk

Spark Inside deliver coaching programmes in prisons that encourage rehabilitation and contribute towards a reduction in violence and reoffending. sparkinside.org

StandOut works to transform the lives of people leaving prison through intensive group sessions, one to one coaching and individual post-release support into employment or training. standout.org.uk

Switchback enables young Londoners to find a way out of the justice system and build a stable, rewarding life through intensive 1-to-1 support on both sides of the prison gate and real-work training. switchback.org.uk

The Zahid Mubarak Trust advocates for reforms and challenges discrimination within the criminal justice system by providing evidence-based interventions to inform policy and grassroots procedures thezmt.org

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