

**A JUSTICE SYSTEM FIT FOR THE FUTURE:  
LESSONS FROM THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC TO BUILD  
A FAIRER AND EFFECTIVE PATH TO RESETTLEMENT**

Policy briefing August 2020

#JusticePostCOVID

## **A JUSTICE SYSTEM FIT FOR THE FUTURE: LESSONS FROM THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC TO BUILD A FAIRER AND EFFECTIVE PATH TO RESETTLEMENT**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

COVID-19 continues to significantly impact the most vulnerable in our society, including those in custody and those being released from prison. With prisons only delivering a limited regime; the Early Release Scheme being suspended at the end of August, having only released an additional 275 people by the 7th August;<sup>1</sup> and probation and resettlement support being delivered in completely new ways, it is crucial we understand the impact and what lessons we should be learning now, so we can improve our justice system for the future and give people the best chance at a second chance.

As a charity delivering support in prison and in the community we have seen and heard first hand the very real impact of the lockdown and the critical need for support for people leaving prison, including having somewhere safe to stay and access to financial and health support. The Ministry of Justice plays a critical role in this but with responsibility for vital support also being held by other Government departments, a truly cross-governmental approach is needed.

This briefing was driven by the experiences and voices of the people that we support through our resettlement services and the staff that support them. It is built from their knowledge and experience, and draws together the lessons we have learnt to make recommendations for the future to better support people on release from prison.

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1. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/909207/HMPPS\\_COVID19\\_WE\\_07082020\\_Pub\\_Doc.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909207/HMPPS_COVID19_WE_07082020_Pub_Doc.pdf)

## WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

There are three dominant themes:

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### HOUSING

# BIGGEST CHALLENGE



since lockdown was **finding accommodation** for someone on release from prison compared to pre-COVID

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### BASIC ESSENTIALS

# OVER HALF

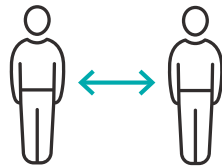


reported that it is **even more difficult** for prison leavers to **access basic essentials** on release

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### COMMUNICATION

# 74%



said that changes to family contact and **social distancing measures** had made the **resettlement** of the people they work with **more challenging**

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These form the basis of our recommendations for the future.

## HOUSING

**“Release from prison is not always good, or something to celebrate for most people. It is absolutely terrifying, especially for those that are being released as homeless and not knowing where to go, how you will get money or benefits, IF or WHEN you will next eat or shower.”**

Service User

A lack of accommodation for prison leavers is not a new issue, and it is estimated that over 30% of rough sleepers have been in prison.<sup>2</sup> We know that 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 move forward and away from crime. People can be swept into a current they can feel powerless to escape from – effectively being set up to fail.

Our resettlement staff told us that the biggest challenge they have faced since lockdown was finding accommodation for people on release from prison compared to pre-COVID. Despite the Government’s commitment to house all rough sleepers, people continued to be released from prison with nowhere to stay, despite the pandemic. From 23<sup>rd</sup> March to 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020 over 1,000 people were released from prison into rough sleeping or other forms of homelessness.

The Ministry of Justice initially committed additional funding to all prison leavers at risk of homelessness for the period from June to the end of August 2020. We welcome this funding commitment. However, there has been limited housing availability during the pandemic and it is critical we now look to longer term and sustainable solutions.

We all know how important having somewhere safe and secure to live is. In our recent public opinion survey, 84% of people said that they think it is important for those being released from prison to have somewhere to live in order to make a fresh start.

**“All prison leavers being housed on release means engagement lasts longer and more engagement could lead to a reduction in recalls.”**

Resettlement Worker

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2. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/781567/Rough\\_Sleeping\\_Statistics\\_2018\\_release.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/781567/Rough_Sleeping_Statistics_2018_release.pdf)



### Recommendations for the future:

The Government should commit that all prison leavers have somewhere to live on release from prison. This should be safe and secure accommodation which provides a foundation for them to make positive changes and move away from a life of crime.

This should include:

- Access to deposits for private rented accommodation for those who are able to live independently
- Specific supported schemes for vulnerable cohorts such as women, young people and those with mental health concerns
- A staged approach which recognises the different level of support needs of people leaving prison. this would include more availability of floating support to those who need it
- Prison leavers should be classed as priority need for housing by local authorities
- Funding and support to enable prison leavers to move on from temporary accommodation into suitable long term tenancies, with ongoing support provided to sustain these placements
- Access to supported accommodation for those who are unable to live independently or require additional support
- In the short term, the Ministry of Justice funding available during the pandemic should be extended until longer term solutions are put in place.

## BASIC ESSENTIALS

At Nacro, we see people released from prison with only the clothes that they are wearing, their £46 discharge grant, travel warrant and discharge papers. For people who are returning to their family home or other accommodation, the things that they need may be waiting for them upon their arrival, however, for all too many, what they leave prison with is all they have.

Being able to buy the basics such as food and toiletries is vital for someone trying to rebuild their life after release from prison. It was problematic for many people leaving prison before the pandemic, but COVID-19 meant it became even more difficult. 52% of our resettlement staff report that it was more difficult for the prison leavers they work with to access the basic essentials on release as a result of COVID.

