

CLOSED

FRIDAY PRISON RELEASES
COLLECTIVE VOICES

Briefing Update September 2021

#EndFridayReleases

I encounter this issue on a weekly basis, it regularly means homeless individuals presenting on a Friday afternoon . . . I wholeheartedly support the initiative to end Friday releases.

Senior Probation Officer

We have lots of issues with Friday releases, which are particularly problematic for people with substance misuse support needs.

Through the Gate worker, London men's prison

People who leave prison on a Friday do not get the early intervention. . . which is unfair and is more likely to lead to further offending

Accommodations Officer, Ceredigion County Council

I would say that most people who are released from prison on a Friday and need to report to the council for housing end up being homeless as they didn't have the time

Resettlement Broker, Nacro

People who are released on Fridays are more likely to be unable to access the support they need and in my experience they are at a greater chance of recall.

Senior Probation Officer

The helpline has seen a significant incidence of callers released late in the day on Friday and unable to access vital support.

Development Manager, StandOut

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Nacro Resettlement Broker

They are left in accommodation with no support . . .this could cause great anxiety [which] may have caused them to reoffend, not stay as directed at their property, or caused them to reach out to substances.

Homelessness Prevention and Housing Options Officer, Powys County Council

Immediately they are set up to fail as they are not given the opportunity that everyone else without a Friday release date is as they are left longer without intervention.

Resettlement Broker, Nacro

The police often have to pick up the pieces where people fall through the gaps, and this happens more often when people are released from prison on a Friday.

Offender Management, Dyfed-Powys Police

FRIDAY PRISON RELEASES: COLLECTIVE VOICES

September 2021

INTRODUCTION

In 2018 Nacro launched a campaign highlighting the problems caused by Friday prison releases. We were told that action was being taken to make sure that people can access the help and support they need when leaving prison, and that changing the day of release wasn't the answer.

Yet three years later the problems that many people encounter on leaving prison have not gone away and we continue to hear case after case of people being released on a Friday who are left without vital support over the weekend, leading to homelessness, lost contact with services, relapse, and reoffending.

This is an important time of change for criminal justice and particularly probation and resettlement services. The reunification of the probation service brings new opportunities; the argument for the need to tackle homelessness on release from prison has been heard and the first stage of funding released; and the prison discharge grant has been increased for the first time in over 25 years. These are welcome steps, yet tackling Friday releases remains one of the outstanding issues we can address at this time to make a real difference to people's chances on release from prison. Friday prison releases are needlessly setting people up to fail; putting additional pressure on other services; and increasing the risk of reoffending.

“I had to sleep at a fishing pit until the Monday because that was the next day the person [at the council] was back in her seat at work.”

Nacro prison leaver

WHY IS THE DAY OF RELEASE SO IMPORTANT?

There is often a window of opportunity for people on release from prison when they are keen to make change and move on. However, this can be quickly lost when the barriers are too high and things are not in place to help them begin to build a new life.

“Due to a delay of time being released he missed his appointment with the housing office. This then delayed his appointment with the Job Centre. We tried to source a night shelter, but this was on a first come first served basis. He had not been given a discharge grant so had no money. He had no access to food. As a result he was caught shoplifting and returned to prison.”

Nacro Resettlement Broker

Everyone should leave prison with the following things in place:

- somewhere to live
- financial support
- access to the basic essentials
- access to healthcare and mental health or substance misuse services
- support and someone to turn to

We welcome the recent Government funding commitments to provide accommodation upon release from prison and additional funding for substance misuse needs. However, it is clear that we remain some distance from ensuring that the basics are in place on release for all prison leavers, and yet we know that these are the critical foundations that make the difference as to whether people are able to break away from the cycle of offending.

Until all prison leavers get the support they need for the day of release, solutions are needed to smooth the transition to the community. Taking action to enable people to be released on an alternative day of the week where it would help them to access the services and support they need is one such solution. Being released on a Friday is not a problem for everyone, but for those most in need of support it can unnecessarily put them at heightened risk of homelessness, substance misuse and/or further offending.

