

Response to the National Audit Office study on improving resettlement support for prison leavers to reduce reoffending

November 2022

Introduction

1. The Criminal Justice Alliance (CJA) is a network of over 180 member organisations working towards a fair and effective criminal justice system (CJS). Many member organisations provide resettlement support to people in and leaving prison across England and Wales.
2. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the National Audit Office's study on improving resettlement support for prison leavers to reduce reoffending. This survey response is based on roundtables and discussions held in late 2021 with over 40 members who provide resettlement support, with a particular focus on access to education and employment or strengthening family relationships. Some of these members included:
 - Access2Advice
 - Children Heard and Seen
 - Enterprise Exchange
 - Family Action
 - Family Links the Centre for Emotional Health
 - The Howard League for Penal Reform
 - LandWorks
 - Making it Out
 - Nacro
 - New Leaf Initiative
 - Open Book
 - Partners of Prisoners (POPS)
 - Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT)
 - Prisoners' Education Trust
 - Responsible Business Initiative for Justice
 - Revolving Doors Agency
 - RIFT Social Enterprise
 - StandOut
 - Shannon Trust
 - St. Giles Trust
 - Storybook Dads
 - Sussex Pathways
 - Switchback
 - Unlock
 - Working Chance
 - Zahid Mubarek Trust.
3. This response is also based on our recent Purpose and Connection briefing, which maps the practical and necessary steps the government should take so everyone in or leaving prison can gain employment and build family ties after release, as well as our response to the Prisons Strategy White Paper (published in December 2021).¹
4. The CJA is also a partner of the Positive Pathways from Prison (PPfP) Project, which has a particular focus on improving family relationships and employment for prison leavers. The Project is supported by Porticus UK.

Survey response

How would you describe the government's current (post December 2020 in Wales and June 2021 in England) performance in resettling prison leavers into the community?

We are particularly interested in your comments on support for prison leavers to find accommodation or education, training or employment. You may wish to include thoughts on:

- *Government's overall performance*
- *Specific strengths and weaknesses*
- *Contributing factors to your assessment*

500 words

Recent government announcements and commitments to improve resettlement support are welcomed, but these often do not go far enough. For example:

- Although the recent subsistence grant uplift is positive, members tell us it is still not sufficient. People leaving prison also need basic possessions (such as clothes and hygiene products), travelcards, food vouchers and access to technology (such as an email address, an internet-enabled mobile phone and data).
- The 'step change' in ROTL for employment is welcome, but it should also be used more to access further/higher education in the community, support work experience and work-based training, as well as to strengthen family relationships.
- People in open prisons can now access apprenticeships, following an overdue legislation change. However, apprenticeships should be available in all resettlement prisons.
- Technology is inconsistently used across the prison estate and the HMPPS digital strategy does not sufficiently address this.² While there are some positive uses of tech, prisons should provide controlled internet access so people can view education and employment opportunities, access housing support and contact other outside agencies to support their release.

Relationships and support networks

Members tell us that many prison leavers have not met their offender manager in prison or their probation officer until after their release – in some instances, people are released without being assigned a probation officer. This delay can lead to gaps in accessing essential services, such as housing and healthcare.

A wider range of support is needed for people in prison to strengthen their family ties in order to support their resettlement, such as more on-site provision to enable weekend visits, more child-friendly environments, relationship and parenting courses and restorative family mediation work.

Employment, training and education

Many prisons do not offer higher level courses, so instead people end up amassing many low-level qualifications, which are not as useful as both high-level or practical qualifications such as a driving theory test or trade

certifications/licenses. Providing controlled access to the internet would increase access to higher level courses.

Employment training in prison is not focused enough on creative and digital industries or on enterprise and self-employment. Members tell us many people in prison want to start their own business and become self-employed. Increased support is needed to enable this, including controlled access to the internet so people can have agency to access advice, funding and resources.

Money, debt and access to benefits

Many people are facing financial hardship when they leave prison. People leaving prison are unable to make Universal Credit claims before release and must wait five weeks to receive their first payment. While awaiting their first payment, they can apply for an advance loan which must be repaid through deductions to future payments. Members have found that prison leavers can fall into debt because of this. Prison leavers would benefit from a one-off advance grant, rather than a loan, to avoid this. Members tell us that bank accounts opened in prison are often closed before people have been released.

What does the government need to do to improve resettlement services?

You may wish to include risks that need to be managed or long-standing issues that require action.

500 words

A national, co-ordinated strategy

We welcome the government's recognition in the recent Prisons White Paper that there needs to be a co-ordinated plan for release but a more urgent focus on a cross-government national resettlement strategy is needed. The MoJ have several policy projects focused on the future of resettlement, such as the Future Prison Regime Design and the Resettlement 2030 vision. While we welcome forward planning, urgent action is needed – there are practical, common-sense solutions that can be introduced now to improve resettlement outcomes for prison leavers.

