

Work and Pensions Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

20 April 2016

Dear Sir or Madam,

►
London Office
29-35 Farringdon Road
London EC1M 3JF
T 020 7186 9500
E enquiries@ymca.org.uk
www.ymca.org.uk

Patron:
Her Majesty the Queen
President:
The Most Reverend
& Right Honourable
Dr. John Sentamu

YMCA England response to Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry on Support for ex-offenders

Every year YMCA helps over 1,000 young people through their work in prisons and young offender institutions.

To supplement this, YMCAs across the country run crime prevention and avoidance sessions with over 6,400 people.

YMCA is also the largest provider of safe, supported accommodation for young people in England – providing just fewer than 10,000 beds every night, which includes housing for ex-offenders.

YMCA is there for all young people, supporting them through difficult times. At the heart of YMCA's beliefs is that young people should always have the opportunity to better themselves regardless of their background, and thus it takes a holistic approach to help develop their mind, body and spirit, and ultimately to achieve their full potential.

The comments and recommendations laid out within this response are formed from consultations with the young people that access YMCA services and the staff that deliver them across England and Wales.

1. How are prisoners helped to find employment; is support available both pre-and post-release?

- 1.1** At the heart of YMCA's beliefs is that individuals should always have the opportunity to better themselves, and thus they provide they support to facilitate this.

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

SUPPORT & ADVICE

ACCOMMODATION

FAMILY WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

TRAINING & EDUCATION

- 1.2** Every year YMCAs across England and Wales work with ex-offenders to find employment through job clubs, speed interviews with employers, and linking training and education with available job opportunities. In addition, they work with local services to provide ex-offenders with holistic support.
- 1.3** YMCAs see mixed success with these programmes aimed at helping ex-offenders into work with many stating that the stigma attached to those with an offending background often prevents them from gaining employment.
- 1.4** YMCA recognises the importance of tailoring support to the individual's background, needs and interests to ensure that the training and education opportunities afforded to them are appropriate and applicable.
- 1.5** Accordingly, detailed work is done with individuals at YMCA to investigate their needs in full, before referrals are made by education workers.
- 1.6** While a lot of importance has been placed on providing ex-offenders with the training and education they need to gain employment, YMCAs see the impact that poor mental health can have on those attempting to gain work.
- 1.7** While it was noted that helping individuals into meaningful work could help to alleviate mental health issues, YMCA believes that more support should be given to these individuals to help them sustain employment.
- 1.8** Companies and organisations should be more pro-active when considering ex-offenders, especially when they have committed relatively minor offences. To further supplement this; more volunteering opportunities should be available to individuals get the job references that employers are looking for.
- 1.9** Similarly, it is important that individuals know about the opportunities out there, and thus job fairs and talks from professionals are critical to make people aware of the variety of options that are open to them.
- 1.10** YMCAs often work with some of the most vulnerable people in society, many of whom have had difficult backgrounds that have led to them offending and receiving a criminal record. Once that individual has accessed our services and got the support they need to succeed, it is vital that stable employment opportunities are available in order to continue on the path to independence.
- 1.11** A greater degree of training and education around mental health, and conditions such as depression and anxiety would allow charity, and agency staff, to work with individuals in a more meaningful way. This will

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

help them overcome their fears and increase their self-confidence so they can sustain meaningful employment.

2. What benefit payments are available on discharge from prison and how long does it take to access those benefits?

- 2.1** A range of benefits payments are available to young people leaving prison. However, as with other vulnerable young people YMCAs work with, the social security system can often prove difficult to navigate.
- 2.2** It is therefore important that ex-offenders are provided with adequate advice on the full range of their entitlement through the social security system upon their release to ensure they do not unnecessarily miss out.
- 2.3** While it is important that ex-offenders are encouraged to access to full range of benefits available to them, it is equally important that social security system incentivises work.
- 2.4** YMCA recognise that that the current benefit system makes finding employment financially unfeasible for many, particularly those accessing Housing Benefit, as this either lost or withdrawn to quickly as soon as an individual finds work.
- 2.5** This is particularly problematic for those on minimum wage or zero hour contracts, which most ex-offenders are. This problem is likely even more acute for young offenders who are not entitled to the new National Living Wage.
- 2.6** In addition to this, given the significant numbers of ex-offenders suffering from mental health issues, greater efforts should be made to ensure that vulnerable people are supported rather than left on benefits, which were never designed to be a long-term solution.