“I have worked with several cases who were released late on a Friday, some before bank holiday weekends. Prison release times can vary and housing office and Jobcentre wait times can be over an hour. They may have had to travel to the Probation area and this may not be the area they usually reside, or have any family in. Often people have had to spend the weekend sleeping rough, even if an obvious priority need case. They may have missed their probation appointment and then worried about it all weekend as they will have had no response to any messages left at the hub. Or they may assume all hope is lost and reoffend over the weekend out of desperation, as sometimes going back to prison is their only hope of accommodation and safety.”

Nacro Resettlement Broker



“If you’re released on a Friday and there are issues then they are not likely to be resolved until following Monday, leaving the weekend to panic/stew/worry which could easily lead to reoffending.”

“Couldn’t find probation then was late for appointment. Then used [drugs] again.”

“Being released on a Friday can be difficult if you haven’t got anywhere to go like family or a friend’s place as housing people is really difficult at the best of times not just with a pandemic on.”

Views of prison leavers

Ideally, support will have been in place for the 12 weeks prior to release, but in reality the day of release is often crucial for putting in place the basic building blocks for life outside prison. As well as needing to attend **mandatory probation appointments**, many prison leavers will need to do a range of things including:

- Appointments with the **local housing authority** to make a housing application and find somewhere to live – around a third of people leave custody without housing and yet we know that safe and stable accommodation is a critical foundation to sustainable resettlement. Where housing has not been found prior to release, the most likely way to secure accommodation is to attend the local housing authority office in person.
- Arranging **employment and benefit support** with Jobcentre Plus – prison leavers are currently not able to submit claims for benefits while in prison and, if they are needed, must do this on release. The DWP phone line has been really helpful during the pandemic to enable this process to work more smoothly, but applications still can’t be made before release. If people do not have **identification documents** or a **bank account** then this can involve more appointments and delay the process.
- **Registering with a GP or accessing community mental health or substance misuse services** – a far higher proportion of people released from prison, compared with those in the community, have mental health or substance misuse issues. Those with health needs often require access to **immediate medical support and medication**. Without access to medication some people are at risk of using illicit substances, or falling back into other offending behaviour.

THE ADDITIONAL CHALLENGE ON FRIDAYS

There are three main factors which contribute to additional problems with releasing people on a Friday:

1. Increased number of releases results in pressure on services

More than a
THIRD 
of prison leavers are released on a Friday

This includes scheduled Friday releases as well as those whose release dates fall on a Saturday, Sunday or Public Holiday.

This peak in releases on Fridays adds pressure to Offender Managers and Responsible Officers, local housing authorities, other accommodation providers, Jobcentre Plus offices and other community services. This places additional, unnecessary stress on those staff, who report to us that the impact of dealing with people released on a Friday impacts on their own wellbeing due to the added pressure and worry that it creates.

“In response to Covid-19 StandOut launched a free Helpline offering advice and support to all men leaving HMP Wandsworth and HMP Pentonville.

Homelessness and issues with housing have been one of the most immediate and pressing needs for our Helpline callers. Fridays are often the busiest and most pressured day on our Helpline as coaches race to get support in place for people before many services close for the weekend or, even worse, a bank holiday.

The Helpline has seen a significant incidence of callers released late in the day on Friday and unable to access vital support, including in some cases to access probation or housing appointments.

Like Akib, who was released with No Fixed Abode on a Friday and called the Helpline at 4pm in a state of desperation. He was told in prison that his probation officer had details of a hotel, but had not been able to reach them all day. Akib had no family to stay with and wanted to avoid previous friends and the associated risk factors. StandOut was also unable to reach Akib’s probation officer and so issued an emergency accommodation grant to cover the weekend period so that Akib didn’t spend his first days of release sleeping rough. Unfortunately, there will be many people who don’t get access to this sort of support.”

Sarah Hocking, Development Manager, StandOut

2. Fridays are busy days in prisons which often results in delayed releases

On Fridays, as on other days, prison staff need to prepare outgoing prisoners for court in the morning and, in addition, need to process the higher numbers of people being released.

Prisons will prioritise preparing for court over those due for release. This can result in people being released later in the day, leaving limited time to present to services before the weekend. People may also have to travel significant distances to reach the area they are being resettled to, arriving late in the day, which reduces the likelihood of them securing all the support they need. This issue is particularly relevant to women and young people due to the configuration of the prison estate and the distance they may be from their home area. Women are held, on average, 63 miles from their homes, with a significant number held more than 100 miles from their home. 11% of children in custody are held over 100 miles from their homes (35% are held over 50 miles away).

