

# VOICES

VOICES  
OF  
INDEPENDENCE  
CHANGE &  
EMPOWERMENT IN  
STOKE-ON-TRENT

## Coproducing Prison Release Pathways in Stoke-on-Trent

*Recommendations from personal,  
professional and prison lived experiences*



VOICES (Voices of Independence, Change and Empowerment in Stoke-on-Trent) is a Fulfilling Lives: supporting people with multiple needs project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.



We would like to acknowledge all the partnership organisations involved with the design and delivery of research and activities of this project.

Special acknowledgment to the people with current lived experience who helped us to develop 'Roundabout Tales' that was facilitated through Rideout.

We would also like to acknowledge Stephen Willis – VOICES Service Coordinator who took the role of lead project officer and also John Ryan (SNSCAB) for providing images included in this report.

## Acknowledgments

## Contents

Introduction and Purpose.....	3
Findings.....	4
Method.....	5
<b>Our Recommendations</b>	
Housing.....	6
Communication.....	7
Welfare Benefits Leading and Learning.....	8
Life Skills and Employment.....	8
Pre-Release.....	9
Peer Mentors.....	9
Day of Release and Post Release.....	10
Meeting the Needs of Women.....	11
What Next?.....	11



## Introduction

In 2016, through the Stoke-on-Trent Community of Practice, VOICES produced a report <sup>(1)</sup> to highlight challenges, gaps and barriers that were identified within the local prison release system. The report was distributed to key stakeholders across the city with the aim to raise awareness of the issues and with the hope that we would influence positive changes for people experiencing multiple and complex needs. By 2019 we realised that customers we were supporting and professionals that we were working alongside, still had difficulties in securing smooth and well-timed effective transitions.

We identified prison release as a key issue for the VOICES legacy systems change projects. The funding for VOICES ceases in March 2022; with clear evidence that 'wicked issues' still existed, we worked with partnership colleagues and people with lived experiences to co-design and co-deliver this project.

Stakeholders who collaborated in this project include representatives from Expert Citizens C.I.C., Staffordshire Police, Probation, Brighter Futures, Restart, SNSCAB, Concrete, NACRO, Stoke City Council, local commissioners, Rideout and people who were in prison at the time of research.

***“Together we reduce stigma  
Together we are heard  
Together we learn  
Together we grow”***

— *Nicola Johnson  
Discharge Co-ordinator  
Brighter Futures*

## Purpose

This report is a product of the VOICES Transitions Prison Release Project and presents key activities that VOICES has coordinated from 2016 to 2021. The purpose of the project was to bring the different elements of the local support system together to form a collaborative group (project team) of key stakeholders to review evidence-based stories and findings. The project team then developed a series of key activities delivered to the wider partnership to test our findings and for consultation.

The recommendations in this report were created by the project team and wider stakeholders and are intended to support frontline staff, managers, organisational leads, and commissioners to improve experiences of people and professionals in prison release pathways.

***“The coproduction of recommendations represents a union of voices, not just one, reflecting a passion for systems change and a strong consensus, from all different areas, that systems change is needed”***

— *Hannah Thompson, Partnership Colleague*

As a legacy of the VOICES project the report provides useful insights for Changing Futures leads in Stoke-on-Trent.

<sup>(1)</sup> [https://issuu.com/voicesofstoke/docs/prison\\_release\\_support](https://issuu.com/voicesofstoke/docs/prison_release_support)





## Findings

Stakeholders emphasised the complexity surrounding this topic – particularly in the context of limited resources. Since our Communities of Practice Prison Release Report in 2016, there were some suggestions that there have been pockets of improvement, however, the overriding sense was that the current prison discharge pathway particularly for those on short sentences is still very challenging. The ‘Improbable Journey’<sup>(2)</sup> case study highlighted the intense appointment schedule of individuals on the first day of release. There’s also unanimous agreement that partnership working and inter-professional relationships, as well as developing an information sharing protocol are key to an effective prison release to ensure individuals are not released with no fixed abode (NFA). One noticeable positive shift has been the change to the discharge grant that almost doubled in the past year. Peer Mentors were also identified as being a crucial asset that supports existing positive practice and practitioners but is acknowledged as being very sporadic in accessibility across prison estates.

### Challenges identified include:

- Friday releases
- Organisations unable to offer ‘in reach’ pre-release support to prisoners
- Lack of suitable rooms within the prisons to conduct vital pre-release assessments
- Short term prison sentences
- Guarantors needed by private sector landlord’s
- Short recalls 2-4 weeks; existing bed spaces are closed
- Without accommodation nothing else can be sorted e.g. employment
- Sex workers return to abusive situations for shelter
- Customers reoffend to have their basic needs met
- Difficulty in contacting prisons / prison staff
- Communication with other services
- Difficulties with mentors accessing prisons
- Developing an understanding of other services roles and constraints
- Unrealistic coordination around appointment schedules for individuals first day of release
- Prison to prison transfer – referrals don’t follow.
- Transfers not delivered appropriately

## Method

Between 2016 and 2021 we coordinated and delivered the following key activities:

- Prison release research
- An initial community of practice was held with stakeholder organisations and people with lived experience in 2016, this led to our first report on prison release.
- The Improbable Journey case study was researched and was presented to kick start a further series of community of practice discussions which were held in 2020 to revisit some of the key points and identify further gaps and barriers to an effective prison discharge.
- Project officers began initial consultations with representatives from National Probation Service, Staffordshire Police, Brighter Futures Women's Project, Brighter Futures Hospital/Prison Discharge Project.
- The development of our welfare leading and learning project which was conceived from our community of practice discussions in 2020 was implemented as a pilot utilizing our colleagues from SNSCAB, where a specialist benefits advisor has been integrated into an existing service to provide advice for those currently ready to be released from prison.
- The 'Improbable Journey' case study was adapted and presented as part of the CFE Research national webinar titled 'Improving service transitions for people experiencing multiple disadvantage: Prison Release.'<sup>(2)</sup>
- Project officers used HM Government Prison Release Protocol Guidance to inform the project aims.
- The organisation Rideout were commissioned to engage with people in prison who had experiences of short term sentences, recalls and prison release. This led to the development of the publication 'Roundabout Tales'.<sup>(3)</sup>
- Stakeholder representatives were invited to our presentation of findings and worked with us to co-design our final set of recommendations.



<sup>(2)</sup> Part 2. Improving service transitions for people experiencing multiple disadvantage: Prison release. - YouTube

<sup>(3)</sup> Roundabout Tales: [https://issuu.com/voicesofstoke/docs/roundabout\\_tales\\_2021\\_final](https://issuu.com/voicesofstoke/docs/roundabout_tales_2021_final)



## Our Recommendations



### Housing

#### *On the frontline*

- Attend court with customers who are doing well to support and advocate when possible or give their legal representative up to date information of any positive progress they are making.

#### *On management*

- Consider keeping bed spaces open for short sentences/recalls.
- Opportunity for prisoners to access services they have previously been excluded from - More understanding from services about context of behaviour when considering risk, a person on paper can look different from a person in front of you.
- Where an individual has accommodation prior to commencing a short prison sentence, local authority housing teams should work with partners to establish whether existing accommodation could be held.

#### *On Strategic Leaders / Commissioners*

- More investment in a range of different options to suit different needs including, Housing First scheme, different levels of supported housing, single person tenancies and hostels.
- Partners including probation, police and crime commissioners, local authority housing commissioners and others should consider the potential for pooled funding and adoption of approaches such as Housing First to create new accommodation options for people leaving prison.
- Review and remove shared housing benefit rate for under 35's. Discuss and promote possible solutions around the need for guarantors within the private landlord sector.
- National sentencing guidelines should consider an automatic presumption against custodial sentences of less than six months for non-violent offences.
- Clarify Through the Gate processes for both short and long-term sentences and where people with multiple disadvantages fit to get the correct level of support at the right time.
- Homelessness priority given to all prison leavers.
- All prisoners should be released with accommodation to go to which meets their needs in an appropriate environment which will not increase risk of relapse/reoffending (Roundabout Tales).



## Communication

### *On the frontline*

- Make contact with and provide prison staff with relevant information as soon as possible.
- Ask to be part of any prison release planning.
- People should be active participants in their own release and support planning – ask their preferred futures.
- Priorities identified at regular meetings e.g. a regular multi agency prison release panel.

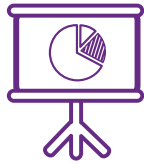
### *On management*

- Shadowing between prison and community.
- Consider developing ways that enable services designed to support people experiencing multiple disadvantages to engage better with people prior to release at the prison.
- Development of a service directory.
- Allowance for volunteers who may still be on probation to visit customers in prison.
- Provide learning opportunities to accountable organisations and partners to better understand the impact and importance of effective resettlement plans - to include Trauma Informed Care and Psychologically Informed Environments.
- Create regular opportunities for prison staff to engage with external services, whether that's current existing meetings or the development of new networking meetings. These could be done virtually or staff could reach out into community based settings.

### *On Strategic Leaders / Commissioners*

- Create means of sharing information with prisons and vice versa.
- Ensure all accountable organisations are aware of the mandatory requirements in relation to prisoner resettlement plans and processes.
- Investment in prison-based coordination roles to bridge the gap between prison and community services and support multi-agency planning.
- Development of information sharing protocols between community services, prison and probation partners to play a critical role in pre-release coordination.
- More robust pre-release assessments should be used for people experiencing multiple disadvantages, taking a holistic approach to the ongoing support an individual is likely to require on release.
- A prisoner database – to record education and qualifications and to create a seamless transition on transfer to other prisons. OR one step further – A CRM to log the above as well as referrals and other key documents and information





## Welfare Benefits Leading and Learning

### *On Strategic Leaders / Commissioners*

- WBLL should be a commissioned service within the prison discharge pathway.
- WBLL should be implemented within prisons to assist prisoners and prison staff to sort out benefits going in, housing issues, other issues – addressed at the start, this will be good for resettlement team and the prisoner’s mental wellbeing. It will put the customer in a more positive place for forming positive relationships if they know things are being handled from the outset.