3. What support do offenders receive to help them find suitable accommodation on leaving prison?

- 3.1** Repeated studies have established that securing adequate housing can have a significant impact on the outcomes for ex-offenders.
- 3.2** YMCA is the country's largest voluntary sector provider of supported housing for young people.
- 3.3** YMCAs across England and Wales offer a range of housing support to young ex-offenders, including providing them with safe and supportive

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

accommodation and working with them to apply for and access housing in social and private rented sector.

- 3.4** However, while there are a range of voluntary sector providers engaged in providing such support, these are often under-resourced and forced to manage a situation where ex-offenders are overlooked for housing support due to being classified as 'intentionally homeless' or the nature of their conviction.
- 3.5** To better support ex-offenders, the housing support provided needs to move from a reactive to a proactive service, with processes commencing much earlier prior to their release.
- 3.6** The support provided to ex-offenders needs also to extend beyond that initial provision of housing upon release, to look at the longer term housing arrangements and tenancy sustainment, through appropriate advice and floating support.

4. What are the impacts of factors such as homelessness and unemployment on the propensity to re-offend?

- 4.1** It is important that ex-offenders have the support they need to re-build their lives and create a stable base after leaving custody. However many of the individuals we work with speak of a feeling of isolation and hopelessness when they leave.
- 4.2** As previously mentioned, many leaving custody are stigmatised because of their background and thus face difficulties securing accommodation and employment. The difficulties they face can lead to a lack of motivation and a return to previous negative lifestyle choices, like drug and alcohol dependency.
- 4.3** Too often boredom, peer pressure and drug addictions all become part of a vicious cycle that ex-offenders are particularly vulnerable to fall in to. If an individual leaving prison does not have the support they need to find accommodation and employment often they can lack focus and something to occupy them, and the resort to what they feel comfortable with and what they know best.
- 4.4** This lack of opportunities for ex-offenders is something that YMCAs see right across the country. Re-offending, as opposed to committing a first offence is often about alienation, with a lack of opportunities being a resounding factor spoken about by re-offenders.
- 4.5** Criminality becomes ever more entrenched with each re-offence. With each activity a person hones their skill set, whether that is shoplifting or

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

burglary. As they gain confidence in their skills they are more likely to use them, and they often receive praise from their peers and negative associates, which reinforces a sense of self-worth and community.

- 4.6** As the association with the criminal lifestyle continues, the alienation from the law-abiding lifestyle increases, with other law-abiders dismissing them and employers finding them less and less appealing. As the cycle continues the alienation increases and individuals find it increasingly hard to break the cycle as offending becomes part of normal social life.
- 4.7** In addition, without the chance of legitimate employment, re-offending can become a means of survival. Along the way, alcohol and substance misuse can also be introduced as a means of escaping the constant feelings of alienation and helplessness.
- 4.8** Prison sentences tend to increase these pressures as accommodation and chances of employment are lost and family relationships tend to be put under strain. The lifestyle is self-propagating and it compounds itself with great efficiency.
- 4.9** In order to help prevent re-offending it is important that this negative cycle and lifestyle pattern is recognised and overcome. When an individual leaves prison it is critical that they receive immediate support to create a stable base from which they can begin to rebuild their lives.

If you require any further information or have any follow-up questions regarding our response, please do not hesitate to get in touch using the contact details included.

Yours faithfully,



Denise Hatton
YMCA England
Chief Executive