Access to benefits has also been a longstanding issue because it is not possible to submit an application for Universal Credit while in prison, and it takes up to five weeks to receive the first payment. It is even more problematic for those who do not have ID or a bank account. While people can apply to receive an advance payment, this is not always processed immediately and the repayments can leave many spiralling into debt.

We therefore welcomed the initiative taken by the DWP during the pandemic to set up a dedicated phone line for prison leavers to make Universal Credit applications. 41% of our staff said that making a Universal Credit claim and/or receiving an advance payment for someone on release from prison has become easier as a result.

The discharge grant has been fixed at £46 since 1996. The introduction of a higher £80 Subsistence Grant for prisoners released under the End of Custody Temporary Release scheme, together with the provision of mobile phones for those who did not have them, was an important initiative taken during the pandemic, but it is clear that the needs of others released at the end of their prison term were also significant.

**“The DWP phone line for prison leavers makes accessing money easier and could reduce crime.”**

Resettlement Worker

### Recommendations for the future:

- The DWP phone line for prison leavers should be a permanent service to enable people leaving prison to easily make a claim for Universal Credit
- An increase in the discharge grant for all prisoners, not just those released under the Early Release Scheme to bridge the gap between release and access to benefits or other income
- Basic needs grants particularly for clothing and other essential items
- Release packs containing basic essentials such as sufficient toiletries and basic food supplies to get people through their first days.

## COMMUNICATION

It is clear from speaking to our staff and the people they support that difficulties in communication have caused stress and anxiety for people serving prison sentences and for those leaving prison during the pandemic. In our staff survey, 74% of our staff said that changes to family contact and social distancing measures had made the resettlement of the people they work with more challenging. Maintaining contact with friends and family is really important for people in prison, as links to the outside world can really help with the transition back into the community and strong family and community connection can support a reduction in reoffending.

From the people we spoke to in prison:

**“I didn’t get to socialise or see my family or speak to people when I felt down.”**

**“I was in a cell on my own so felt isolated, no family contact and nothing to do had a negative impact on my mental health and wellbeing. I was having a really tough time and very nearly reduced to self-harming through the stress and fear I was under.”**

**“It felt like the staff just locked us up, turned the lights off and just forgot about us.”**

Leaving prison is often a difficult and stressful time for many people, and so good communication and the right support really can make a significant difference in giving people the best chance to be able to turn their lives around.

**“The extra phone minutes that has been given to prisoners to help with their lack of visits during this time. I think that should continue going forward so that contact with families and friends is less dependant on times of week when they have been paid and prioritising other costs to use as phone credit so that they know they can at least speak with family everyday I believe will improve the mental health of many individuals.”**

**“Providing homeless prison leavers with a mobile phone has been an excellent resource and increased our ability to have contact with service users.”**

**“The increased use of email a prisoner has also been very beneficial.”**

Resettlement Workers

## **Recommendations for the future:**

### **1. Ensure all prison leavers who need one have a mobile phone:**

- It provides a crucial mechanism for them to engage with services such as probation, resettlement, substance misuse or mental health services.
- It means they can stay in touch with friends and family on release and support staff can contact them in times of need
- Use of a mobile phone on the day of release enables service users to quickly and proactively engage with agencies during periods that may have been wasted. For example making phone calls to housing providers or setting up benefits claims while waiting for a train or travelling to their home town from prison.
- Two thirds of our staff say that the level of engagement with service users has increased since lockdown because of the provision of mobile phones and a phone call from a mentor on the day of release has helped to build positive relationships and address many of the small problems that might otherwise have escalated.

### **2. Retain the funding for the extra phone credit and reduced phone charges for people in prison**

- Pre-COVID the cost of phone calls from prison, and limited phone credit made it difficult for some people to maintain family and community contact
- The maintenance of family and community ties is important for improving the chances of successful reintegration into society
- It enables people in prison to deal with practical matters without having to sacrifice time connecting with family

### **3. Improve in cell technology to ensure that people can contact family even if locked down:**

- Everyone should have the same basic access to a phone. This would not only improve communication with external support networks such as family and friends, but would also allow more effective communication with professionals within the prison who are able to contact prisoners from offices if future lock downs occur.
- In some prisons, there are in cell phones that can be called directly from a dedicated phone line in the resettlement offices. This enables quick and direct support to address needs during lockdown but also allows a more comprehensive and time efficient service. In these prisons resettlement staff have been able to hold 3 way telephone conversations with local authorities, completing vital housing interviews while service users are still in their cells.

### **4. Continue and expand the use of video visits and email contact:**

- this is particularly important for people who are unable to receive social visits because of distance, cost, or disability
- consideration should also be given to expanding this facility to enable assessments to be carried out by resettlement workers, health staff and others
- Review the 'email a prisoner' function to ensure that local prison regimes or staffing structures do not impact on the ability of this service to join up professionals, families and prisoners. The cost of this should be reviewed as current costs are high and disproportionate to the cost of delivering this service





## About Nacro

We are a national social justice charity with more than 50 years' experience of changing lives, building stronger communities and reducing crime. We house, we educate, we support, we advise, and we speak out for and with disadvantaged young people and adults. We are passionate about changing lives. We never give up.

**“I am proud of working for an organisation who still perseveres to carry on to make a difference and to make issues known in order to change them for the better.”**



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