

Toolkit for prisons wanting to engage with employers

This toolkit draws on lessons learned from a two year project in one prison. It is not intended to be a blueprint for every prison or every situation. But it should help prisons that want to review the work they are already doing as well as those that want to start something new. There are no short cuts, but there are many ways to give people a better chance of getting and holding down a job after release. We hope this short document will help more people achieve that goal.

Working with Employers

1. Finding interested employers:

Local Councils

Most councils will have a department that works to get local people into employment. These will often provide:

- a brokerage service for local employers
- **training** opportunities and **apprenticeships**
- help **paying** for **travel** to **work** or **equipment**

Councils may also have a specialist team that aims to help people who are furthest from the job market back into work and ex-offenders will fall under the remit of this team.

Planning obligations/ section 106 agreements

Planning obligations also known as section 106 agreements are private agreements made between local authorities and developers that are linked to planning permission and are intended to mitigate any negative impact of the new development by ensuring that the development makes a positive contribution to the local area or community.

These can cover a wide range of areas including public open space or affordable housing but one use of them is to insist that an agreed proportion of the developer's workforce is made up of local people who would otherwise find it hard to gain employment.

If this is the case local authorities and relevant employers have a strong incentive to engage with prisons to recruit suitable candidates.

Chambers of Commerce

A **chamber of commerce** is a business network whose goal is to further the interests of participating businesses. Business owners in towns and cities form these local societies to advocate on behalf of the business community.

There are also other types of business networking organisations such as BNI which are worth exploring if your local chamber of commerce is not that active.

Most chambers of commerce hold regular meetings and networking events and it is worth prisons joining their local chamber.

Business in the Community

Business in the Community (BITC) is the Prince's Responsible Business Network.

Members work together to tackle a wide range of issues that are essential to creating a fairer society and a more sustainable future including helping people overcome disadvantage by increasing access to sustainable, good employment.

BITC work with participating employers to remove the barriers to ex-offenders gaining employment including the Ban the Box campaign which calls on UK employers to give ex-offenders a fair chance to compete for jobs by removing the tick box from application forms and asking about criminal convictions later in the recruitment process.

Charities

There are also several charities and social enterprises who provide guidance and advice for offenders wanting to enter employment: **Clinks** and **The Prince's Trust** have useful websites.

Other charities such as **Bounce Back** or **Blue Sky** look to find employment for ex-offenders within a particular field of employment. **Nacro** also has a list of national charities working to employ ex-offenders.

Prison-based organisations

Many organisations already based in the prison will have existing links with employers:

- **CRC**
- **Education provider**
- **National Careers Service provider**
- **Job Centre Plus**
- **Local charities or initiatives**

At area level many of these organisations will employ employment brokers whose job it is to build links with employers.

2. Recruitment/ onboarding procedures

Most organisations will have recruitment procedures that may make it difficult for an ex-offender to gain employment. Unless the employer is experienced in employing ex-offenders they will be unaware that their recruitment procedures may add an unnecessary layer of complexity so it is important to clarify at the onset what is crucial for their recruitment process and what it might be possible to relax.

- **Previous offences:** it is important to check which offences are not acceptable for any role.
- **Identification paperwork:** employers will need different identification paperwork: some such as proof of address will be very difficult for prisoners to obtain and this should be explained to the employer. Other forms of ID, such as right to work documentation (passport OR full birth certificate together with official document giving the person's permanent national insurance number) are mandatory and the employer does not have any flexibility about requiring these documents.
- **Bank accounts:** to start work prisoners will need a bank account for their salary to be paid into. Many CRCs offer this service to prisoners in the last twelve weeks of custody. If this is not possible, Unlock is a good source of information and advice.
- **References:** does the employer require references as part of the recruitment process? Will they accept a reference from a prison tutor in lieu of an employment or personal reference?
- **Requirements of the role:** are there any mandatory requirements of the role such as a prerequisite standard literacy or numeracy or a qualification. Again, some of these, for example a CSCS card to work on a construction site, will be non-negotiable but for others there may be some flexibility.

The aim of these discussions is to make sure that gaining employment with an organisation is achievable for an ex-offender and that any requirements which would be impossible for most ex-offenders to provide are identified early in the process.

These discussions also help the prison to draw up a checklist about what needs to be in place before a prisoner is released for there to be a smooth transition to employment. The list will vary from employer to employer but is likely to include as a minimum:

1. **CV**
2. **Disclosure letter**
3. **Right to work documentation**
4. **Bank account**
5. **National insurance number**

It is also important to find out whether prisoners will be expected to sit a formal competency-based interview or whether it will be more of an informal chat. Either way, many prisoners are likely to have had little or no experience of interviewing for a job and interview practice sessions can be very useful.

3. Building a relationship

It is key that both the prison and the employer nominate an individual to take this forward who has the time, passion and seniority within their respective organisations to make things happen.

Another important factor in building strong relationships is for both parties to recognise how little they might know of how the other operates. Prisons in particular are almost unknown, except for TV dramas and newspaper articles, to people who have not worked in them. Prisons operate with their own priorities, systems and jargon which can be completely impenetrable to anyone outside.

