

September 2026

RR3

Reducing Reoffending
Third Sector Advisory Group

The Effective Implementation of the Sentencing Act

Report 1: Resettlement

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Introduction

About the RR3:

The Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3) provides the key interface between the voluntary sector, and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), in order to increase mutual understanding and build a strong and effective partnership. The group is made up of senior leaders from the voluntary sector and meets quarterly with c

ivil servants to provide guidance and feedback on MoJ policy developments. The RR3 convenes Special Interest Groups (SIGs) to advise on specific areas of policy and practice as the need arises. In 2026-27, a SIG on the effective implementation of the Sentencing Act 2026 was established. The objective was to explore the increased demand on the voluntary sector resulting from key provisions within the Act, with a focus on post-release resettlement support.

A separate report will be published that specifically explores the role of lived experience in delivering effective resettlement.

Context

The Independent Sentencing Review:

The Independent Sentencing Review (ISR) was commissioned in 2024 by the then-Government with the intention of developing sustainable solutions to the ongoing prison capacity crisis. Led by former Lord Chancellor, David Gauke, the review's interim report – the history and trends in sentencing – was published in February 2025, followed by its final report in May 2025. The Government subsequently accepted the majority of the review's recommendations.

The Sentencing Bill/Act:

The Sentencing Bill was introduced to parliament in September 2025 before receiving Royal Assent (becoming law as the Sentencing Act 2026) in January 2026. Phase 1 of the Act's implementation began in March 2026, which included key measures such as the presumption to suspend short custodial sentences, the expansion of suspended and deferred sentences, and the introduction of a new, fixed-term recall model. Phase 2 began in September 2026 and included the implementation of the earned progression model.

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The Special Interest Group on the Effective Implementation of the Sentencing Act:

The impact of the implementation of the core measures in the Act will be to increase demand on voluntary sector services.

This is due to the increased numbers of people who will require support in the community, as opposed to custody. Demand on these services is already increasing, as found by Clinks' [2025 State of the Sector research](#) – of the organisations surveyed, 57% reported engaging more new service users in 2024/2025, with 77% reporting that the level of need amongst people they supported had increased over the course of the 2024/25 financial year. Yet statutory funding has not kept pace with demand, with 58% of organisations surveyed believing that the level of statutory funding provided under their commissioned contracts was not adequate to deliver their service to a high quality. This context is essential in understanding the pressure the voluntary sector continues to face and reinforces the need to set out practical solutions that will support the sector to cope with the impact of the Sentencing Act.

This report is based on the findings of a series of voluntary sector roundtables that exclusively focused on support in the community. It leverages a wide range of sector expertise and co-produces recommendations for government on what resettlement support needs to be in place to make a success of the Sentencing Act reforms.

The core questions that the SIG has sought to answer are:

1. What is needed to most effectively support people in the community given the increased numbers as a result of the Sentencing Act?
2. What does the voluntary sector need to be able to cater for this increased demand on their services?

There is a secondary focus on the support needed for people on community sentences.

The report initially covers the entire resettlement pathway, followed by sections on the needs of distinct groups.

It has been broken down into the following sections:

- Pre-release support
- Through-the-gate provision
- Post-release support
- Tailored support for distinct groups

It then explores the following areas:

- Improving probation-voluntary sector partnership working
- Commissioning
- Support for people serving community sentences

The resettlement pathway: pre- to post-release

Pre-release support:

The provision of effective preparation for release remains inconsistent, as highlighted by the latest [annual report](#) published by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Charlie Taylor. Of the 40 inspected prisons across the men's and women's estates (in 2025-26), 40% were deemed as poor or not sufficiently good in their work preparing people for release.

The report notes that 'population pressures hindered well-planned release', which has been exacerbated by the succession of early release schemes that have placed even greater pressure on stretched Offender Management Units (OMUs). It is important to note the recent announcement that there will be a review of the existing Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) model.

Release planning can be undermined by late, inaccurate or changing release dates, sentence recalculations, unpredictable release times and transfers close to release. These issues make it difficult for people leaving custody, probation and voluntary sector providers to plan effectively and can mean that arrangements made in advance are no longer relevant at the point of release.

