

# REFORM

# NEWTON



Breaking the cycle: building a  
whole-system model of resettlement

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# Breaking the cycle: building a whole-system model of resettlement

*Reform was delighted to host a policy roundtable which explored the challenges and opportunities associated with breaking the cycle of reoffending and helping with effective rehabilitation. The discussion was introduced by Amy Rees, Director General & Chief Executive at HM Prison and Probation Service, and Chris Beal, Director at Newton.*

Since 2008, the reoffending rate in England and Wales has fluctuated around 30 per cent. Reoffending rates vary depending on the length of the sentence, but typically follow the trend where shorter sentences lead to a higher probability of reoffending. For example in Q1 of March 2022, adults released from sentences which were less than 12 months had a proven reoffending rate of 55.5 per cent; in comparison, those with sentences of 12 months or more had a far lower rate: 20.4 per cent. Reoffending rates also vary by ages, with juvenile reoffenders having the highest rates: 35.4 per cent; followed by the 15 to 17-year-old offenders, with a reoffending rate of 33.9 per cent.

Reoffending causes several damaging economic and social consequences, both for the individual and wider society. It leads to unfulfilled potential among ex-offenders and creates unnecessary, often long-lasting, suffering for communities across the country. Reoffending also imposes significant costs to the taxpayer; a recent estimate found that the total economic and social cost of reoffending was £18.1 billion.

This policy problem has proven to be a longstanding challenge. And whilst consecutive governments and ministers have attempted to implement various policy initiatives and solutions, the nation still faces significant problems. Although there has been some success in trying to move the dial, there remains a challenging backdrop of capacity, demand, fiscal constraints, and high staff turnover.

To truly tackle the challenge head on, it is imperative that policymakers can create a more sustainable, safer and outcome-driven system. At this roundtable, our expert participants engaged in a lively discussion on the most significant obstacles and opportunities relating to breaking the cycle of reoffending and building a whole-system model of resettlement. The main themes are summarised below.

## Move away from a siloed system and towards an ecosystem of collaboration

Participants were generally in consensus that the siloed nature of the prison and rehabilitation system is a root of many of the issues. There are several departments, organisations, charities and agents who all play a vital role in the prison systems. This ranges from local government, civil servants, and police officers to probation professionals, and community-led organisations.

However, the flows of communication both within and between these organisations is disorganised, and even in some cases absent. This leads to informational gaps which in turn can cause several issues: reduced productivity, replicated assessments, and poor outcomes for individuals. For instance, one participant noted how multiple departments might conduct the same assessments of the same issue for the same person as they have not been communicating with each other.



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Participants agreed that this represents the broader problem of an over-siloed case management system.

Additionally, participants noted how the siloed nature of the system impacts care leavers in particular. One participant drew attention to the number of ex-offenders who become care leavers after going to prison and how siloed working specifically affects these individuals due to the lack of wider, whole-family engagement approach.

In terms of adopting a more joined-up approach, the Troubled Families Program was pointed out as a source of good practice. Participants expressed hope that if leaders and policy makers can build on this type of model and encourage communication between organisations then resettlement attempts can produce improving results in future.

### The importance of community for embedding a preventative approach

A startling fact came to light in the roundtable discussion: when a person enters custody for the first time with a sentence of less than 12 months, they have already been in contact with policing and justice institutions an average of 37 times. This striking statistic points to wider flaws in the system and worryingly suggests that currently, the system is not doing enough to prevent offending and reoffending, even when a person is known to the services.

One participant suggested that this is due to an identity problem that arises for probation and prison services: namely, that the services see themselves as managing demand, rather than being involved in preventative services. This challenge highlights, among other things, the importance of community and social connection

and the role various civic organisations can play in preventing reoffending.

There was general agreement among participants that due to a range of problems, and most consistently a prison and probation service where demand outstrips capacity, the system does not “sit around the table of prevention”. It was discussed that if the systems can try to take a more preventative approach, work better with, and be embedded into community organisations, then tackling the issue of reoffending will be easier and produce better outcomes.

Indeed, this point is even more important when considering how many of the participants agreed that social fabric plays a preventive role in the prison system itself. For instance, one participant firmly stated how HMPPS cannot run its system without effective partnerships.

This therefore highlights the role that broader community services can play in helping to prevent re/offending and further points to the importance of collaboration between service providers

### Local delivery and national standards

Delivering services on the local level was another point of discussion. Many participants noted how better delivery of services is often enacted locally. For example, when considering the above need for better communication and embeddedness between service providers; and how such a system is key to reducing the reoffending rates. For instance, upskilling offenders whilst they are in the system is a key service, and one that is vital in reducing the reoffending rates. Such a task, it was noted, is best delivered locally as local employers know the skills needed for jobs in the area.

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However, it was also noted that it is important to square a need for local delivery with a nationally consistent and joined-up prison and probation service. This complex matter was thoughtfully discussed by participants in the context of preventing reoffending. It is hoped that future reforms and policy will reflect on this trade-off and strike the right balance between embedded, local delivery and standardised prison and probation systems.

### Putting the individual at the centre of the experience

Whilst much of the discussion was focused on public service provision, participants also reflected on the factor of individual experience. The individual experience of the system can be complex, and unexpected.

Participants shared accounts that illustrate the complex relationship between the prison system and offenders. For instance, one gave an example of a fifteen-year-old boy who was physically restrained upon his release from HMP High Down. The boy was being restrained as he could not face going back into society and his community and instead was desperate to stay in prison. Other noted how offenders are often overwhelmed with a large number of contact points and appointments for support whilst in the system and especially upon leaving for resettlement.

One participant emphasised the importance of an effective probation system for people in this situation. Significant resources are spent on reconnection services both from the prison and probation services themselves, and from other organisations such as NHS England. And, whilst the objectives of these policies are benign, they are not necessarily productive at preventing reoffending.

Instead of the current siloed, narrow approach, described as fortnightly 'box checking' exercise, participants agreed that a more sustainable probation system can come about. This would be one which joined-up services that provide holistic and sustainable support. This system would be one which puts the individual offender at its centre, and helps to build a rehabilitation program around their specific needs. Indeed, the importance of putting an individual as a part of a team cannot be understated. Such a system would encourage and motivate offenders to get involved and as such, likely reduce the reoffending rates.

Inevitably, this is linked to the extent of the trust that can be fostered between the individual and the wider system. Participants all agreed that flows of trust between offenders and the systems and structures they are under is key to preventing reoffending. Without trust, it is hard for offenders to actively engage in the programs and make the most of the help they receive both inside and outside of the system, thus increasing the likelihood of reoffending.

There is much to be optimistic about. The policy levers are there, and there is the will to bring about change among many of those involved in the system. Building a whole-system model of resettlement will not be an easy task, but it is one which participants recognised can and should be worked towards in order to achieve approaches which genuinely serve the needs of both individuals and society.





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