“Sometimes they are being released from a prison which is out of area. Sometimes service users are released later than midday, taking into consideration travel, it is difficult for a service user to access all support organisations required.”

Nacro Resettlement Broker

“I am based in a Local Authority in rural West Wales. We often find that prison leavers accessing our temporary accommodation are unable to get to their addresses during the working day as the nearest prison is two hours away, and people are not always released first thing in the morning. This means that when people are released from prison on a Friday, delays in accessing accommodation would not be known to Local Authority staff until Monday, and so people can be left homeless over the weekend. Due to staff limitations across a range of services at the weekend, people who leave prison on a Friday do not get the early intervention from support services until the working week starts which is unfair and is more likely to lead to further offending.”

Bleddyn Evans, Accommodations Officer, Ceredigion County Council

“If people leaving prison have to travel a long way to attend probation we lose half a day just doing that... this will often mean through the gate workers are working until quite late in the day to try to get everything in place in time for the weekend.”

Nacro Resettlement Broker

“Our closest prison is about two hours away, so when people are released on a Friday, they are unlikely to arrive in the area until the late afternoon when services are closing for the weekend. The police often have to pick up the pieces where people fall through the gaps, and this happens more often when people are released from prison on a Friday. A blue light response to a crisis situation which is created by an inability to access statutory support services over the weekend is not cost effective, and isn't how it should be. We have had occasions where people have been released from prison on a Friday and have overdosed, and this might have been prevented if they had access to the right support.”

DS Paul Roberts, Offender Management, Dyfed-Powys Police

3. Services in the community can have reduced service on Fridays and reduced or no service over the weekend

People leaving prison are left with a limited window of time in which to make vital arrangements before services close for the weekend. A number of appointments and practical issues often need to be sorted out or planned for immediately, but in our experience, some of the most crucial resettlement agencies run reduced services on Fridays or close early and run little or no service over the weekend.

“I work in a London prison providing through the gate support to people on release. We have lots of issues with Friday releases, which are particularly problematic for people with substance misuse support needs. The prison healthcare team do not provide people with medication to take out of prison on release because of the risk of overdose, and so it can be a race against the clock to try to get medication sorted out on the day of release. On Fridays, a number of prescribing teams do not have a clinical prescriber available, and so it often means that people released from prison on a Friday are left without medication over the weekend. This creates a significant risk of further offending and relapse into substance misuse.”

Voluntary Sector Through the Gate worker, London men’s prison

“Friday is a bad day to be released because the world of work goes home early.”

“I ended up at a night shelter, probation was closed, the council official had left until Monday... had I not got into the night shelter I was told to do as others do and break into the redundant nunnery opposite St. Joseph’s.”

“Didn’t feel like people want to help on Friday afternoon, want to go home.”

“Most services close at midday on a Friday.”

Views of prison leavers

WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

We know from our experience that the combination of the above factors can leave people struggling to access vital services on a Friday and over the weekend, and that this not only increases the likelihood of reoffending but simply sets people up to fail. The higher number of people released from prison on a Friday puts unnecessary pressure on services, and this is exacerbated on bank holiday weekends. People can be left to sleep rough or in unsuitable housing, not being able to access vital medication or support over the weekend – putting their own health and safety at risk as well as those around them – and having to survive with only their discharge grant.

A lack of follow-up and support, often critical to keeping up the momentum of resettlement plans, over the weekend can mean quick disengagement. We know that there is often a window of opportunity for people on release when they are keen to make change and move on. However, this can be quickly lost when the barriers are too high and things are not in place to help them move forward and begin to build a new life.

“As a senior probation officer I encounter this issue on a weekly basis, it regularly means homeless individuals presenting on a Friday afternoon and probation officers battling council staff for accommodation last minute. It has meant individuals using substances, not getting scripts on time, individuals that are using alcohol having to get through a weekend without a support appointment and being unable to speak to their probation officer for another two entire days until Monday. I wholeheartedly support the initiative to end Friday releases.”

