

# LONDONASSEMBLY

## Economy, Culture and Skills Committee

This document contains the written evidence received by the Committee in response to its Call for Evidence, which formed part of its investigation into employment after prison.

Calls for Evidence are open to anyone to respond to. In June 2025 the Committee published a number of questions related to its investigation, which can be found on page 2. The Call for Evidence was open from 17 June to 25 July 2025

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## Questions asked by the Committee

1. To what extent are individuals able to effectively prepare for entering the labour market whilst in custody?
2. What are the main barriers for individuals when looking for work after leaving prison?
3. How effective is the current support provision in helping individuals who spent time in custody find and sustain employment after leaving prison?
4. Are there any interventions which have proven particularly successful in helping individuals who have been to prison in finding and sustaining employment?
5. What could the Mayor, local and central government do to help people who spent time in custody find and sustain employment?

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## Breakthrough Social Enterprise Ref No. EAP001

### Executive Summary

Breakthrough Social Enterprise is a lived experience-led organisation dedicated to equipping prison leavers and individuals from underserved communities with the tools, confidence, and skills required to thrive in today's digital economy. Our submission draws on deep frontline insight, hard-earned trust, and real-world evidence of what works when supporting people after prison into meaningful work.

We work with individuals often written off by society — including those with long criminal histories and “red-line” convictions — and yet, we have seen first-hand what is possible when support is inclusive, forward-thinking, and rooted in belief. Through tech-enabled, trauma-informed interventions, we are showing that reintegration into professional roles is not only possible, but scalable.

This submission addresses systemic failures, barriers, and the urgent need for change — while also offering a roadmap for how the Mayor, local authorities, and central government can back organisations like ours to help break the cycle of reoffending and exclusion.

### 1. A System Under Strain: Preparation in Custody Is Severely Limited

Across the prison estate, there is a dangerous mismatch between the scale of people's potential and the support currently on offer to prepare them for the world of work. Education in custody is underfunded, outdated, and often irrelevant to the modern labour market. Through the current DPS (Dynamic Purchasing System) model, prisons are under immense budgetary pressure, meaning educational provision is frequently reduced to paper-based literacy courses or basic vocational training, disconnected from London's fast-changing economy.

In reality, the majority of prison education does not prepare people for reintegration into society — let alone employment in tech, data, finance, or innovation industries.

There is little to no digital access, and modern tools like AI, coding platforms, or even email are almost entirely absent. In an era where almost every job requires some form of digital fluency, this leaves people profoundly disadvantaged from the moment of release.

Most importantly, socialisation and self-belief are rarely addressed. Prison reinforces isolation, dependency, and learned helplessness. Very few interventions actually teach people how to learn, how to collaborate, or how to build their confidence as future professionals.

### 2. Post-Release Barriers Are Deep and Demoralising

Upon release, prison leavers are expected to rebuild their lives in a society that has moved on — digitally, socially, and economically — with very little help. Many of our participants describe the first 30 days as more stressful than the entire sentence.

Probation services, while often staffed by dedicated individuals, are under-resourced and overstretched. Short-staffing means that employment support is reduced to box-ticking rather than genuine preparation or mentoring. DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) job coaches often have no real understanding of prison leavers' journeys, offering a narrow set of roles (e.g. hospitality, retail, construction) that feel like another form of marginalisation.

We work with many individuals, particularly between the ages of 18–30 and over 50, and the global majority backgrounds who reject these limited options not out of laziness, but out of ambition. They believe they are destined for more — and in many cases, they are. But when

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only low-paid, low-skill roles are offered, many return to criminality, feeling that the system still refuses to see their potential.

Moreover, fear of disclosure, internalised shame, and a lack of employer awareness create huge psychological hurdles. Men and women alike feel blocked by their records, with very few avenues that allow them to speak about their experience without fear of rejection. The trauma of past convictions continues to haunt their future, long after a sentence has been served.

### 3. The Current System is Disconnected and Exclusionary

The support system as it stands is fragmented, difficult to access, and often serves as a gatekeeper rather than an enabler. There is a dangerous lack of joined-up provision between custody, probation, job centres, and community support. Key institutions operate in silos, leading to duplication, delays, or worse — individuals falling through the cracks entirely. Crucially, the system still works on outdated assumptions: that people with criminal convictions should be funnelled into construction or warehouse work. It fails to recognise that many want to enter the modern economy — and could — with the right support.

