



Policy briefing

Policy analysis from Nacro

Barriers to effective resettlement: Friday prison releases

This briefing is the first in a series which will shine a spotlight on the practical challenges to effective resettlement for people leaving prison and put forward cost effective solutions. At a time when the Government is reviewing the future of probation, we have an opportunity to improve the overall criminal justice system and remove the practical barriers to rehabilitation.

Introduction

Nacro is 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 have delivered resettlement services for people leaving prison for many years and we seek to improve services through our national and regional influencing.

From our experience of supporting people on release from prison, we know that there are a number of practical challenges people face to moving on in their lives. Nacro believes that Friday releases are compounding those existing challenges, needlessly increasing the risk of reoffending, and that simple solutions exist to tackle the problem.



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Why is the day of release so important?

While, in some cases, support will have been in place for the 12 weeks prior to release, the day of release is often crucial for putting in place the basic building blocks for life outside of prison. As well as needing to attend mandatory appointments with relevant probation staff, prison leavers may 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.¹ 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. They will need to register for benefits such as Jobseekers Allowance or Universal Credit, Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit.

Registering with a GP or accessing community mental health or substance misuse services – a 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.

What are the difficulties with Friday releases?

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

1. Increased number of releases

National statistics, as well data from Nacro services, show that more than a third of custody leavers are released on a Friday.² This includes scheduled Friday releases as well as those who have release dates 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.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/delivering-safer-and-more-secure-prisons-the-roots-to-rehabilitation>

2. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-questions-answers/?page=1&max=20&questiontype=AllQuestions&house=commons&member=533> and Nacro data from delivery in Essex CRC



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2. Fridays are busy days in prisons

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. Due to performance indicators, prisons will prioritise preparing for court over those due for release. This can result in people being released later in the day, having limited time to present to services before the weekend. People being released may also have to travel significant distances to reach the area they are being resettled to, arriving late in the day, reducing the likelihood of 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.

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

In addition to the above, 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, such as those highlighted previously. 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.

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 can increase the likelihood of reoffending. 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 a £46 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 away from crime.



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CASE STUDY

M

M was released on a Friday before a bank holiday weekend after serving a year in custody. He has an addiction to heroin but, when released, was not given the prescription charts from the prison which were needed to determine the dose of methadone he needed. He was also not given a bridging prescription. As it was late afternoon on a Friday the GP from the substance misuse service had left and M and his resettlement broker were unable to get his medication. M was vulnerable and entitled to priority housing. However, the local authority did not deem him to be priority need and, as it was a Friday afternoon, M didn't have time to gather the further evidence needed to prove this before the weekend. M spent the weekend sleeping in a known drug house and ended up using heroin. As part of his licence conditions he was required to give blood samples and tested positive for drug use.

Releasing M earlier in the week would have meant faster access to the medical services and medication he needed and increased his chances of finding a housing solution more quickly.

CASE STUDY

C

C was released from prison after serving a three week sentence. On release, his Through the Gate mentor met him and went with him to present to probation, a train ride away. On presenting to the local housing authority to make a homeless application, C was told to make an online application to receive an appointment with a housing officer for the next week. C's mentor contacted a local charity to which he could also make a homeless application and they asked him to come down on the following Monday. C also had to wait until the following Monday to go to the Jobcentre Plus to enquire about getting a deposit for a flat. C slept rough that weekend.

Had C been released earlier in the week, he would have been able to access these services faster without a three-night gap in which he had to sleep rough, which increased his chances of reoffending.



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Nacro's ask

We believe that ending Friday releases would make a significant difference to people leaving prison being able to access the services they need to help resettlement. Spreading releases between Monday to Thursday and being able to put support in place earlier in the week would provide a more stable foundation for life in the community. While, in the longer term, this might be helped by legislative change, we believe there are immediate mechanisms that can be used by HMPPS and prison governors to ensure Friday releases are avoided. These include:

1. Make more use of Release on Temporary Licence to release someone at least a day earlier
2. Increase use of Home Detention Curfew and ensure that where it is utilised, release is never on a Friday
3. For a determinate/extended sentence early release or recall, the Parole Board to use their discretion to avoid Friday releases
4. For 'executive release' (usually of those recalled to prison from licence) the Secretary of State to use their discretion to avoid Friday releases

Our partners

We have also heard from many of the services we work with that Friday releases can significantly impact upon their ability to deliver critical and effective services. Below are two examples of some of the providers we work with and how Friday releases can affect their services:

"The worst thing about Fridays is trying to get prescription organised in time to ensure that the person is not without essential medication over the weekend. Released prisoners will seldom report to the service on release as they have a number of appointments to attend; this is even more challenging if they have been released from further away. Trying to get a prescription organised can be really difficult, costly and puts several people under stress, particularly, if you need to get it organised at a different hub.

Releasing people on a Friday without prescription can mean a weekend without medication, putting themselves and others in danger and significantly impacting upon their chances of effective resettlement. Releasing people earlier in the week would ensure prescription can be organised in time and that person gets the medication they need immediately on release."

Criminal Justice Substance Misuse Practitioner



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“More often than not, people released on a Friday attend our housing office either very late in the day or on occasions when offices are closed, especially if some need to attend probation first, particularly if services are not within easy reach of each other. We are a statutory service with normal opening hours from Monday to Friday and whilst we do operate an Out of Hours Service, this tends to be over the phone where we may touch on basic advice and sign-posting. In practical terms this support is not the same in depth as advice given during normal operating hours.

If we aren't able to help them directly we signpost to other agencies which may also not be able to help out of hours and over the weekend. This can lead to lack of intervention at a crucial time.

Some prison leavers are given release grants which can assist to secure accommodation for one night – however if they are released on a Friday, they will obviously need support to cover three nights until the beginning of the next week.

Friday releases significantly impact upon the support and help we can give people trying to find housing on release.”

Housing options officer, Local housing authority