Senior Probation Officer, response to Nacro survey, May 2021

“They are left in accommodation with no support, not having met any of their support workers/ housing officers, etc. so they may not know the area, not know what to do in an emergency, this could cause great anxiety, and by the time staff are back in, it may be too late to start engagement, as the anxiety may have caused them to reoffend, not stay as directed at their property, or caused them to reach out to substances.”

Sara Jones, Homelessness Prevention and Housing Options Officer, Powys County Council

“If they need to report to the council they don’t have a lot of time to do this alongside attending the job centre and claiming universal credit. They have to get it all done in that one day as no one is able to offer support over the weekend. I would say that most people who are released from prison on a Friday and need to report to the council for housing end up being homeless as they didn’t have the time.”

Nacro Resettlement Broker

“When they are released on a Friday... they are given the information by the prison of where to collect their meds from over the weekend. It appears that not all prisons will pass this information on... which means they go without methadone for the weekend due to not being told where to pick it up from. By Monday, they are likely to have used again and if they didn’t have a lot of money when they were released then they probably committed crime to fund that usage. Immediately they are set up to fail as they are not given the opportunity that everyone else without a Friday release date is as they are left longer without intervention.”

Response to Nacro survey, May 2021

SUPPORT FOR OUR CALL TO RESTRICT RELEASE FROM PRISON ON A FRIDAY

We know that there is overwhelming support for our call to restrict Friday prison releases from those people working in resettlement teams in prison and in the community. Our 2021 survey shows:

94% 

of resettlement workers support Nacro’s proposal that people should be able to be released from prison earlier in the same week to help their resettlement

98% 

of resettlement workers agreed with the statement: “Being released from prison on a Friday can be a race against the clock to attend appointments and access services before they close for the weekend.”

We also know that Friday prison releases are an issue for other agencies – local authority housing, the police, probation and prison staff – as the additional challenges presented by Friday releases place an increased burden on their staff and resources, and creates an additional risk of further offending. We believe that our call has wide support across the agencies working in the criminal justice sector.

“As a Senior Probation Officer, I strongly support the campaign on Friday releases. People who are released on Fridays are more likely to be unable to access the support they need and in my experience they are at a greater chance of recall. Agencies including probation go to great lengths to prepare for releases and the individual deserves the best chance to access support and work towards their rehabilitation. However, being released on a Friday means that they have reduced support later that evening and over the weekend, which could be crucial in determining what decisions they then take. Housing and substance misuse agencies often deliver reduced or no support on a weekend, leaving people struggling to access key services such as shelter and prescriptions.

I believe that the initial days following release are the most important in the direction people go, so it is vitally important that partnership agencies are available to guide them.

Senior Probation Officer, June 2021

And we know that the public are supportive of our campaign:

70% 

of adults in the UK support our campaign to stop prison releases on Fridays and before public holidays

Nacro polling, 2018

END FRIDAY RELEASES

THE SOLUTION

Until it is the reality that everyone has the support in place that they need on the day of release from prison, solutions are needed to aid the transition into the community. For those with significant resettlement needs who are due to be released from prison on a Friday, there needs to be a mechanism whereby they can be released on an alternative day in the same week. This will mean that a successful transition to the community is more likely, as they will have a better chance of accessing services on the day of release, and it will mean that if a service is not accessed on the day of release then there is potential to access it the following day rather than being left with a two day period where support services are not available. Being released on a Friday is not a problem for everyone, but for those most in need of support it unnecessarily puts them at heightened risk of homelessness, substance misuse and/or further offending.

In Scottish law, the Prisoners (Control of Release) (Scotland) Act 2015 states that prisoners due for release on a Friday can have their release brought forward by one or two days if it would be better for the prisoner's re-integration into the community.

We therefore call for similar legislation to allow for early release in England and Wales. This would require amendment of section 23 of the Criminal Justice Act 1961 by the insertion of the following subsection after subsection (3):

“(3A) Where a prisoner is to be discharged on a Friday or the day before a bank holiday, at the discretion of the governor of the prison they may be discharged on a day within the previous five working days that is earlier than the day on which the prisoner would otherwise fall to be discharged if it would assist with resettlement in the community.”

We are aware that the provision in Scottish law has been under-used, and so it is important that, alongside the legislative change, a simple application process is devised, clear guidance is provided on how best to apply, and that the availability of early release and the process for applying is publicised widely to people in prison, prison and probation staff, particularly those who are supporting resettlement.

