

Connections

Designing **better support**
for people with experience of
care and women's prison



About this Handbook

This handbook summarises our work to design a better way of supporting women with experience of care and custody.

It has been co-developed by three groups:

LIVED EXPERIENCE DESIGN TEAM

We are a group of people at HMP Foston Hall with experience of care and custody. We use our strengths, stories and ideas to help lead this work and create change.

DESIGN TEAM

We are people working across services like prison, probation, children's social care, women's centres, housing, health and mental health. Some of us also bring lived experience. Together, we are designing and testing new ways of working, shaped by women's voices and what we know about how the system works in practice.

STEERING GROUP

We are a group of leaders from HMPPS, children's services, charities, local services, national organisations and people with lived experience. We help guide the project and support others to get involved and make change happen.



DESIGN TEAM



Derby City Council



LIVED EXPERIENCE DESIGN TEAM

CHANGING LIVES



STEERING GROUP



This work is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and is being led by Innovation Unit, in partnership with HMP Foston Hall.

We want to share what we learn, so it can influence wider systems, shape policy and support change elsewhere.

This handbook brings together our latest thinking and will grow and evolve as the work continues.

A note on who we mean by ‘women’

When we say ‘women’, we include anyone who has been treated as a girl or woman by systems like social care or the criminal justice system. This includes, but isn’t limited to, trans women, people who were assigned female at birth but now identify as non-binary or trans men, and intersex people.

Because of this, we use both ‘women’ and ‘people’ in this handbook. Our focus is on supporting everyone affected by the women’s prison system, both inside prison and on release into the community.

A note on language

This handbook was co-written by people with experience of care and custody, and the staff who support them. Together, we chose to write from the perspective of women to centre lived experience and reflect how this work has been shaped.

We’ve used a ‘we’ voice throughout the handbook, and signposted where direct quotes are used.

Some shared definitions

What we mean by the words we use

Care experience

We use the term ‘care experienced’ to include people of all ages who have spent time in care. This could include foster care, residential care, kinship care, or adoption.

Trauma-informed

Being trauma-informed means recognising how common trauma is, and how deeply it can affect people’s bodies, minds and relationships. It means working in ways that help people feel safe, have choices and feel in control.

For example, it might mean noticing that shouting could be a trigger, or understanding that things like addiction or self-harm may be symptoms of trauma, not just problems to fix.

When we talk about being trauma-responsive, we mean supporting people to heal from trauma and move forward with their lives.

Anti-racism

Anti-racism means recognising that racism can show up in people, institutions and systems – and that we all have a role in challenging it. It’s not enough to be ‘not racist’ – anti-racism is about actively noticing and changing the rules, behaviours and beliefs that keep racial inequality going, and working for fairness. For example, noticing when Black or minoritised women are treated more harshly or excluded from support, and challenging it.

Gender-specific

Gender-specific support recognises that women often face different challenges to men – including how they are treated by the justice system.

It means services respond to women’s needs, strengths and experiences, and aim to offer care, dignity and fairness to all women – including those who are trans, non-binary or intersex. For example, understanding how shame or fear of losing children can affect how someone engages with services – and responding with compassion, not judgement.

System

When we talk about ‘the system’, we mean the services and organisations that work together to support people – like social care, education, health, housing, police, courts and prisons. Systems are made up of people, policies and ways of working.

Changing the system means changing how organisations work together, so support is more joined-up and works better for people.

A note on accessibility

We've designed this handbook to be accessible, recognising that everyone brings different experiences, needs and ways of learning.

Some sections include two versions of the same content:

KEY MESSAGES

A shorter version using clear language and visuals

MORE DETAIL

A longer version for those who want to go deeper

You'll find these one after the other, so you can choose the version that works best for you.

Principles that have guided our design process



We are led by women with lived experience, and value their insight, strength and leadership.

We take a trauma-informed, gender-specific and anti-racist approach in everything we do.

We notice power, reflect on it, and work to share it fairly.

We are designing to challenge harm and inequality, not replicate it.

We build on what's already strong — in people, places and relationships.

We try things out, learn as we go, and aim to create change that lasts.

Why this work **matters**

We are women and people who've been in care and in prison.

We've been let down by systems that don't always work together — or work for us.

We've been through trauma, loss and big changes.

These things didn't just hurt — they happened in systems that failed to protect us and sometimes caused more harm.

Some of us **don't have family we can rely on.**

Some of us **can't see our children.**

Some of us **don't know where we'll live after prison.**

Some of us **don't know who to turn to for help.**



But we are not just what's happened to us.

We are strong. We are creative.

We look after each other.

We know our own lives better than anyone else.

That's why we're not just asking for better support — We're working together to build it.



The context

Many people in women’s prison have experienced trauma and hardship throughout their lives – in childhood, in relationships, in institutions and in prison. These experiences are shaped and made worse by racism, poverty, gender inequality, disability, neurodivergence, immigration status and other intersecting factors.

Sources

1. [Women in Prison \(2023\)](#)
2. [Hunter \(2023\)](#)
3. [Women’s Budget Group \(2025\)](#)
4. [Prison Reform Trust \(2021\)](#)
5. [Corston Review \(2007\)](#)
6. [Corston Review \(2007\)](#)
7. [Wadman et al. \(2018\)](#)
8. [POST \(2023\)](#)
9. [Jung and LaLonde \(2016\)](#)
10. [Fitzpatrick et al. \(2024\)](#)

31% of women in prison have experience of the care system, compared to just **2%** of the general population.¹

Custodial sentences are **twice as common** amongst black and mixed ethnicity care-experienced children.²

Women are **more likely to self-harm in prison** than men.⁶ Children who have been in care are also more likely to self-harm than other children.⁷

Women are frequently victims as well as perpetrators of crime. **Six in ten women report having experienced domestic violence.**⁸

Women in prison are **more likely than men to receive short sentences** – 69% serve sentences less than 12 months.³ and 72% of women in prison are there for non-violent offences.⁴

Women are **more likely to be imprisoned further from home** than men, making visits from family and friends harder.⁵

Care experienced women are **more likely to return to prison** because they lack support from family and social networks.⁹

Support often feels **confusing, unclear and disconnected** – especially for mothers, and for women whose children are in care or at risk of going into care.¹⁰

These patterns of harm are often repeated across generations.



The following pages describe what we have learnt from people with lived experience of care and custody, and to the staff and services who support them.



