

Speech: Rough Sleeping Strategy and prison leavers: Rory Stewart blog

Sleeping out, night after night, in a street or a park, or a doorway, is not simply cold and uncomfortable – it is lonely, and damaging to soul and body. Rough sleepers are seventeen times more likely to be attacked than the general public. They are more likely to have substance misuse problems, and many have issues with their mental health. In addition, nearly one in three female rough sleepers have experienced sexual violence while homeless.

And too many rough sleepers come straight from prison – moving from their jail cells into this outdoor life of isolation, vulnerability and addiction. On the streets, without a job, without mental health support, or a bed for the night – they are sucked back into a criminal life, reoffend, and soon end up back in prison. We must do much more to help rough sleepers, and ex-prisoners in particular, to find a house and re-establish a more stable life. It is not just good for them, it is vital for public safety.

Today (13 August 2018), therefore, as the government launches a £100 million initiative to reduce and ultimately eliminate rough sleeping across England, I am delighted that ex-prisoners are integral to this project. As part of the rough sleeping initiative we will invest £3 million per year for 2 years in a pilot scheme which will include a new team of dedicated officers, who will spend time with offenders, when they are still in jail and in the community, to ensure that they are much better equipped for life outside the prison walls.

The particular focus of these pilots will be prisoners on very short sentences – often the most difficult group to engage with. The officers will ensure that the prisoners are fully signed up to the benefits, an employment support system and that their bank accounts are setup before they leave prison. But their key task will be to find suitable housing, and to provide support for prisoners to sustain their new accommodation.

Many remarkable charities have shown how even the most frequent offenders can turn away from crime by leaving the streets. We will make this process easier by engaging much earlier with offenders – when they are still in jail– making sure that probation and local authorities understand their needs before they are released. And because female offenders are particularly vulnerable, we will be working with local areas to develop a pilot for ‘residential women’s centres’ in at least five sites across England and Wales. We will also be measuring and judging prisons on how many of their prisoners find accommodation on release.

None of this will be easy. But every time we help an ex-prisoner set up a new and better life, with a roof over their head, relationships with family, basic support, and a job, we dramatically reduce the chance of their reoffending. This is not simply saving an individual from a life of crime and prison. It is protecting all the potential victims of their crime – and

reducing the burden of reoffending that costs the public £15 billion a year. Thus, preventing rough sleeping among ex-prisoners is good for them, good for the streets, and good for the public who will be better protected from the misery of crime.