CASE STUDY: Simon

Simon was released from a London prison on a Friday in April 2021. He has a history of mental health issues and alcohol dependency. Prior to his release, Simon's Resettlement Broker had liaised with the relevant agencies regarding his alcohol dependency, mental health, housing and financial needs. The 'duty to refer' was completed, and **it was clear that he met the threshold for priority need for housing** (and had, in fact, been placed in supported housing some months previously).

On the Friday that Simon was released, the Resettlement Broker rang the housing department at the local authority as they travelled to Simon's probation appointment, and left several voicemails to try to find out what progress was being made with accommodation for that night.

Simon finally received a call at approximately 3.00pm from the housing department to say that **they had not found him anywhere**, he had not been deemed as a priority need, but that they would try and find him supported housing for the following week. He was advised to call again first thing on Monday morning.

Despite advocating on Simon's behalf, the Broker was **unable to secure accommodation for him for that evening, or over the weekend.**

Although it was then agreed that Simon would travel to stay with his brother in Ipswich over the weekend, he did not make the journey. The Broker spoke to him by phone several times that evening, when it appeared from the background noise that he was with other people, drinking on the streets. The Broker was unable to get in touch with him again after that evening, and was later advised that **he had been recalled to prison** shortly afterwards.

The Resettlement Broker told us: 'failing to provide Simon with accommodation was always going to put him at risk of relapse, but **to lose contact with someone for two whole days over the weekend, until services re-open on Monday, is a recipe for certain disaster.** It comes as no surprise that he was recalled having been put in a desperate situation. People are pulled back into patterns of addiction when they do not have the support they need, and accommodation is absolutely key to this.'

CASE STUDY: **Maria**

Maria's accommodation arrangements with the council fell through at the last minute the evening before her release from prison on a Friday, at which point it was too late to contact the Homelessness Prevention Team. The probation team were unable to help due to lack of funding for temporary accommodation. With no options to stay with family or friends, Maria borrowed money for a hotel over the weekend until her support workers could explore options from Monday. However, **the distress and uncertainty of the situation meant her support workers lost contact with Maria**, who after not attending subsequent probation meetings has been recalled to prison.

“I truly believe, that Maria being let down last minute, and being released homeless on a Friday, affected her negatively, and could be the main reason for her being recalled to prison. Maria suffers from mental health issues, and is highly vulnerable, with very little support.”

Through-the-Gate Support Worker, Women in Prison

CASE STUDY: **Patrick**

Patrick was released on a Friday after spending two years in prison. He had an ankle injury and had been using a wheelchair in prison so he was supplied with crutches upon release, and had limited mobility. A duty to refer form had been sent into the council and they had asked him to present on the day of release which was a Friday. He was released at 11am and was met at the gate by his Nacro Resettlement Worker. They went to the council office, but had to wait for over 2 hours, during which time **Patrick began to suffer from the effects of drug withdrawal. He couldn't leave his place in the queue to go to the drug support unit, as this would mean he risked being homeless all weekend.**

When he finally had his assessment he was accepted as a priority need, and was only able to access his temporary accommodation after 4pm that day. It was great that he **avoided homelessness, but because it took all day to sort this out he was then unable to attend any other appointments.** He was left without support from the drug support unit over the weekend which put him at significant risk of further offending and he was drawn back into substance misuse. Patrick did not then engage with drug support services the following week and was recalled to prison shortly afterwards for failing to attend probation appointments.

CASE STUDY: **Julian**

Julian was released on a Friday and had been given the housing office manager's telephone number and told to ring her on his day of release. He was priority need for housing because of his age and medical history. He was unable to speak to the manager as she was on annual leave, and was unable to speak to anyone else.

Julian spent the weekend rough sleeping until he was able to make contact with his resettlement worker on Monday.

Voluntary Sector Through the Gate worker, London men's prison



About Nacro

Nacro is a national charity with over 50 years' experience of changing lives, building stronger communities and reducing crime. We deliver services across each part of the criminal justice system – from liaison and diversion services at police custody and court; education in prisons; and prison resettlement services. We deliver the national Bail and Accommodation Support Service on behalf of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), housing prison leavers on Home Detention Curfew and those bailed from court in need of an address.

Nacro
WE CHANGE LIVES

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