We've seen what **good support** looks like



“The best support I've had in prison was when staff were really there for us, helping, planning, chatting and getting everyone on the same page.
I accepted help from organisations that helped me resist temptation, understand triggers, feelings, warning signs and healthy relationships. This work helped me transform, believe in myself and see the resilience and strength I didn't know I had.”

- MEMBER OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE DESIGN TEAM

There's **great practice to build on** — and we should learn from it

There is support that works for us. We've experienced it. From women's centres and peer mentors to care leaver and parenting support, we know what makes a difference for people navigating care, the justice system and prison.

We've met staff who go above and beyond, people who really care, who take the time to build trust, who see our strengths as well as our struggles. When that support is gender-specific, trauma-informed and joined up across services, the impact is huge.

We've seen what good looks like, support that understands women's lives, including experiences of trauma, domestic abuse, loss, and having children in or at risk of care. Support that recognises both our vulnerabilities and our strengths, and works with us.

We've also seen projects and services that make real change. Many are led by women's specialist organisations, which play a central role in supporting women in prison, through the gate and in the community, offering consistent, relational and practical support. Others focus on understanding care experience, building relationships across services, and helping us plan for the future, build confidence and move into work or education.

We've been part of running some of these ourselves, working alongside staff to design and deliver support, and to take ownership of our plans and futures.

Sometimes prison has given us a chance to stop, reflect and begin to rebuild. But that can fall apart once we leave. The challenge is not just starting change, but sustaining it, including having the right support to comply with licence conditions and build a stable life in the community.

These aren't just good stories, they show what's possible. Support that is relational, consistent and works across systems can help us stay engaged, take ownership of change and move forward with our lives.



Being care experienced can come with **extra challenges**



“

Many of us have been through trauma, grown up feeling unloved or unimportant, faced abuse, harm, control, addiction and mental illness.

People don't always know what we've survived.

The public sees and hears our mistakes. They should also see and hear our achievements too.

”

- MEMBER OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE DESIGN TEAM

Inequalities shape how we are treated — including gender, racism and care experience

We often face unfair treatment, stigma and judgement as we move through care, the justice system and prison. These experiences shape every part of our journey and make it harder to trust people or services.

Sometimes we're labelled 'difficult' or 'risky', when really we're trying to cope with the effects of trauma. Things we do to survive, like using substances or staying in unsafe relationships, can be punished instead of understood. We can be seen as 'too complex' or likely to disengage, and can be left out of the support we need.

If you're Black or from a minoritised community, the barriers can be even greater. Some of us are judged more quickly, treated more harshly, and are less likely to get the help we need.

Some of us are also navigating the fear or reality of our children being in care or at risk of being taken into care. If we're care-experienced, there's a higher risk our children will be removed, and that risk is even greater if we're Black or minoritised.

We don't always see people who look like us or understand where we're coming from. Too few services properly respond to trauma, racism, gender or different cultures and life experiences, including the needs of women and people who do not identify as women but are impacted by the women's prison system.

Most of us have experienced harm, abuse, coercion or control, but the system doesn't always see that alongside our actions or the reasons behind them. We can be labelled 'offenders', 'addicts', 'care leavers' or 'bad mums'. These labels shape how we're treated and can make us feel judged, misunderstood and unsafe.

And when services have hurt or let us down in the past, it's no surprise we find it hard to trust again or stay engaged. We want support that recognises and challenges these inequalities.



We need support to build a **different life** after prison



“ I feel nervous about what the future holds for me outside of prison. But I've realised that if I walk out those gates with the same mindset, I'm setting myself up for the same life I hate. I can't promise I'll never see another jail cell again. I'm worried I'll be on my own. I am worried about where I will live.

But I'm working on myself — I'm doing it for my kids, and with my whole heart.

”

“ My biggest worry is housing, it's a big part of getting my life on track. I'll be devastated if I finish my sentence and get released with nothing sorted, but if worst comes to worst it's nothing I can't come through and build from.

”

- MEMBERS OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE DESIGN TEAM

We have a **higher risk of reoffending** than people who haven't been in care

Those of us who've been in care are more likely to end up in prison, and more likely to return. Not because we're worse people, but because we've often had more to deal with, and less consistent support.

Despite many of us experiencing trauma early in life, the vast majority of people who've been in care do not end up in custody. But for those of us who do, those experiences can affect our mental health, how we manage emotions, and how we build relationships. Without the right support, it can be harder to make and sustain different choices.

Some of us have few loving or stable relationships. Some of us are in prison far from home, so visits from personal advisers, family or children are harder. Prison itself can bring back trauma. Some of us self-harm or find other ways to cope. Without family support, we can end up in debt or being bullied. Some of us choose not to say we've been in care at all, in case it is used against us, but this means we miss out on the support we're entitled to.

Getting out doesn't always make things easier. Some of us don't know where we'll live. Some of us have never lived on our own. We don't always get the emotional or practical support we need to build a life, or meet the expectations placed on us. It can feel really lonely after release.

The stigma we face, as care-experienced and as people with convictions, makes it harder to get housing, find work or plan for the future. This can affect how we engage with support and how able we are to comply with licence conditions.

If services want to help us break the cycle, they need to understand what we're up against, support us to take ownership of change, and stick with us over time.



We need services to
work **together**



“

I want people there to
help me and a plan to
look forward to.

I have nothing to lose,
but everything to gain.

”

- MEMBER OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE DESIGN TEAM

Despite staff doing great work, **we can fall through the gaps** of disconnected and underfunded systems

We know there are people who care and want to help, but services are stretched, underfunded and not always joined up.

Staff are often juggling too much, and it's hard for them to give us the time, care and consistency they want to. Some of the places that really help, like women's centres, trauma services and housing support, don't always have enough funding to stay afloat, which can make it harder to work with us in the way they want to.

Support can feel disconnected. Services like health, housing, probation and prison don't always work together or share responsibility. Sometimes it's not clear who's meant to help us. Decisions can be made about us, not with us. Assessments or release plans can be rushed, happen too late, or fall through the cracks. Time in prison could be a chance to rebuild our lives, but service pressures often get in the way.

High numbers of short prison sentences make things even harder. There's often little time for assessment, planning or building relationships, and we can be released without the support we need to stay safe, comply with licence conditions or move forward.

If we've been in care, it's even harder. Prisons don't always know we're care leavers. Personal advisers might not know we've gone to prison. We can be moved from one prison to another with little notice, losing relationships and having to start again. If we're 18–25, we can fall between youth and adult services, depending on our category of care experience. And often, support stops at 25, even though our needs don't.