Current pre-release practice dictates that pre-release planning should begin no later than 12 weeks ahead of release, but given the context set out above, support is often provided inconsistently. As a result, SIG participants recommended that:

The existing pre-release model should be strengthened by enabling voluntary sector key workers based in the community greater access to people in prison, and at an earlier stage, in the run up to release.

This should build on existing processes for early identification of resettlement needs and allow for the establishment of trusted relationships with community-based support, thereby ensuring greater continuity of support from prison into the community.

It is important to note regarding the recommendation set out above, that greater access for community-based workers must align with greater access for staff based in prisons given regimes continued to be restricted, with limited time out of cell for many people in prison.

The voluntary sector plays an important role in providing relational support at the pre-release stage for people in prison, helping them to engage with support when difficulties emerge. This should be recognised as part of the wider preventative infrastructure around resettlement rather than relying solely on offering crisis support.

The overarching recommendation for greater access to people in prison should be supported by specific, practical measures that can further reduce the challenges associated with pre-release planning. This should include:

Accessible and clearly communicated release plans

Release plans should be 'realistic', tailored to and agreed with each individual, and clearly map out expectations for the period immediately following release, including the location of appointments, responsibilities across agencies and contingency planning:

- Supported by the consistent implementation of release planning that incorporates: ID, bank accounts, Universal Credit (where necessary), GP registration and medication, mental health and neurodiversity assessments, safeguarding plans, and housing referrals

Improving communication around licence conditions

Licence conditions should be explained in accessible language and enable time for engagement with the person affected, as well as – wherever possible – being co-produced;

- People need to understand what is expected of them and why, with opportunities to ask questions and understand the consequences of non-compliance
- Clearer communication and greater ownership of licence conditions would support both compliance and engagement, and adaptations and clarity are particularly essential for neurodivergent people

Incorporating voluntary sector expertise within pre-release planning

More detail is provided on through-the-gate provision and effective post-release support, below, but success in these areas relies upon a sustained pre-release focus that follows a person throughout their sentence. To reinforce this focus, SIG participants recommended that:

Wherever possible, every person leaving prison should be supported by a named key worker who provides support in the run-up to release and continues that support in the community. This role should be clearly defined within local resettlement pathways, coordinate with existing statutory and voluntary sector provision, and avoid duplication across overlapping schemes, including those supporting people with substance use treatment needs.

Through the gate provision:

The first 24-48 hours following release from prison are critical and require intensive support that reduces the barriers to accessing resettlement services. Yet, the disinvestment in specialist, through-the-gate support which many of the organisations we spoke to had experienced has meant that services on the day of release are inconsistently provided. SIG participants emphasised areas within on-the-day provision that should be prioritised, namely access to suitable accommodation and accompanying transport plans, alongside practical support covering phones, clothing and food.

There is also a need for greater coordination between the systems people have to navigate immediately after release. Access to benefits, linkage with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as well as finance, housing, employment and health support (including access to therapies, prescriptions and mental health support) are not reliably sequenced around release, while Universal Credit processes can contribute to financial instability at a point when people are already managing significant practical pressures.

In the immediate period following release, there was general consensus regarding the effectiveness of the Departure Lounge model, a through-the-gate resettlement approach that co-locates housing, benefits, health, employment and voluntary sector support in a single community setting immediately following release. Participants highlighted its value in reducing 'information overload' that many people face on their release. Yet, the availability of departure lounges is extremely limited, partly due to funding cuts.

Current commissioning practice was also raised in reference to creating an additional challenge for TTG provision. It was argued that 'prime-led commissioning' through large contracts 'dilute through-the-gate work.'

In order to reinforce current provision and to rectify any inconsistencies, there are several core components required to ensure a seamless transition from prison to the community on the day of release:

- Support tailored to the individual so that TTG provision is provided based on need
- Underpinned by early planning and clear communication to each person leaving prison to ensure they have a robust and accessible plan in place
- Effective information sharing between the relevant stakeholders – both statutory and non-statutory

The key recommendation to support more effective through-the-gate provision was to:

Roll out a 'one-stop-shop' model on release, through the capacity of Departure Lounge services

In addition to these components, SIG participants noted the current demands on prison staff and recommended:

The prioritisation of resources

Those who are at greatest risk of crisis, whether due to risk of homelessness, substance use relapse or considered to be at risk of recall should be prioritised for meet-at-the-gate, peer support and accompaniment to probation, accommodation, treatment, benefits, Jobcentre and other first-day commitments. The prioritisation of resources should be developed alongside the Probation Service, at a local level, given recent changes that will see probation target its resources at those considered to be most 'at risk'

More effective release time coordination

To ensure that voluntary sector staff are available, when needed, and so that coordination across services can be secured (avoiding releases when services are closed and ensuring transport/logistics are in place)

Increase the number of Departure Lounges

Explore the viability of establishing a specific pot of funding to establish and sustain a wider network of Departure Lounges to support with through-the-gate provision

Ensure the consistent, coordinated provision of practical support

Ensuring every person leaving prison is supported with: obtaining ID, accessing banking services, securing a phone and tenancy-related issues (where relevant)

Post-release support:

Building upon the findings from our roundtable on Resettlement, this section draws on insights from our engagement at the Collective Voice Criminal Justice Forum, alongside ongoing work with Clinks' Families' Network. The engagement through the Collective Voice forum informed the points made across the post-release support subheadings below, while the Families' Network engagement specifically informed the argument on the role of families' organisations. Together, these discussions highlighted the need for post-release support to provide a seamless transition from custody to the community, sustain trusted relationships and respond to people's practical, health and wellbeing needs over time.

Throughout our engagement, participants highlighted that effective post-release support relies on identifying need early and developing personalised release plans that connect custody-based work with community provision, rather than leaving people to navigate a sudden gap in support after release.

As a basis for long-term resettlement, support must continue beyond the first night and address the needs identified in custody. Trusted relationships are central to this, including access to peer mentoring after release. Participants argued that commissioning processes should protect peer-led provision and strengthen links with Lived Experience Reference Organisations (LEROs) and voluntary organisations.

Inevitably, accommodation was referenced as the critical component in securing positive resettlement outcomes. Participants noted the continuing provision of community accommodation services, particularly CAS3, but raised concerns about access to move-on accommodation given that CAS3 provision is limited to 84 nights.

Participants highlighted the need for accommodation pathways to extend beyond CAS 3 or short-term placements, with move-on options, safe local housing, strategic housing links and support to sustain tenancies.

It was also argued that accommodation pathways, including CAS3, require greater transparency. Published data and ongoing review would help to understand whether placements are supporting or hindering treatment, recovery and engagement, as well as whether people are able to move successfully into longer-term accommodation.

Participants also focused on several additional areas considered to be essential to effective resettlement.

On employment, participants recommended that:

Employment support should connect prison leavers to real jobs, help manage disclosure, spent convictions and DBS checks, prepare employers to understand trauma and licence conditions, and address benefit/rent structures that can make work unaffordable.

On the topic of digital inclusion, it was recommended that:

There be renewed focus, particularly for older and long-sentenced people, including support with navigating online systems such as Universal Credit and banking

The recommissioning of Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) as Community Support Contracts (CSC) was also raised and there was general consensus that provision within these contracts must complement rather than duplicate or displace existing voluntary sector relationships and local assets. There was particular concern that the new contracts – with their holistic model – could obscure the importance of through-the-gate and personal wellbeing support if the different elements of the single pathway are not clearly defined and connected. The significant budget attached to the proposed CSCs is a positive addition to the support offer on release from prison and it is vital that this resourcing is utilised in the most efficient and effective way possible.

To support the approach set out in this section of the report, the SIG set out an overarching recommendation for reform of resettlement, to:

Establish minimum standards for resettlement and community support so that every local area has a clear and consistent offer for people leaving prison or receiving community sentences. This should provide a baseline while allowing sufficient flexibility for local circumstances and existing services.