Members tell us that the inconsistencies in both the infrastructure and provision that are available (e.g. differences in the number of purposeful activity places, programmes on offer and rooms for them to be delivered, in-cell telephony and technology) across the estate impacts on people's ability to prepare for release, access education/employment support and contact their family. These inconsistencies can be particularly disruptive when people transfer between prisons as they near release (e.g. from a closed to open or a training to resettlement prison).

Improving outdated technology

We welcome the commitment to invest in technology and broadband to support people in prison with education, learning, and employment; however, this is far too slow and is holding us back. The White Paper states that only 16 prisons will have access to in-cell technology by summer 2022. Based on this timescale, it would take approximately six-and-a-half years to roll out in-cell technology to all prisons and YOIs in England and Wales.

As there are currently no consistent systems or minimum standards to implement technology in each prison, we recommend that the MoJ and HMPPS introduce a national minimum standard for technology, which is outcome-focused, replicates established good practice and addresses inconsistencies across the estate. The standard should be clear that technology should not be used as a replacement for face-to-face contact in prisons (particularly with social visits and education provision), but as a supplement. Prison governors should establish a local technology strategy which meets the national minimum standard and should be given the resources and encouragement from HMPPS to use their discretion, be creative and innovate to best meet the needs of their local population using digital approaches. The strategy should include all uses of digital and technology, especially tech that allows people to have agency over their own life in prison, such as kiosks, controlled internet access, in-cell telephony, video conferencing and emails.

More funding for technology

There is currently a lack of consistency in technology across prisons, which members tell us has a detrimental effect on delivering resettlement services effectively and efficiently. Building new prisons with 'state of the art' resources will further entrench these inconsistencies. The government should have a long-term goal of reducing the prison population and closing prisons which are not fit-for-purpose. Funding should be divested from new prisons to urgently improve facilities and infrastructure in current prisons to reduce inconsistencies instead of adding to them.

Are there any additional comments on the government's support to prison leavers that you would like to share with us?

500 words

Mitigating the harmful impact of the restricted regime on resettlement planning

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a lack of rehabilitative opportunities for many people in prison who have been unable to progress in their sentence by accessing programmes, progressive transfers or ROTL. We recommend the government set out clear plans to show how it will mitigate against the negative impacts of the pandemic on people's rehabilitation and sentence progression and release planning.

Reducing the prison population

Even a short time in prison can disrupt people's employment, accommodation, healthcare and wellbeing, caring responsibilities and financial health. The best way for people to access employment and build pro-social networks to reduce reoffending is by not going to prison in the first place.

As such, we recommend that the government have long-term ambitions to reduce the prison population; invest in robust effective alternatives to custody; and divert the earmarked resources for prison building into providing increased rehabilitation opportunities and improving release planning and support in the existing prison estate at a more urgent rate than proposed. Greater use should be made of probation supervision, community sentences and unpaid work

partnerships that are both rehabilitative for individuals as well as reparative to communities.

Criminal records reform

Criminal records are a barrier to employment for hundreds of thousands of people. The MoJ's recent White Paper recognises the need to provide support to people leaving prison in relation to criminal records disclosure, but fundamental changes are needed to sufficiently address this. We recommend the government introduce a more proportionate and flexible disclosure system, so that minor and very old crimes do not appear on standard and enhanced criminal records checks. It could also take a distinct approach to childhood criminal records and introduce regular review mechanisms.³

Practical barriers such as onerous vetting procedures prevent people with lived experience of prison from providing in-prison resettlement services. HMPPS should thoroughly review policies and procedures that disproportionately disrupt the ability of people with lived experience to do resettlement work.⁴

We recommend the government introduce more incentives for employers to take on people with previous convictions, including financial incentives, such as the previous manifesto commitment of a one-year holiday on Employer National Insurance Contributions (NIC).⁵

Accommodation

Inspectors continually find that many people are released with no fixed address. Those who need housing support are negatively impacted by contractual changes with accommodation support agencies.⁶ Similarly, members have found that people they support have been released homeless, due to delays with being assigned a probation officer, which in turn delays housing referrals to local authorities. Local authorities' housing assessments are also often delayed.

The views expressed in this response are not necessarily those of any individual CJA member or funder.

For more information, please contact Hannah Pittaway, Policy Manager, on: hannah.pittaway@criminaljusticealliance.org.uk.

¹ Criminal Justice Alliance, [Purpose and Connection: A briefing in advance of the Prisons White Paper](#) (2021). Criminal Justice Alliance, [Prisons Strategy White Paper consultation response](#) (2022). Criminal Justice Alliance, [Education: Are prisoners being left behind?](#) (2021).

² HMPPS, [HMPPS Digital, Data & Technology Strategy](#) (2021).

³ [FairChecks](#).

⁴ Criminal Justice Alliance, [Change from within: Insights from people with lived experience working to improve the criminal justice system](#) (2019).

⁵ This was a commitment in the Conservative Party Manifesto 2017. See page 54, [Forward Together, Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future. The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2017](#).

⁶ HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales [Annual Report 2021-22](#) (2022).