Support looks different depending on where you live, and it also changes from service to service, and worker to worker. It can feel like a postcode lottery, where getting good support depends on geography and luck.

Even the best workers can't change the system on their own. If services want to do better, they need to work together, take shared responsibility, and be supported to deliver consistent, joined-up care.

Our vision for support

I get the support I need

A safe home,
enough to live on,
help with my health,
people I can count on,
and chances to learn, work and grow

Support is caring, consistent and led by me

Built around what matters to me,
with people who listen, respect me
and stick around,
so I feel safe and in control

I have somewhere to
live, something to
do, and a community
to turn to – with
support that works
together to help me
live a good life.

Rehabilitation is everyone's responsibility

The people in charge
support this work,
with good staff and money,
and take action to
challenge unfairness

Support is joined up across all parts of my life

Services work together,
with one plan and clear roles,
so I know who to turn to,
and don't have to keep telling
my story

"I know what's happening next, who I can turn to, and that services are working together to support me."



"People get to the heart of what is really important to me and get to the root cause of the challenges I face"



"Making sure I have a safe place to live, can see my family, make friends and get help with the things I need."

I get the support I need

I have a safe place to live, enough money, support for my health, and help to cope, heal and feel safe.

I'm supported to build strong relationships – with friends, chosen family, children or others I trust.

I get support to build confidence, learn new skills and find opportunities to reach my goals in learning, work and life.

Support is caring, consistent and led by me

Support is built around my strengths, needs and choices. I lead decisions about my own life.

I'm supported by people who care, treat me with respect, stick with me, and help me move towards the future I want.

I get support that understands gender, trauma, racism, and identity – helping me feel safe, valued and in control.

"To ensure that all women have the support, knowledge and opportunity to live a beautiful life – not one defined by prison, violence or pain"



"Someone who listens, and who understands that just because you've been through bad stuff, it doesn't mean you're a bad person."

Support I choose, based on what matters to me

I have somewhere to live, something to do, and a community to turn to – with support that works together to help me live a good life.

Rehabilitation is everyone's responsibility

There's a commitment across agencies to work together and take shared responsibility for reducing reoffending and improving lives.

Leaders invest in time, training, and resources so that support is joined up, and person-led.

Racism, inequality and stigma are actively challenged, with trauma-responsive practice built into policy and delivery.

Support is joined up across all parts of my life

I get joined-up support from a team of people who work together across all areas of my life.

Services and communities work closely together, with clear communication, strong relationships and shared responsibility.

I have one joined-up plan that reflects my needs, includes the right people, and means I don't have to keep repeating my story.

Peer support

Housing support

Mental health and wellbeing support

Physical health support

Community connection and activities

Finance, benefits and debt support

Life skills support

Parenting, family and relationship support

Education, training and employment support

Support to overcome trauma

Women's specialist support

Domestic abuse and sex worker support

Drug and alcohol support

The future of support we want to see

Our approach builds on the good support that already exists, and adds the changes we think will make the biggest difference for women with experience of care and custody.

It is shaped around four key features:



A joined up team

People around me work together and use one joined up plan to support me



A circle of support

Peer support helps me build loving and supportive relationships

3



A safe place to live

I get support to find safe and stable housing when I leave prison



4

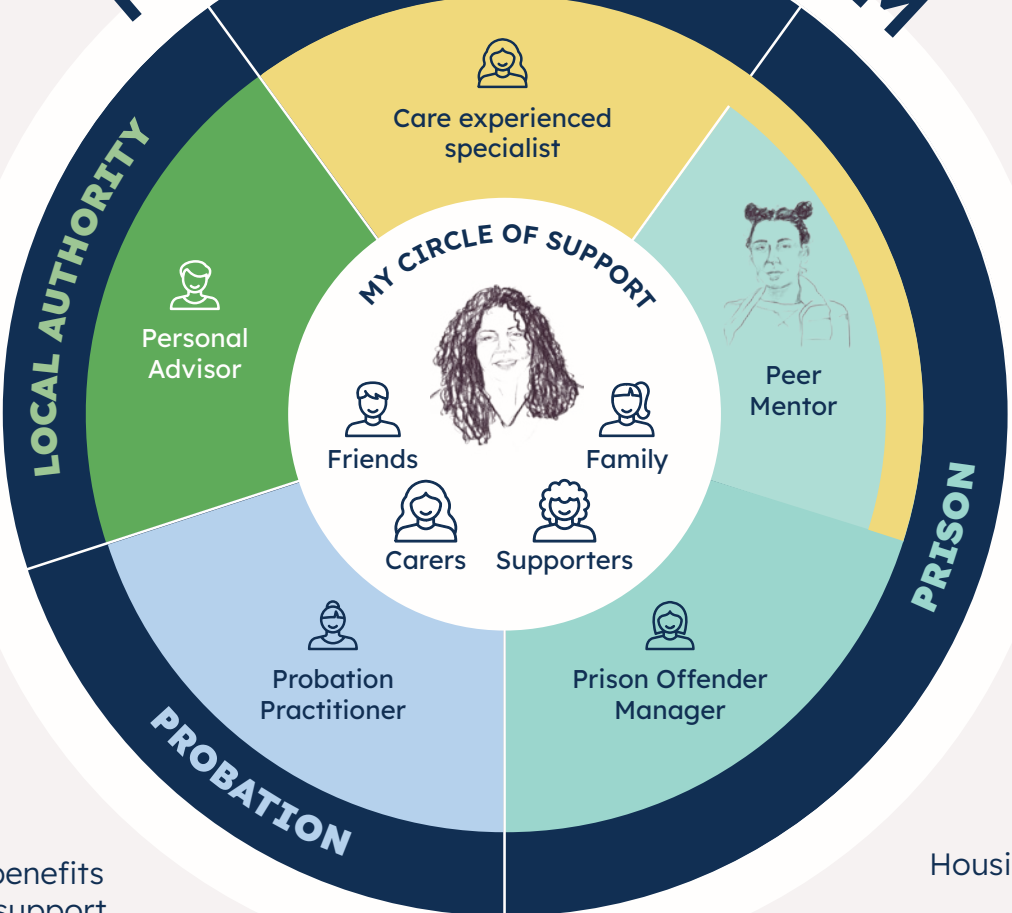
A system that supports me

The whole system comes together to support my rehabilitation

MY JOINED UP TEAM

WOMEN'S CENTRE

MY CIRCLE OF SUPPORT



Social care support

Life skills support

Community connection and activities

Mental health and wellbeing support

Physical health support

Finance, benefits and debt support

Education, training and employment support

Drug and alcohol support

Community, voluntary and faith organisations

Domestic abuse and sex worker support

Parenting, family and relationship support

Peer support

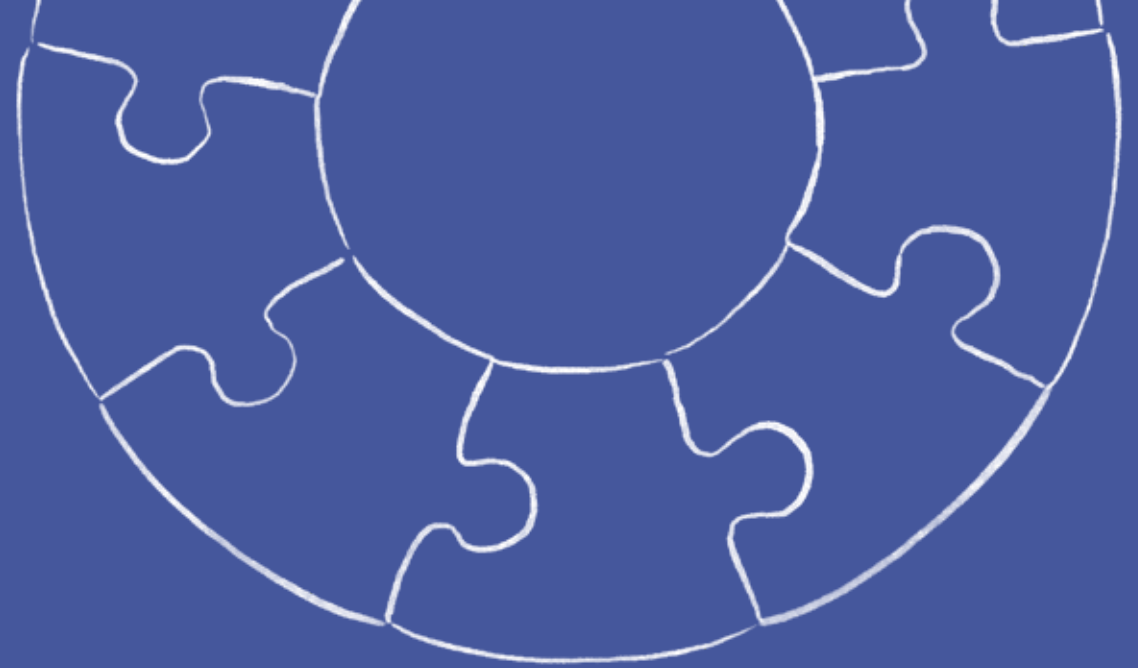
Housing support

Support to overcome trauma



A joined up team

I have a team around me who know me, talk to each other and work together to support me in prison and in the community. They understand what matters to me, help me plan for the future and connect me to the right support. I know what I can expect from each of them.



The right people around me

My team brings together prison, probation, a peer mentor, a personal adviser if I have one, and a care experienced specialist. Together, they support me in prison and as I settle back into life in the community.

A team who work together

My team shares information, plans together and checks in regularly. They work in a consistent way, understand my strengths and support me to move towards the future I want.

One joined up plan

I have one shared plan that I develop and review with my team. It is based on what matters to me and sets out what support I will have, what will happen when I am released, and who is responsible for each part.

We have a small multidisciplinary team around us

This includes a prison offender manager (POM), a probation practitioner, a peer mentor, a care experienced specialist and, if we have one, a personal adviser. The team comes together when a person enters prison, to plan for release, and when support needs change or increase. They share information, make decisions together, with clear review points to ensure actions are followed through.

The care experienced specialist connects us to women's centres and community support

They help us connect into through-the-gate support and link into community services before release, so we have a community to turn to and get the support we need. This builds on the central role women's centres already play in providing trusted emotional, practical and gender-specific support in prison and in the community.

We work to one joined-up plan

This combines the resettlement plan and pathway plan and is led by us. It is co-written with us, focuses on our needs, goals and what matters to us, and sets out clear roles and actions in language we can understand. The plan is living and reviewed regularly with us to update goals, notice risks early and respond to changes in our lives. It can be completed together with the team or through one-to-one conversations, with different parts completed with different team members depending on our situation and preferences.

We are supported by a care experienced specialist

his role supports everyone in prison who has care experience, regardless of age, sentence length or whether we are on remand. They are employed by a women's centre, based in the prison, and have strong links into the community. The role is protected and not used for other operational duties. Their role includes:

- identifying people with care experience early
- offering practical support, advocacy and help to navigate systems and paperwork
- working with POMs, personal advisers and local authorities to develop joined-up plans and prepare for release
- linking with women's centres, CRS providers and voluntary organisations to make sure we are connected to the right support
- offering trauma-informed, gender-specific support, including group work and activities that build confidence and plan for the future

We are supported by staff who work in consistent ways

Staff are trained in the model and use approaches that are person-centred, trauma-informed, gender-specific, anti-racist and strengths-based. They understand the needs of care-experienced people and younger women. Shared ways of working and partnership agreements help make sure this is consistent across organisations.

We work on one shared plan that brings everything together

The team helps me use 'My Plan'. It focuses on what matters to me, my needs and goals, and sets out clear roles and actions in language I understand. It brings together the resettlement plan and pathway plan into one shared document, led by me. My team and I complete this together, and staff use it to update their own systems and meet their statutory responsibilities. Who leads my plan depends on my situation:

- the Prison Offender Manager (POM) leads if I have more than 10 months left on my sentence
- the Probation Practitioner leads if I have less than 10 months or am on recall, and continues in the community
- the care experienced specialist leads if I am on remand

The plan is reviewed regularly with me to update goals, notice risks early and respond to changes in my life. This happens at least every three years on a life sentence, every two years on a long-term sentence, and at least once on a short-term sentence, recall or remand, or more often if my needs change. Different parts of the plan can be completed with my care experienced specialist or peer mentor.

We are connected to support when we need it

We have regular check-ins with our lead worker, who brings in the wider team and community services. My plan is used to agree priorities and spot when more help is needed. After release, I am supported to comply with my licence conditions and avoid reoffending.

A circle of support

I am supported by peer mentors and others who understand my experiences. They help me build a network of safe, supportive relationships in prison and in the community.



Peer support

I can get support from people who have experienced care and custody. Peer mentors help me settle into prison, make sense of what I'm going through and feel understood.