Continuity of care:

For people with substance use issues, continuity of care was seen as particularly dependent on practical coordination between custody, treatment providers, probation and community services. Participants highlighted the following challenges:

- **Inconsistent pre-release support** – participants highlighted that community-based treatment providers and voluntary organisations are not always able to access people sufficiently in advance of release to establish relationships, undertake release planning and coordinate continuity of care. This is often exacerbated by late changes to release dates, inconsistent communication and challenges in arranging timely pre-release contact.
- **Accommodation** – referenced as the ‘biggest’ barrier to continuity of care and sustained recovery. Without access to safe, suitable housing, people can find it more difficult to maintain recovery, engage with support and establish stability following release. Participants highlighted the importance of a range of accommodation options, including recovery housing and sober living environments where these are appropriate to an individual’s stage of recovery and support needs.
- **Communication** – ensuring continuity of care is being undermined by ‘late or inaccurate’ release information and/or last-minute changes to release areas, poor tracking of release dates and inconsistent communication between prison, probation and community services.
- **Challenges on the day of release** – people leaving prison often experience ‘information overload’ on their day of release, with a lack of clarity regarding the sequence of available support and inconsistent communication with practitioners

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Participants also noted that treatment provision in prisons and treatment provision in the community are commissioned and funded through separate systems, creating challenges for service integration and continuity of care. As implementation of the Sentencing Act increases the number of people requiring support in the community, there is a risk that the implications for treatment demand are not fully reflected in health and local authority commissioning arrangements. Closer coordination between justice, health and local government partners is therefore required to ensure that service design, capacity and funding reflect changing patterns of need.

To solve the challenges set out in this section, participants recommended:

Establishing clearly sequenced routes into treatment and wider support following release, with communication that is clear to both practitioners and the person leaving custody

Embedding practical resettlement work before release, including ID, banking, housing, treatment planning, medication and links to community services

Implementing crisis planning and relapse responses that prioritise recovery over automatic recall

Access to treatment in the community:

Recent data highlighted in the Justice Committee's report on drugs in prison showed that 49% of the people surveyed had an identified drug-related issue. This illustrates the extent of future demand on drug and alcohol services in the community and emphasises the importance of ensuring that treatment on release is both available and accessible. Engagement after release is more likely where people have already experienced motivating, recovery-oriented support in custody.

As highlighted in our engagement at the Collective Voice Criminal Justice Forum, clear processes are needed for prescriptions, rapid community prescribing and contingency planning where release dates or locations change at short notice.

Treatment pathways should also reflect the range of substance use needs experienced by people leaving custody. This includes support for people using non-opiate substances and psychostimulants, access to residential rehabilitation assessment, and appropriate alternatives for people who relapse or do not wish to engage with opioid substitution treatment.

Better use of data would help services understand why people do or do not engage with treatment. This should include the impact of medication pathways, recall patterns, housing instability and the accessibility of services. Understanding these factors would support a more effective response to disengagement and relapse.

Recall and enforcement responses should be informed by treatment need and recovery plans rather than being triggered simply by missed appointments or instability immediately following release.

A more problem-solving approach could support recovery while reducing the risk of people returning to custody without the underlying issues being addressed.

SIG participants then developed the following recommendations:

The availability of rapid prescribing consistently across the country, where necessary, to avoid creating a cliff edge on release

Timely access to treatment, including outside of standard office hours where necessary to support people leaving custody, should be supported by sufficient investment to avoid placing additional pressure on already stretched treatment services

Flexible re-engagement routes into treatment that recognise anxiety, relapse and a range of practical barriers to accessing support, building on practice already delivered successfully in many areas and ensuring consistent availability.

Digital and phone options for accessing support, recognising that these are already widely used by providers and should be sustained and made available wherever appropriate.

The building in of community-based treatment from the start of a sentence, rather than plans being put in place on release from prison

Provision of specialist advice to probation practitioners regarding the availability of treatment options

Mental health support:

Mental health is a critical part of the post-release support offer. In November 2025, the [Justice Committee](#) published the first report as part of its inquiry into rehabilitation and resettlement, highlighting that '48% of men and 70% of women in prison have a mental health difficulty.' Demand for mental health support in the community is therefore significant.

Although the challenges associated with transitioning from prison into the community have been set out earlier on this report, this section emphasises the impact of these challenges on the mental health of people leaving prison, which is exacerbated given the already high need identified within prison settings.

People leaving custody can face significant changes in their circumstances immediately after release, including loss of accommodation, financial insecurity, changes in relationships and uncertainty about their licence or probation requirements. Together, this can reinforce pre-existing mental health issues that are already prevalent within the prison estate and as identified by the Justice Committee.