## Life Skills and Employment

### *On the frontline*

- Work to form close trusting relationships with customers (community and prison staff).
- Support customers to consider moving area and work with the customer, prison staff and probation to produce a solid plan whilst they are still in prison.
- Provide people with info and opportunities to support them to engage in or self-manage elements of their prison discharge.

### *On management*

- Enable prisoners to have more access to communication technology and education to use.
- More initiatives for prisoners to connect to community such as national volunteer programmes.

### *On Strategic Leaders / Commissioners*

- Reduce risk to employers through employer incentive schemes.
- A life skills service.
- Pay prisoners more for any work they do so that they are able to earn money to support their own discharge.

“Working with police and probation as a welfare benefits specialist through the VOICES project has provided our service with first-hand understanding of the specific systemic barriers faced by both customers and officers. Their skills, developed over time and bringing different disciplines together, has positively influenced our working practices. Specifically, we are more competent and informed to understand and advocate on behalf of customers based on this wider ‘field’ experience. This has resulted in positive outcomes for clients who are unlikely to have engaged with our service outside of the project structure. We have gained access to a joined up forum for sharing specialist knowledge and practices which are put back into the ‘melting pot’ for further service development and discussions for the professional development of all partners.”

— John Ryan  
Specialist Welfare Benefits  
Advisor - SNSCAB





## Pre-Release

### *On the frontline*

- Provide photos and maps for unfamiliar locations e.g., probation building, drug service.
- Support to open a bank account (banks able to take confirmation of ID from prison).
- Provide a release pack – water, healthy snacks (as well as the photos and maps suggested above).
- Ensuring the ability for GP registration pre-release.

### *On management*

- Wellbeing prison wings for people with mental health or substance misuse issues. Recruit and train staff specifically to work on there. Have a high vulnerability/high needs wing for people with real difficulties and an early day's unit that allows for a 14-day induction.
- People should not need to repeat their story. A full assessment of the person's health and social care needs should be conducted prior to release.
- Ability to apply for benefits in preparation for release.
- Access to personal ID, charged mobile phones with credit, email addresses, travel warrants and directions to pre-arranged appointments, alongside coordination of appointments to ensure they are realistic and achievable.



## Peer Mentors

### *On Strategic Leaders / Commissioners*

- Peer supporters should be paid. Additional well-trained, structured and supported volunteer roles should provide a pathway to paid roles.
- All prisoners should be assigned a mentor upon release (or pre-release to assist with planning).
- Provide people with info and opportunities to support them to engage in or self-manage elements of their prison discharge.





## Day of Release and Post Release

### *On the frontline*

- Offer as much support as possible / as much as your customer will accept. Provide or ensure they know plans for transport where possible. Rearrange appointments as necessary or let services/probation know any hold ups and estimated timescales.
- When developing induction, support and resettlement plans always consider human needs.
- Negotiate and advocate for changes to individual plans that demonstrate consideration for health, safety, and wellbeing. For example, is it necessary for a person to present for a probation induction on the day of release when they have no fixed abode and no finances.

### *On management*

- Small caseloads that allow workers to provide intensive support for individuals.
- Share the difficulties experienced by people leaving prison with ineffective release plans with services that people are required to engage with.
- Flexibility from probation on day of release, allowing contact to be made from phone rather than needing a face to face appointment. Prioritisation could then be focussed on coordinating medication and accommodation. This would particularly support a Friday release. Or remove the need to visit probation at all on first day, allowing time for the person to humanely adjust and action their physical and environmental priorities.

### *On Strategic Leaders / Commissioners*

- Establish a discharge hub where there would be a representative from probation, the drug service, Housing Options, as well as other housing services. There would be space for other services to attend as they want.
- The role of the probation officer needs revision, the modern probation service is focused far too much on surveillance and monitoring with no offer of support (**Roundabout Tales**).
- The practice of releasing prisoners on a Friday should end (**Roundabout Tales**).
- All prisoners should be assigned a mentor upon release (**Roundabout Tales**).
- (Experienced) Peer supporters should be paid. Additional well-trained, structured and supported volunteer roles should provide a pathway to paid roles (**Roundabout Tales**).



## Meeting the Needs of Women

### *On the frontline*

- Safe accommodation combined with wrap-around support prioritised from the point of release. (particular concern for women released in rural settings with limited transport links who are travelling to probation appointments and accommodation in unfamiliar areas).

### *On management*

- Resettlement planning should consider the risk of violence and exploitation an individual is likely to be exposed to both at the point of release and within any accommodation offered in the days and weeks following. Risk assessments and multi-agency safeguarding measures should be implemented.

### *On Strategic Leaders / Commissioners*

- Gender-responsive pathways for women in the criminal justice system.



## What Next?

Following the coproduction of the recommendations VOICES continued to work in supporting partnership colleagues to establish and develop a core group of key stakeholders to continue this work, communicate the recommendations and to integrate them into the Changing Futures programme in Stoke-on-Trent.



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