

Early birds

Prisoners serving short sentences for minor crimes are being let out early to ease chronic overcrowding in jails. But the policy is causing problems for services that help prison leavers with drugs problems back into the community. **Carlita McKnight** reports.

According to the latest Ministry of Justice figures, the prison population total for England and Wales stands at 82,586. The Prison Reform Trust says that the prison system as a whole has been defined as 'overcrowded' every year since 1994. The pressures placed upon the prison system by overcrowding can result in worsening physical conditions within prisons and greater pressure being placed upon the provision of and access to services within prison.

As a means of tackling overcrowding across the prison estate, the introduction of End of Custody Licences (ECLs) in June 2007 was designed to ensure that all prisoners who were eligible could be released from prison up to 18 days early.

But, according to those working within the system, both in and outside prison, the ECL scheme has created a number of problems for inmates leaving jail with drug problems or a history of them.

During January and February this year there were 2,310 releases on ECL, with 1,866 of those released serving sentences of less than 12 months. Unfortunately, prisoners serving less than 12 months are not eligible for an offender manager on release back in to the community. Whilst this is unlikely to directly impact upon their ability to access community based drug treatment, it does make sorting out housing, benefits and employment more difficult. In turn, as recently released prisoners become disengaged with the community, it can become more likely that they return back to crime and illicit drug use.

Prisoners released under ECL are given the normal discharge grant, as well as a subsistence payment, which would cover benefit payments up until their formal release date. For prisoners who may have been moved around



prisons during their custodial sentence, ECL can mean that they are being released with a comparatively large cash sum, from a prison that is potentially far from their support networks such as their family, community and local drug treatment services. For some, this can lead to an increased risk of drug overdose – as their tolerance to street drugs is diminished.

Bringing forward a prisoner's release date may make it more difficult for continuity of care in the community. Although the Drug Intervention Programme (DIP) aims to pick up prisoners upon release, this doesn't always happen after ECL, because prison-based services sometimes find it hard to respond quickly enough when working to the timetable of a new release date. One DIP team member told a DrugScope reference group: "It comes down to prison-based workers having the time to make contact with the prescribing service and the DIP team. They should be ensuring that no one is left without support. If CARAT (counselling assessment, referral advice and throughcare) teams have 24 hours before release, community services will not be able to get a script organised in time for collection upon prison release."

And DIP teams have varied success in dealing with prison-based health services. *Commissioning healthcare in*

prisons, a report published in February by the Healthcare Commission, found 13 out of 18 Primary Care Trusts either had no strategy for commissioning prison healthcare or that the strategy needed updating. The report noted that one of the main barriers to PCTs being able to collect clinical audits on health services in prisons was a lack of computerised records and data which made overall prisoner health need assessment difficult and for some PCTs impossible. It also highlighted the need for improvements to be made in the processes for transferring and releasing prisoners. "PCTs must continue to ensure that they have arrangements in place for the continuing care, transfer and release of prisoners and that compliance with these arrangements is routinely monitored," the report said.

While there are some inmates who are exempt from ECLs, such as sexual offenders, people convicted of serious violence and foreign nationals facing extradition, the main barrier to being released on an ECL is not being able to provide a release address as a condition of licence. Prisoners over 18 who are serving a custodial sentence of between four weeks and four years have to provide a bail address to ensure their acceptance on to the ECL scheme. For some families, being used as the default setting for a relative's bail address can prove both difficult and divisive.

During a recently held DrugScope reference group on family and their role in supporting recovery, one family member said: "Families are often contacted by prison, probation, court, residential rehab and other agencies as someone is being released. They may well feel under pressure to offer support, which they may not have otherwise done."

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