Clear and accessible pathways into community mental health provision are needed, including voluntary sector support for people who do not meet statutory thresholds. Information about existing mental health needs, medication and support should be transferred early enough to enable continuity, with contingency arrangements where release dates or locations change.

The role of families' organisations – transition from custody to community remains a major gap:

As part of the work of the SIG, we engaged Clinks' Families' Network on the questions informing this report. Through this, network members highlighted a significant gap between the work that can take place during custody and the support available after release. While there may be opportunities to strengthen family relationships and address practical issues in prison, these are not always carried through into the community.

Despite the important role families can play in resettlement, wellbeing and compliance, support for families, including children, remains under-funded and inconsistently available. Families' organisations therefore need to be recognised as part of the wider resettlement infrastructure rather than treated as peripheral to prison, probation and community pathways.

Links with probation are essential, but families and family support providers are not consistently included in release planning, communication or referral pathways. Community Rehabilitation Service processes were also seen as not sufficiently designed around families, despite the importance of family relationships to successful resettlement.

Family support should therefore be embedded within both pre-release and post-release pathways. This should include clear referral routes, appropriate information-sharing arrangements and named contacts across prisons, probation and voluntary sector providers, so that families do not have to repeatedly navigate the system or identify support themselves.

As the Sentencing Act enters further stages of implementation, planning for increased demand should include consideration of the likely impact on families and family support services.

Family Network members therefore recommended that:

HMPPS should assess the impact of the Act on family services as part of implementation planning, including the implications for children and the capacity of specialist family organisations to respond.

Tailored resettlement support for specific groups:

Women:

Resettlement support must be tailored to the needs of specific groups, acknowledging that generic service provision fails to cater for the distinct needs of these groups.

Women represent approximately 4% of the prison population, and their needs are often overlooked in a system that is designed primarily for the large male population.

This necessitates a renewed focus, following successive governments' commitments on this agenda, to ensure that gender-specific support is available. This should include:

- Distinct resources for gender-specific, trauma-informed resettlement pathways that incorporate aspects including safe and appropriate accommodation options
- Sustainable funding for 'one-stop models' such as women's centres incorporating co-location of necessary support services, wherever possible

Older people:

Given the growth of the prison population, and particularly the greater number of people serving longer sentences, the number of older people in prison has increased significantly. According to the [latest prison population data](#), there are over 16,000 people in prison aged 50 or over which equates to almost 19% of the entire prison population. Yet the support available for this cohort remains limited, which creates several barriers to effective resettlement.

There are several practical measures that SIG participants set out, designed to incorporate appropriate resettlement support for older people leaving prison:

- The provision of accessible accommodation, adapted for needs including age-related disabilities
- Coordinate health and social care support to ensure that there is a seamless transition from care in prison to care in the community. This must include continuity of medication
- Support with digital inclusion with a focus on accessing digital support services that may not have existed at the time a person had entered custody

Provision for those presenting with disabilities or who are neurodiverse:

As referenced previously, generic service provision often fails to take into account the distinct needs of certain groups. This particularly applies to people with disabilities or who are neurodiverse. The result can be additional barriers to accessing vital services, understanding relevant information and navigating the requirements placed on people following release.

Support should therefore include clear and accessible information, with processes adapted where necessary to reflect individual needs. Staff should have appropriate training in proactively identifying and supporting neurodiversity and disability, and reasonable adjustments should be provided as part of the resettlement pathway rather than relying on people to request them once difficulties arise.

Recall:

The number of recalls to prison have surpassed releases for the first time ever, with the first three months of 2026 seeing 13,193 people recalled for breaching their release licence, a 101% recall rate. Given this alarming statistic, it is essential to focus on understanding and addressing the reasons for non-compliance rather than simply recycling people through short periods of custody. Recall processes should test alternatives and provide problem-solving pathways where this is possible.

The introduction of FTR56 creates an opportunity for more time to provide support, but this can be undermined by transfers, short support windows and limited understanding of the model across the voluntary sector. It also does not address the drivers behind recalls in the first instance.

SIG participants therefore recommend:

The establishment of a dedicated pathway for those on recall, beginning on day one of recall, for resolving the causes of non-compliance with licence conditions

Further, such a dedicated service should be extended to those who are released straight from court and those who are released following time on remand.