When I leave prison, I am supported to connect to peer support in the community through women's centres, probation or local organisations. I can also use my experiences to support others and build confidence and skills for the future.

Building a circle of support

With support from peer mentors, I can think about the relationships in my life, who I can turn to and who I want around me as I move forward. This includes reflecting on friendships in prison, letting go of relationships that aren't good for me, and building a network of people I trust.

Parenting and family support

If I want it, I get support to think about my family relationships, including those that feel complicated or painful. This might include rebuilding trust, setting boundaries, exploring what I want from healthy relationships, keeping myself and my children safe, and parenting support.

We are supported by peer mentors who have lived experience of care and custody

They bring understanding through shared experience, helping us feel less alone and more able to talk openly about what we are going through. Peer mentors receive training in mental health first aid, trauma-informed practice, gender-specific support, care experience, coaching, goal setting and maintaining boundaries. They have regular supervision from the care experienced specialist.

Peer mentors support us to build and strengthen a circle of support

This includes thinking about who is in our life now, who feels safe and supportive, and who we want around us as we move forward. Through guided conversations, they help us reflect on relationships, including friendships formed in prison, and think about how to strengthen healthy connections and grow a supportive network of relationships.

If we want to, we can become peer mentors ourselves

This helps us build confidence, skills and a sense of agency, and can open up opportunities such as education, training or work. We are supported by our joined-up team to do this.

In prison, peer mentors support us to build confidence and connections

Their roles includes:

- meeting people when they arrive in prison to help them settle in
- meeting one-to-one to listen, offer encouragement and help us think about our goals and next steps
- offering emotional support and sharing positive coping strategies
- working with us on parts of the My Plan workbook
- providing group support alongside the care experienced specialist
- supporting us to strengthen our relationships with friends, family and people in the community
- helping us prepare for release by thinking about who we can turn to and what our first steps might be

We can also access wider support to help us understand our relationships

This includes thinking about healthy and unhealthy relationships, rebuilding trust, ending contact with people who cause harm, spotting warning signs, avoiding high-risk situations, setting boundaries and understanding our triggers. Workers help us access counselling or therapeutic support where needed.

We can get parenting support if we want it

This can include help to strengthen or maintain relationships with our children where this is safe and wanted, support if we are trying to keep custody of our children, and help to understand our rights and navigate the care system. We can also get emotional support around separation or loss, practical advice on parenting in prison or after release, family-focused support sessions and parenting classes.

National guidance supports this approach and sets out what good support should look like for people with care experience.

It shapes what Prison Governors commission and what providers offer.

Peer support continues into the community

We are supported to access peer support available locally, whether through women's centres, probation or care experience services. We are supported to build these relationships before release, so they are already in place when we leave. If we have been a peer mentor in prison, we are supported to continue this in the community.

A safe place to live

I am supported to find somewhere to live that I can call home, where I feel safe enough to settle and start moving forward. I get help to plan early, understand my options and find a place that is as stable and suitable as possible for me.



Support to think about where I will live

I get support to explore all the places I might live after prison. This includes any home I already have or staying with friends or family. If I don't have anywhere to go, workers help me understand my housing rights and explore accommodation options. They stand alongside me so I am not making these decisions on my own.

Accommodation planning starts when I arrive in prison

Planning begins early so there is time to make good decisions. As a care-experienced person, my housing needs are taken seriously and prioritised, so I am supported to avoid homelessness and not lose my belongings.

Help to move into a safe and suitable place

When it is time to leave prison, I get help to move into accommodation that is as safe and suitable as possible for me. I am met at the gate by people I trust, who help me get there, settle in and sort out the practical things I need. I get support to deal with housing issues early, understand my rights and connect with community organisations who can help me keep things steady.

Probation, housing providers and local authorities build a plan around our needs and what matters to us.

For people under 25, personal advisers lead early planning with housing. For people over 25, probation leads, working with prison, housing providers and women's centres to ensure a seamless transition. They draw on the expertise of the strategic housing lead and resettlement team to understand housing law.

We work together to identify the best place to live after prison, balancing risks, avoiding unsafe locations and thinking creatively about the best options. Plans include clear contingency arrangements so if accommodation breaks down, we don't fall into homelessness.

Accommodation planning starts immediately.

Planning begins when we arrive in prison, with urgency for short recalls and well before release for longer sentences. Probation workers are appointed at least 10 months before release to allow time for housing assessments and work with partners. Where accommodation has not been secured, we will be advised about the process for our worker to make a Duty to Refer to the local housing authority, with our consent. This happens much earlier than the recommended 56 days before release to increase the chance of finding suitable accommodation.

We get support and advocacy to make informed housing decisions.

Workers support us to:

- understand what a safe place to live means to us and reflect this in our plans
- understand housing law, our rights and the decisions we are being asked to make
- complete forms, write letters and communicate with housing services
- explore options for storing our belongings
- understand housing costs, manage payments and deal with issues early
- think about the right area to live in, including avoiding places that feel unsafe or linked to past harm
- explore different accommodation options, aiming to find a permanent solution such as social housing, supported housing or suitable private accommodation, but also considering interim or temporary arrangements or staying with friends or family
- prepare for what different housing options are really like, including the emotional impact of living alone after custody

Our housing needs are prioritised and barriers are removed wherever possible.

We are supported to:

- keep any tenancy we already have when entering prison, including through housing benefit where possible
- provide alternative forms of reference where payslips or landlord references are not available
- challenge decisions where accommodation is refused due to past arrears, with support to set up manageable repayment plans

Temporary arrangements are safe and a step towards stability.

We can access temporary arrangements when needed. We are supported to understand what it will be like in advance, through information, photos or virtual tours, so expectations are clear. Accommodation is checked to make sure it is safe, gender-responsive and not in environments that could be triggering. Planning for move-on starts early, so temporary accommodation is a stepping stone towards stable housing.

We are supported to move in and stay settled.

We are met at the gate and supported to travel to our accommodation. This is led by our personal adviser or care experienced specialist. We get help to settle in and manage the first days and weeks.

We are supported to maintain our accommodation, including help with benefits, bills, forms and appointments. We can access financial support, such as setting-up home grants, so housing feels like home. Workers check in regularly, help resolve issues early and support us to understand our rights and keep our tenancy. We are supported to act on contingency plans if needed and support continues as our circumstances change.

There is a dedicated housing pathway for women with care experience, with a clear commitment that no one leaves prison into homelessness.

