

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

March 2020

As five specialist small charities working on both sides of the prison gate to support successful resettlement, 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 5,000+ people released monthly.

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, unable to access vital services and with only a £46 release grant to survive**. Especially in London, where the virus is most widespread, we cannot continue to allow large numbers of people to be released homeless during a pandemic.

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**:

1. **Recognise prison-leavers as a vulnerable group** for the purposes of Covid-19 planning and priority access to services including local housing support.
2. Provide a **basic smartphone** and preloaded **sim card** for all prison-leavers to enable remote access to vital support services as physical offices become unreachable.
3. Increase probation officer **discretion on reporting requirements for people on license** to reduce recalls, and associated anxiety, as attendance at meetings becomes impossible.
4. Provide prison-leavers with their **license conditions** and a **manned phone number of a named probation officer** at the point of release, rather than at probation appointments.
5. Work with DWP to ensure **Universal Credit** claims are set up pre-release and paid on the day of release, or else **increase the £46 discharge grant** to make up any shortfall until payment.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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.

**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](http://abandofbrothers.org.uk)

**Spark Inside** deliver coaching programmes in prisons that encourage rehabilitation and contribute towards a reduction in violence and reoffending. [sparkinside.org](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://thezmt.org)

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