An overstretched probation service – improving probation-voluntary sector partnership working:

SIG participants acknowledged the demands faced by the Probation Service but highlighted the impact this continues to have on effective resettlement support given the service's role as a critical gateway into community support. In particular, voluntary organisations referenced staffing shortages and inexperience, workload and accountability pressures as diminishing overall effectiveness.

Several practical by-products of an overstretched service were repeatedly highlighted. It was noted that referral responsibility resting mainly with probation creates delays and that enabling prison or pre-release teams to take on greater responsibility for referrals, in partnership with voluntary organisations and where appropriate, could reduce the demands on probation. Late, inconsistent or incomplete referrals to voluntary organisations were also flagged as an ongoing challenge for serving delivery. Further, this ties in with continued information-sharing barriers including a lack of voluntary sector access to key systems such as NDelius. The combination of these challenges can subsequently make it more difficult for voluntary organisations to mobilise appropriate support at the point it is needed.

Several recommendations have been developed by the SIG that would foster increased collaboration between probation and the voluntary sector:

Establish a decision-making framework for recall decisions that incorporates the relevant voluntary sector providers and provides for a ladder of escalation as opposed to immediate recall

Establish stronger partnership structures, at a local level, that facilitate more effective partnership working between probation and the voluntary sector. - Existing local governance arrangements should be reviewed with a view to reducing duplication, improving coordination and making more effective use of the time and resources currently invested in multiple overlapping partnerships and boards.

Ensure that responsibilities for information sharing across supply chains are clearly established within the new Community Support Contracts

Establish a statutory-non-statutory working group responsible for mapping provision across all service pathways at a local level

Involve voluntary sector organisations at the earliest possible stage in policy development, service design, and implementation, with clear communications regarding upcoming reforms

Commissioning:

As part of the exploration of what effective resettlement support should look like, commissioning was consistently referenced as a significant barrier. The overarching argument was that commissioning arrangements should support collaboration between statutory services and voluntary organisations rather than transferring responsibility without the necessary resources, information or accountability. Subsequently, focus must be on strengthening existing local provision and relationships rather than displacing them.

The challenges:

Short-term funding and lack of full cost recovery:

Funding is, too often, short-term and does not reflect the cost of delivering services. This includes core organisational costs, such as realistic overheads, as well as supervision, safeguarding, training, data, management and mobilisation costs. Funding arrangements that do not recognise these costs risk placing additional pressure on organisations and limiting their ability to sustain services.

This potential risk is amplified due to the ongoing implementation of the Sentencing Act, which will place additional demands on voluntary organisations. This makes sustainable, multi-year funding and effective commissioning arrangements particularly important. The impact of the Sentencing Act is unlikely to be uniform, with demand potentially increasing in some areas while reducing or shifting elsewhere. Funding and commissioning arrangements therefore need to be sufficiently flexible to respond to changing need rather than being based solely on fixed assumptions about future demand, particularly where responsibility for related services sits across multiple commissioning systems and agencies.

Family Network members raised the issue of short-term contracts being unlikely to provide sufficient capacity where reforms increase demand for family support or require services to operate differently across prisons and communities. There is also a risk of destabilisation where there is a gap between the implementation of reforms and the commencement of new support contracts, particularly where existing providers are required to demobilise before replacement provision is in place.

These delays can create a cycle in which services are unable to meet demand because staff cannot gain timely access to establishments. This is particularly problematic during a period of significant system change, when organisations may need to mobilise quickly in response to new patterns of release and increased demand.

Large contract package areas and current commissioning practice crowding out small, specialist organisations:

The commissioning of large contract package areas (CPAs) often has the effect of crowding out small, specialist organisations from accessing statutory funding, and can lead to an over-reliance on large prime providers. Such an approach risks reducing the provision delivered by smaller organisations who bring local knowledge due to their being genuinely embedded within local communities, as well as an ability to provide forms of support that are difficult to replicate at scale. Commissioning and procurement routes should therefore be made more accessible to small and specialist organisations.