The pathway builds on the [national plan to end homelessness](#) and takes a corporate parenting approach, balancing risk with long-term wellbeing. It recognises that care experience can affect housing history and access to accommodation. Housing prioritises safety, suitability and stability.

A system that supports me

The system around me understands my experiences and works together to support my rehabilitation in prison and in the community. I get the support I need to build confidence, explore who I am and who I want to be, and move forward.



Finding my purpose and rebuilding my identity

I am supported to make the best use of my time in prison. I can think about who I am, who I want to be and what I want from my future. I can take part in coaching, workshops, education, training and activities that build my confidence and help me learn new skills. This continues in the community, helping me stay on track.

A system focused on rehabilitation

The system around me believes people can change and works together to make that happen. Services share responsibility, understand care experience and make sure support is joined up. Leaders make sure the right support and opportunities are in place, so I have a real chance to build a better future.

Our voices shape support

Our experiences and ideas matter and help shape how support works. We are listened to and have a real say in decisions that affect us. We are supported to come together to share ideas, learn from each other and improve support for others.

There is a 56-day pre-release offer that provides joined-up support for women with care experience

It responds to changes in recall timeframes set out in the Sentencing Bill, providing joined-up support in the 8 weeks before release. It brings together existing provision and works flexibly for a rotating cohort, including women on remand or longer sentences. The offer includes:

- support to prepare for release and have support needs met
- support to explore who we are and where we come from, making sense of our life stories in ways that recognise culture, ethnicity and identity
- support to think about who we want to be and what we want from the future
- coaching, motivational interviewing and creative or therapeutic activities that build confidence, self-belief and goals
- education, training, vocational activities and life skills support to prepare for life in the community

We are able to shape the ongoing design and delivery of support

There are opportunities for people with care experience to influence and improve support through feedback, peer roles, paid involvement and participation in decision-making spaces.

Staff work consistently and collaboratively

Staff across prisons, probation, local authorities and women's centres are supported to work in consistent ways that understand care experience and enable rehabilitation. Training supports trauma-informed, anti-racist and gender-specific practice, helping us feel safe and manage anxiety.

Training is delivered across services, with organisations drawing on each other's strengths. For example, women's centres support training on gender-specific approaches, and care experienced specialists support women's centres, prisons and probation to understand the realities of care experience.

National guidance supports a rehabilitative approach for women with care experience

It shapes what is commissioned and delivered in prison and on release. This includes:

- how organisations work together across prison and the community, including joint planning, shared training and integrated working
- joint working between prisons, probation, local authorities and women's centres to support compliance with licence conditions and improve outcomes, including stability, wellbeing and progression
- recognising care experience as a protected characteristic, to reduce stigma and discrimination, strengthen accountability and ensure services consider our needs

We benefit from a system-wide approach to corporate parenting

We benefit from a system-wide approach to corporate parenting, with partners working together to support rehabilitation in prison and after release. This includes:

- widening the role of local authority corporate parenting groups to include rehabilitation from prison for people with care experience
- bringing together prisons, probation, local authorities, health, housing, CRS providers, employers, further education and training providers, with clear roles
- improving access to opportunities such as work experience, apprenticeships, supported internships and guaranteed interviews, with trusted support alongside
- strengthening local protocols and partnership agreements, with clear leads and shared accountability
- involving elected members and senior leaders to strengthen oversight
- shifting the public narrative to better understand care experience and custody, and recognise the value of rehabilitation
- ensuring commissioning focuses on prevention, consistency, stability and long-term outcomes

What **success** looks like

For me

I am safe,
supported and
in control

I have good health
and wellbeing

I have strong
relationships and
people I can turn to

I have hope and a
plan for the future

I have a stable
place to live
after prison

I don't return
to prison

For staff and services



Staff are **skilled, confident and supported**



They understand **my experiences** and work in ways that are **kind and fair**



They make sure **support is led by me**



They work together using a shared way of working



This is backed by the people in charge

Outcomes

Improved rehabilitation for women with experience of care and custody

1. Reduction in the number of women returning to prison
2. Improved relationships and connection with children, family or chosen support networks
3. Reduction in incidents of self-harm and violence among women in prison
4. Access to safe and stable accommodation on release
5. Improved mental health and wellbeing
6. Women receive good quality, person-centred help, care and support
7. More women move into work, education or other activities that give them purpose after prison

Increase in skills, capabilities and practice of professionals from a range of organisations to deliver a new way of working that tackles systemic injustice

1. A support offer based on a shared vision and practice model is delivered collaboratively across services
2. Support plans are co-produced with women and demonstrate partnership working across services
3. Staff demonstrate relational, person-centred ways of working
4. Staff demonstrate good practice in relation to gender specific, trauma informed and anti-racist practice
5. Staff report improved knowledge, confidence and capability to support care-experienced women in custody and on release

System change for women with experience of care and custody

1. An effective and viable support model is codified, shared and used to influence national policy and practice
2. Leaders in HMPPS, MoJ and local systems advocate for and support the model
3. Systems embed the model into everyday practice and decision-making
4. Services work together through shared approaches, clear protocols and strong partnerships

Meet Jas

Age:
19

Sentence status:
Recall

About me

I've been in care all my life. When I was 15, I moved into foster care, which was the best home I've had. I think if I'd been in foster care earlier, I might not have ended up here. My foster carers showed me what a real home can look like.

I've been recalled for breaching my licence, and I want to try and stay out when I'm released. My PA has been amazing, but I am still worried about the support I'll have when I'm back in the community, as I had such a strong network in prison.

I am creative and love rapping, but I've been struggling with the death of my aunt. It's made me up and down, which affects my mood and behaviour. I sometimes struggle with self-harm.



My hopes and worries

- I want to stay out of prison and build a more stable life with my partner. I want somewhere I feel safe and settled, where I can start again.
- I want to **focus on my music** and use it as a way to express myself and cope with what I've been through.
- I worry about being on my own and things getting too much, especially when my mood drops or I'm grieving.
- I worry about breaching my licence again if I don't have the right support around me.

