



Update: Urgent action to support prison-leavers during Covid-19

As five specialist small charities working to support successful resettlement we are calling for urgent action to support prison-leavers and protect public health during Covid-19. In addition to safe accommodation, priority action is needed to ensure:

1. **Access to finance** by significantly raising the £46 discharge grant.
2. **Access to technology** through provision of smartphones to access remote services.
3. **Information and guidance** to support health, wellbeing and compliance with new rules.
4. **Access to specialist voluntary sector support** through an emergency resettlement fund.

This submission is an update to the [joint briefing](#) published on 23rd March 2020.

Action needed to support prison-leavers

In normal times, many of the 5,000 people released from prison every month struggle to access basic services like healthcare, housing and benefits.¹ Among young adults supported by Switchback, for example, 42% are released homeless, a third have no bank account and a third have no ID. These barriers to resettlement often drive people towards poverty and reoffending. During this pandemic they could become a matter of life or death, not just for prison-leavers but for the wider public too.

It is more important than ever that everyone being released has somewhere safe to go and can access vital support services. Yet we are seeing many men released into inadequate housing (e.g. without electricity) and without the basic means to stay safe and well during this crisis. We welcome the MoJ's commitment to develop an accommodation plan;² this should be published as soon as possible to provide much-needed clarity for providers and prison-leavers.

In addition to safe housing, we are calling for priority action in these four areas to support prison-leavers and protect public health and the NHS:

1. Access to finance

Existing problems with Universal Credit (UC) have been exacerbated by Covid-19 and it is taking several weeks for many to make a claim and get an 'advanced payment'. Switchback, for example, is having to provide new prison-leavers with emergency supermarket vouchers so they are able to eat.

The £46 discharge grant hasn't changed since 1996, yet it often has to last for weeks, driving people into hardship. This has now become a public health risk. We note the Justice Secretary's comment that some people are now receiving £80.³ We welcome this recognition that £46 is insufficient but we urge clarity on how £80 has been calculated and who will get it. **The discharge grant should be made equivalent to six weeks' UC until all prisoners can be released with benefits already in place.**

¹ Ministry of Justice, Offender management statistics quarterly: Jul to Sep 2019. 64,005 were released in the year to September 2019.

² Justice Committee, Oral evidence: The work of the Lord Chancellor, 24 March 2020

³ Justice Committee, Summarised note of the meeting with the Lord Chancellor from 7 April



2. Access to technology

Many prison-leavers do not have a smartphone or internet access and so cannot apply for Universal Credit, communicate with probation or access other vital support remotely. Switchback and other charities are providing smartphones to enable access to these services but in small numbers. **The MoJ should make basic smartphones with data available at the gate for anyone who needs one.**

3. Information and guidance

We are finding that many new prison-leavers are unaware or confused about essential travel, distancing rules and guidance to protect themselves and others during Covid-19. A lack of clear information is leading to non-compliance, compromising public health and risking extra strain on probation, police and NHS services. We are also seeing heightened anxiety and mental ill-health among prison-leavers just as support has become even thinner. **Every prison-leaver should receive clear advice and guidance about keeping themselves and others healthy and safe during this crisis, informed by voluntary sector expertise.**

4. Access to specialist voluntary sector support

Release from prison is an overwhelming and challenging experience in normal times. This has suddenly become even harder. At the same time, probation support, already piecemeal, has been reduced to a brief two-weekly phone call in most cases. While many charities have temporarily closed due to lack of funding, some specialist small charities like Switchback have remained in operation and are providing vital resettlement support remotely. But specialist organisations cannot reach significant numbers without additional resource.

There has been welcome interest from MoJ officials in coordinating voluntary sector support for early releases. However, little progress has been made and, more importantly, there has been no recognition of the need for enhanced support for the *much greater number of normal releases*. **The government should provide an emergency resettlement fund for specialist charities to support prison-leavers remotely during Covid-19.**

Switchback Trainee case study: Adnan

Adnan, 21, was released homeless from HMP Belmarsh in March shortly before the current lockdown. He did not have a smartphone and so could not apply for Universal Credit online. He was relying on Tesco vouchers provided by Switchback to eat. Adnan's Switchback Mentor supported him to present at the local council who provided accommodation, but the flat had no gas or electricity. Switchback provided a smartphone so he could apply for UC, however he has faced five weeks of delays and rescheduled phone appointments. Contact from probation has been a brief two-weekly phone call. Adnan has never lived independently and was sofa-surfing for years before prison. Despite these huge challenges, thanks to the support of his Switchback Mentor he is complying with his license conditions, trying to take control of all aspects of his life for the first time and working towards his goal of becoming a barber.

For more information about this briefing please contact sam@switchback.org.uk.