Vetting:

The voluntary sector's ability to recruit, train and employ people with lived experience is one of its key strengths and a significant contributor to effective service delivery. Participants highlighted that lived experience should be recognised as a core professional asset within commissioned services, rather than being viewed as an unpaid addition to delivery. People with lived experience play a vital role in building trust, supporting engagement and providing credible peer support across resettlement pathways.

However, current vetting arrangements can create barriers to recruiting and retaining people with lived experience within commissioned services. To mitigate this challenge, it was recommended that vetting arrangements must be proportionate and appropriately tiered so that people with relevant lived experience can contribute safely without unnecessary barriers preventing their involvement.

Additionally, delays in vetting and prison access are limiting the ability of voluntary organisations to respond quickly, even where funding and staffing are available. Providers reported waits of up to six months for vetting, leaving organisations stretched and reducing their ability to deliver support.

Improving the speed and consistency of clearance processes would allow providers to mobilise support more effectively and at a pace that reflects the implementation of the Sentencing Act.

Supporting people serving community sentences:

The implementation of the Sentencing Act is expected to increase the number of people receiving support in the community without a period of custody. Effective resettlement therefore needs to be considered alongside the support required for people serving community sentences.

For some people, early access to voluntary sector support can help address the practical issues that may otherwise undermine engagement with probation and increase the risk of breach. This includes support with housing, benefits, employment, substance use, mental health, family relationships and other issues that may affect a person's ability to comply with their sentence. Ahead of sentencing, there should also be additional scope for pre-sentence reports (PSRs) to be strengthened via specialist input from voluntary organisations already supporting those about to be sentenced.

The development of a more community-based sentencing system therefore needs to be accompanied by a clear local infrastructure of support. This should build on existing voluntary sector provision and ensure that people serving community sentences can access the same kind of practical, relational and specialist support that can help people leaving custody to sustain positive outcomes.

This system should be underpinned by implementing the following recommendation:

Establishing a minimum set of standards for community support with commensurate resources to ensure that there is a baseline level of support on offer, with a focus on Community Sentence Treatment Requirements (CSTRs), whilst allowing for sufficient flexibility for provision to reflect local need and existing voluntary sector infrastructure.

Conclusion:

The implementation of the Sentencing Act provides both an opportunity to fundamentally reform the criminal justice system but also creates the risk of potentially exacerbating longstanding and systemic challenges. The opportunity is to rebalance the sentencing regime so that a greater focus is placed on community alternatives to custody, which are proven to be both more effective and efficient. The risk is that the necessary support is not put in place to support a greater number of people in the community.

The evidence gathered by the SIG is clear: resettlement cannot be treated as one-off intervention at the prison gate but must be a continuous and seamless pathway from custody into the community, built around trusted relationships, early planning and support tailored to individual need, whilst utilising the expertise of the voluntary sector at every stage.

In addressing ongoing and emerging challenges related to the current resettlement offer, the SIG agreed on three overarching principles:

- Strengthened pre-release planning
- Effective support on the day of release
- Sustained community support

Within each of these three strands, there are a range of practical recommendations that this report has set out. The theme that runs throughout these recommendations is the role and value of the voluntary sector. Without the services and support that the sector provides, an already creaking system would struggle to meet growing demand. However, the value of the voluntary sector goes beyond preventing system failure. The sector delivers trusted, person-centred and cost-effective support that can improve resettlement outcomes, strengthen community integration and make more effective use of public resources.. This reinforces the need to ensure that the wider sector is involved and engaged, at the earliest possible stage, in the development and then implementation of policy.

A refreshed approach to resettlement requires consistent minimum standards for resettlement, alongside sustained investment in the voluntary sector, stronger partnership working with probation, consistent minimum standards for resettlement, and commissioning arrangements that support high-quality delivery. Any minimum standards introduced should be accompanied by funding that reflects the true cost of delivery, ensuring that expectations placed on providers are matched by the resources needed to achieve them. Particular attention must also be given to accommodation, health and treatment, mental health, family support and the distinct needs of women, older people, disabled and neurodivergent people, and those subject to recall.

The Sentencing Act provides an opportunity to shift the focus of the justice system towards more effective community-based support. To realise that opportunity, the government must ensure that the infrastructure, relationships and resources needed to make resettlement work are in place.



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