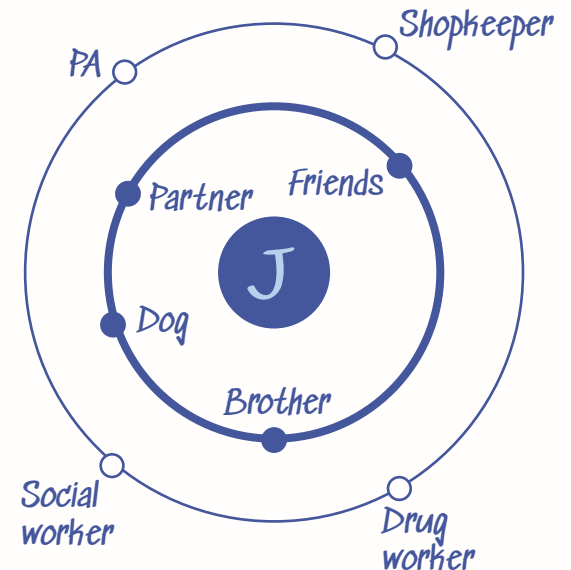
What I like doing in my spare time

- I like writing, performing music and rapping.
- I like spending time with my partner.
- I really enjoy supporting others.
- I love being around my dog.

What good support looks like for me

- I need people who are consistent and don't disappear when things get difficult.
- I need support that understands how my emotions and grief affect my behaviour, and helps me stay safe when I'm struggling.
- I need someone who listens to me and helps me stay on track, not just tells me what I've done wrong. I need a group of people to turn to.

Support network





How the new approach would affect Jas

A peer mentor meets me soon after I arrive and helps me settle back in, knowing this isn't my first time and I'm worried about starting again

The care experienced specialist reaches out to my Personal Adviser and lets her know I am back in prison

They work with the resettlement team to act quickly, so I can keep my tenancy while I am on recall

My team takes time to understand what has happened, including my grief and how it has affected my behaviour

I don't have to start again. My previous plan is picked up and updated, led by my probation practitioner, so support continues from where I left off

We focus on what will help me comply with my licence, including who I can turn to when things feel overwhelming

I attend weekly sessions as part of a joined-up pre-release offer that starts straight away, including time with other care experienced women

I get support to manage my emotions and stay safe, including support with self-harm and dealing with the loss of my sibling

My peer mentor supports me to use music and writing as a way to express myself and cope

I am supported to become a peer mentor in prison, building my confidence and giving me a sense of purpose

Before I leave prison, I reconnect with community support, so I know who I will see when I get out

When I am released, I am met at the gate by my Personal Adviser and supported to travel home and settle back into my accommodation

My Personal Adviser joins my first probation appointment, so I don't feel like I am facing it alone

In the community, I stay connected to peer support and start volunteering as a peer mentor, using my experiences to support others. It feels great to be part of a community.

I have regular check-ins with people I trust, who help me stay on track, manage my emotions and avoid situations that could lead to another breach

My team works together to support me, and I move into paid work supporting others

Meet Em

Age:
25

Sentence status:
On remand



About me

I had a hard start in life. I was born addicted to heroin and brought up by my grandparents when I was little. I was abused by a family member, which led to me going into care. I felt completely failed by my family.

As a teenager, I got into a relationship with someone much older who was violent. This led to me going to prison, I retaliated and became as bad as my abuser.

Since being in prison, I've had time to work on myself. Even though I haven't been sentenced, support from Changing Lives and the Chaplaincy has helped me think about my hopes and dreams, and what healthy relationships look like. I chose to stop support from my PA when I was 21, as I didn't feel it was helping me at the time.

★ My hopes and worries

- I want to work and be financially independent. I think I'd be great at working in healthcare as I worked as a hospital volunteer before and really enjoyed it.
- I want my friends and family to be well, settled and feel loved.
- My biggest worry is housing. Because of my ex-partner's violence and damage to my previous flat, I worry I won't be accepted again. Being on remand makes this harder, as housing is often only sorted for people who are sentenced. I worry about being released with nothing in place.
- At the same time, I know I can rebuild my life, even if things don't go to plan.

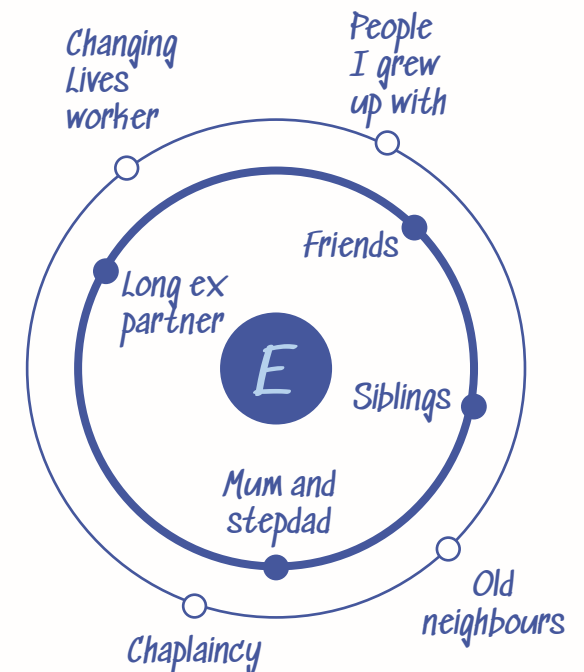
⚙️ What good support looks like for me

One to one support built on a trusted relationship. I struggle to access support or be honest with workers when I don't feel like I know them. Good support means someone will listen to your whole story, and won't make decisions based on assumptions of your life.

★ What I like doing in my spare time

- I like movie night and going to the cinema. I like staying active and getting outside and walking. I love hair, nails and make up.
- I am emotionally intelligent and good at creative writing. I use writing to take responsibility and celebrate my achievements.

Support network





How the new approach would affect Em

A peer mentor meets me soon after I arrive in prison, helps me settle in and explains what support is available

They tell me about the support a Personal Adviser could still offer me, even though it may be for a short time. The care experienced specialist contacts the duty team and I am assigned a PA

Family engagement workers support me to think about healthy relationships, safety and what I need to avoid going back to harmful situations

My probation practitioner helps me build on My Plan and agree a clear plan for release, including staying with my sister until I can find a place of my own

My PA helps me apply for a supported internship in healthcare, so I have something to move into when I leave

Because I am on remand, a care experienced specialist takes the lead for me. We complete the remand-focused pages of My Plan and think through what support I need while I wait for my sentence

My peer mentor takes me to a movie night on the wing, knowing this is something I enjoy, and helps introduce me to others

When I am sentenced and told I will serve another 8 weeks, my care experienced specialist brings my team together

I get support from Changing Lives to understand my housing rights while I am still on remand. We explore options together, including staying with my sister away from my ex-partner, temporary accommodation, and support to apply for a new tenancy, including advocacy to explain my situation

The people supporting me take time to get to know me and build trust, so I feel safer being honest about my life and what I need

They meet with me, my probation practitioner, my POM and my PA to share what we have already worked on, so I don't have to start again

Before I leave prison, I am connected with a women's centre and a church. The women's centre comes with me to some of my appointments, so I don't have to go on my own

My probation practitioner supports me to stay connected to the right support for the long term. As my sentence comes to an end, they make sure my support continues and share My Plan with my local women's centre.