A good way to begin to breakthrough this mutual ignorance is to arrange a visit to the prison for participating employers. If possible during the visit allow employers the chance to spend time chatting informally to prisoners. It is also beneficial if employers have the chance to meet with the Governor to demonstrate the commitment from the top.

It is also worth bearing in mind that if you are outside of the prison it can be particularly frustrating trying to contact staff within the prison: prison staff often work shifts, are less likely to be at their desks than a typical office worker and do not have mobiles! This can be extremely frustrating for an employer who urgently needs to contact someone in the prison and is worth thinking through possible solutions to this before the problem arises.

4. Selecting prisoners

To a certain extent prisoners will self-select based on the requirements of the role and their own motivation.

Whilst it is important to extend employment opportunities as widely as possible it is also important that the prison puts good quality candidates in front of employers. Employers certainly need to have realistic expectations of working with ex-offenders, it is also crucial that the successes outweigh the failures or they will quickly give up.

Employers are often willing to come in and run workshops with a group of prisoners explaining the roles they have on offer. This allows the prisoners to ask any questions they may have and fully understand the requirements of the job. It is important to encourage the employers to be as honest as possible about the roles they have available and to make clear what they are looking for in an employee. Long job descriptions are not overly helpful but if employers are able to distill the top three things they are looking for in an employee this can be a good way for prisoners to recognise if the job is for them. It is also helpful to get the input of prison staff; workshop instructors and tutors will be particularly effective at highlighting individuals that they feel are job ready and possess the attributes desired by employers.

5. Through the Gate

It is ideal if employers are willing to interview prisoners for roles they have available before they are released.

However even for a prisoner who has been provisionally offered a post on release and has all the practical arrangements in place, it is likely that there may be initial complications that could derail an otherwise successful employment placement.

Therefore it is crucial that both the ex-prisoner and the employer continue to have contact and support so that any issues can be resolved quickly. Unfortunately, most agencies working in the prison cease both contact and support on release and even within the same organisation responsibility for the prisoner is usually handed over to a community-based worker.

The solution to this will need to be worked out on a local level but the ideal is an integrated support package which begins before release and continues post-release. If this is not possible every effort should be made to share communication between agencies and introduce the prisoner to the person offering through the gate support prior to release.

As a minimum post-release support should include:

- A named-contact point for both the employer and ex-offender to get in touch with should any problems arise
- The opportunity for the prisoner to meet and set up a first appointment before release
- Ongoing monitoring and feedback from both the ex-offender and employer which is fed back to the prison.

Prison-based preparation for employment

1. Coordinating prison-based support

In most prisons there will be a lot of different organisations that have some responsibility to prepare prisoners for employment. These would typically include:

- **CRC**
- **Education provider**
- **National Careers Service provider**
- **Job Centre Plus**
- **Local charities or initiatives**

The **first step** is to get all of these organisations into the same room and ask them to clearly explain:

- what exactly they do?
- who they report to and with what outcomes?
- how prisoners are referred to them?
- what they see as gaps in the system?

It is important that this meeting really addresses the details of service provision and what is actually happening on the ground rather than the aspirations of each organisation.

- At what stage are prisoners assessed as to their readiness and motivation for employment and by who? How is this communicated to others?
- Who then picks up any unmet needs (training or qualifications required, CV's, bank accounts etc)?
- How is this ongoing work reviewed?
- How does each organisation keep a record of who is addressing these issues and whether they are completed?

From this meeting there should be a clearer understanding of a prisoner's pathway to employment on release and particularly any gaps in provision or duplication of services that will need to be resolved.

The aim should be to work towards a system which identifies prisoners who are motivated to work relatively early on in their sentence and then has a clear action plan, which is regularly reviewed, working towards their release date, where every organisation is clear about their responsibilities.

It is important to recognise that no one organisation or department can do all of this work and regular meetings of all of the organisations working should help to improved coordination and communication.

The purpose of this initial meeting is to understand the detail of what is currently happening in your prison to allow you to build a more effective system with fewer gaps in provision and better monitoring.

2. Data-sharing

One of the keys to making this work is that information is shared between the different organisations and departments working with the prisoner. It is important to find out:

- Where does each organisation record what it does?
- Is that accessible to everyone else?
- Who needs access to what data?

In addition to the organisations mentioned above, you should consider how information will be shared with drug or alcohol services or with healthcare, as they may well have information that will impact on a prisoner's employment prospects on release.

If important information is not routinely shared between different organisations it will be necessary to set up data-sharing agreements. This will help to avoid situations where two organisations are independently trying to arrange accommodation on release, or a prisoner is being prepared for a job that he is not medically fit for etc.

How information is managed, accessed and shared may have to be decided at a local level. It is important to recognise that there may be unhelpful incentives for different organisations to compete rather than co-operate. Sorting out good data-sharing locally is essential to overcoming this.

3. Measuring performance

You will need to decide how you are going to measure success and how you will collect the data to support this.

The best measures will look at whether prisoners are still in work several months after release, as well as whether they had a job to go to on release. Sharing data will be the only way to find this out. But where prisons can collect this information, it will provide a powerful motivation for prisoners and staff to make it known, and celebrate success.