

Prisons are in lockdown. This means that every prisoner is spending a minimum of 23 hours a day locked in their cell. **Prison Visits Halls are closed and all prison visits have been cancelled and we don't know when they will start again** - so the men and women currently serving prison sentences in England and Wales are both in lockdown and in isolation, with many struggling to even make contact with their families and friends.

Most prisoners will tell you that their moments of hope - something they look forward to week after week - are visits from their families. We are doing our best to support people in prison, as well as their families and loved ones on the outside, to stay positive, stay hopeful and stay connected. **But we won't lie to you: it's tough, very tough.**

It's not just on the inside that Pact's services are vital. We are also there to support people as they leave prison. **Those leaving during the current situation are finding themselves in a very different world from the one they knew.** The 'discharge grant' (the amount of money that is available to everyone leaving prison) is still just £46 and is expected to see someone through the first week after release, allowing time for Universal Credit and other benefits to become active. But with things as they are, this grant is simply not enough. People are finding themselves unable to meet the most basic needs of food and shelter.

Jack's story

A few weeks ago, Jack* was released from prison into a world he no longer recognised. After spending 23 hours a day in his cell (to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the prison) he was looking forward to his freedom. But instead he was faced with a country in 'lockdown'. It was going to be extremely tough. Jack had to go straight to his Probation appointment so he used some of the discharge money to travel the distance across town. After his appointment he used some more of the grant to get to the temporary accommodation that had been arranged for him. At his accommodation, Jack received a parcel from a food bank.

Paul* is one of Pact's 'Through the Gate' mentors. He had been supporting Jack through the last few weeks of his sentence and had hoped to meet him at the prison gate on release unfortunately, the lockdown restrictions meant that this wasn't possible. But Paul had given Jack his phone number and told him to get in touch.

Jack called Paul to ask for some support: he only had the clothes he was wearing and a handful of possessions in a carrier bag - he really needed underwear and a change of clothes if possible. Although Jack felt uncomfortable about asking, he shyly mentioned this to Paul. He also told Paul that he'd have to use what was left of his discharge grant to collect his prescription which had been sent to a chemist in the next town. He was worried about how he was going to make it through the week.

Paul listened to Jack and, together, they came up with a plan. Paul contacted the chemist and arranged for Jack's prescription to be moved to a nearby chemist so Jack didn't have to travel. Together, they found a local charity who confirmed that they would be able to help Jack. Although they couldn't meet Jack in person (because of social distancing measures) they arranged for him to receive some underwear and a clean set of clothes - along with another package from the food bank. This gave Jack some hope. He felt that he could make it through the week. He told Paul that he'd been "a lifeline" to him in those first few days. Now, he is looking forward to the future and a time when the restrictions are eased.

Jack is just one of the people released from prison every week with just £46 in their pocket and a series of hoops to jump through in order to begin their new life. It was tough before the lockdown began: now it is even harder.

Pact are working hard to continue to support worried families, people in prison, and people leaving prison, who now face a very uncertain future. **We urgently need funds to expand our independent Helpline, continue advocating on behalf of the people we serve, and to carry on our remote befriending services for prisoners' families.** We also need funds to support the Pact team in enabling people to access emergency assistance - just like in Jack's story.

These are unprecedented times. We are all facing challenges and increased uncertainty as a result of the current Coronavirus pandemic. **For Pact's service users, the impact of this crisis is likely to be more significant and longer lasting than for many others.** That's why we're launching our COVID-19 emergency appeal.

We can't do it without you. Your gift today, no matter how large or small, will help. Perhaps you could match the discharge grant of £46? A gift of £22 enables us to answer a call on the Helpline from worried family members and a gift of £84 can provide one-to-one befriending support for a prisoners' family with one of our specially trained volunteers. Every gift helps. Every single pound keeps Pact services running at this incredibly difficult time. If you are eligible for Gift Aid, let us know, we can claim an extra 25% of your gift from the Government.

You can donate to Pact's work right here: <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/our-cv19-appeal>

Together, we can make a difference. Andy Keen-Downs CEO, Pact

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