Meet Lizzie



Age:
39

Sentence status:
8 year sentence

About me

I'm a people person, but I also love my own company. I'm creative and enjoy writing and drawing. I have three children, and I live with fibromyalgia and a personality disorder.

I've spent more of my life in custody and children's homes than in the community.

I've struggled with drug use for a long time. At first, getting clean and staying out of jail was for my children. But recently, I reached out for help and I have stopped using for me, not just for them. I realised that if I walk out those gates with the same mindset and the same addiction, then I'm signing myself up for the same life I hate. Changing is a lifelong process, and I'm doing it with my whole heart.

My hopes and worries

- I want to continue my recovery in the community, ideally in an all-female residential rehab which would allow me to have my children round more, and hopefully have them living with me if they wanted to. I want a stable home and to have people over for meals.
- I hope my mum and sister have good health, wealth and happiness. I want to prove to them that I have changed so I could do babysitting duties, so they can have a break too.
- I worry a lot about relapsing and ending up back in prison. I need good support to stay in recovery.
- I also worry about not improving relationships with my mum, sister and my kids. I don't want to let my kids or myself down.

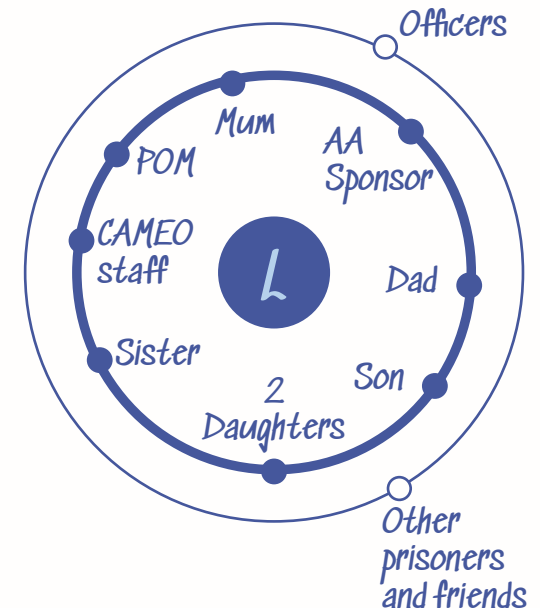
My strengths and interests

- I enjoy writing, drawing and storytelling. I care deeply about my children and my future.
- I am reflective, determined and committed to change.

What good support looks like for me

- I need consistent, round-the-clock support. Supported accommodation in the community and therapeutic programmes in prison have been life changing for me. Knowing there are people there when I need them helps me feel safe and not alone.
- Gender-specific support is really important for me to feel understood and safe.

Support network





How the new approach would affect Lizzie

I am supported throughout my sentence by a consistent team who get to know me, understand my recovery journey and help me stay focused on the future I want

I get support to build practical life skills, including how to manage a home, bills, responsibilities and where to go if things start to go wrong

My team and I plan ahead for when things feel overwhelming or don't go to plan. We agree what helps, who I can reach out to and what steps to take, so I can manage difficult moments without going back to old coping strategies or losing support

I get support to think about my relationships with my children and family, including rebuilding trust and understanding how to build safe and healthy relationships

They meet me at the gate and support me to travel there and settle in

I meet with my POM and care experienced specialist to complete My Plan and think about the support I need. When I reach 10 months before release, they introduce me to my probation practitioner and we start to agree a clear plan for release

I have one-to-one sessions with my care experienced specialist and peer mentor to build my confidence and think about my future

My team supports me to plan for recovery in the community, including applying for an all-female residential rehab

My support is planned around what will help me stay well, including women's centre support, mental health support, safe accommodation and ongoing therapeutic support. I am introduced to these services before I leave prison, so I know who will support me

My probation practitioner helps me access support to rebuild relationships with my children and family, and makes sure I stay connected to the support that helps me stay in recovery, manage my mental health and keep moving forward

I attend regular group sessions with other care experienced women, where I think about who I am and who I want to be

I also get support from CAMEO, mental health services and drug and alcohol support

They help me understand all my options, including staffed or semi-supported accommodation, support me with applications and advocate for me, so I am not navigating this on my own - I worry about how realistic my options are as I'm not being released into an area close to the prison

I secure a place in all-female supported accommodation. It isn't what I first hoped for, but a worker visits me and shows me brochures and videos, which helps me feel less worried

Over time, I rebuild my relationships and feel more stable. I host a dinner for my family to celebrate a new chapter.

A poem

Words written by one of the women taking part in this work — a poem that speaks to the pain, power and possibility at the heart of this project.

Care experienced
Locked up inside
Going out of our minds

Got no support
We all need help
Can't do this on our own

We asked for help
For too long
Now we take a stand

Rising up, building on each other
People take time to talk
But talk they do

About their feelings, their hopes
Holding one another
Through good and bad

Talk, listen
To our views, our past
See who we really are

***We are not our past
Our future awaits
Beyond the locked gates***

Putting this into practice

The Connections model is supported by a set of tools and guidance to help teams work in this way day to day.



Blueprint

The blueprint sets out how the model works in practice across the whole journey, from entering prison through to life in the community. It shows who is involved, what happens at each stage, and how services work together to provide joined-up support.



My Plan

My Plan is the shared plan used by people and their team. It brings together resettlement planning and pathway planning into one place, focused on what matters, goals and next steps. It is used by prison, probation, local authorities and the care experienced specialist to guide and align support.



Additional tools

A set of practical tools that can be used alongside My Plan. These offer different ways to explore identity, life story, relationships and future goals. Workers might introduce these tools in one-to-one support or group sessions, depending on what feels helpful.

Connections



Care experience specialist JD

This role provides dedicated support for people with care experience in prison and the community. They help identify care experience early, build relationships, advocate for support, and connect services so support is joined up and consistent.

Connections



Peer mentor JD

Peer mentors use their lived experience of care and custody to support others. They offer encouragement, understanding and practical support, helping people feel less alone and more confident. The role also provides opportunities to build skills, confidence and move towards education, training or employment.

Connections