Furthermore, most programmes still exclude individuals with “red-line” offences such as arson, terrorism, or sex offences. This leaves the most stigmatised people with zero options, increasing isolation and risk. Breakthrough is one of the **only providers in the UK** that refuses to apply such blanket bans. We work with all individuals regardless of offence category — not to excuse behaviour, but to believe in the possibility of change.

Our commitment is simple: if someone is willing to show up, do the work, and apply themselves, they deserve a pathway to purpose — just like anyone else.

### 4. Breakthrough’s Proven Approach: Technology, Transformation, and Trust

At Breakthrough, we’ve built a model that works — and our outcomes prove it.

We were the **first organisation to place someone directly from HMP Isis into a professional role at KPMG**. Since then, we’ve supported people with long criminal histories into roles at leading employers including DXC Technology, Mott MacDonald, Beacon CRM, and several AI start-ups. These individuals were previously unemployed, overlooked, and in some cases, serially reoffending.

What makes our model work?

- **Lived experience-led design:** Our programmes are created and delivered by people who’ve lived it. This ensures credibility, relatability, and radical empathy.
- **Focus on “learning how to learn”:** We don’t just teach content — we teach mindset, confidence, and curiosity.
- **AI-powered integration:** Our use of generative AI tools allows learners to get 24/7 support — for CVs, job prep, skills training — without waiting on a human. It’s like having a personal coach in your pocket, available any time.
- **No red lines:** We hire and support individuals regardless of offence, provided they meet our standards and pass our internal interview process.
- **Belief in aspiration:** We don’t push people into “what’s available” — we help them unlock “what’s possible”. From coding to strategy roles, we support people into jobs that align with their dreams and dignity.

We are not only changing lives — we are changing expectations.

### 5. What the Mayor, Local Authorities, and Central Government Must Do

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If government is serious about equity, reintegration, and rehabilitation, it must radically shift how it funds and supports community-led innovation.

We call on policymakers to:

## Mayor of London

- **Fund Pan-London Expansion:** Resource organisations like Breakthrough to deliver digital-first, lived experience-led services across all boroughs. We should not be boutique — we should be baseline.
- **Create a 'Redemption Employer Network':** A GLA-led initiative that brings together employers committed to second chances, digital roles, and lived experience hires.

## Local Government

- **Commission Without Red Lines:** Stop excluding people based on offence category. Risk must be managed, not avoided.
- **Invest in Transition Services:** Fund the first 30 days post-release with transport, housing, mobile tech, and coaching — the essentials that determine whether someone reintegrates or relapses.

## Central Government

- **Reform DPS and Prison Education Policy:** Make modern, relevant, and digital learning the default — not the exception.
- **Resource Lived Experience Models:** Directly fund organisations that are led by and for those affected — the ones delivering results that traditional services cannot.

## Final Reflection

The current system asks prison leavers to rewrite their story — but refuses to give them a pen. Breakthrough Social Enterprise is led by people who have lived the pain of exclusion and the power of possibility. We have walked the landings, faced the rejections, and seen what it takes to truly rebuild.

We are not waiting for transformation — we are delivering it. But to scale this impact across London and beyond, we need strategic investment, systemic change, and political courage. Let this be the moment we stop managing the problem — and start believing in the solution.

I'll attach some resources that form the basis of our programmes

<https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>

<https://ai-2027.com/>

<https://www.re-des.org/es/a-solarpunk-manifesto>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mW-W7AKRdnA>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr7uO\\_zAPF8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr7uO_zAPF8)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-TZqOsVCNM>

## Catch 22 Ref No. EAP002

### London Assembly Economy, Culture and Skills Committee

### Call for evidence: Employment after prison in London

### Catch22 submission – July 2025

## BACKGROUND

### About Catch22

[Catch22](#) is a charity and social business. We design and deliver services that build resilience and aspiration in people and communities, supporting over 160,000 people annually facing social disadvantage. We operate across the justice, education, social care, employability and skills sectors.

Operating at every stage of the Criminal Justice System (CJS), Catch22 provides services designed to rehabilitate offenders, reduce reoffending, create safe custodial environments, and support victims. Our Justice services work with over 40,000 individuals each year across prisons and the community.

In London, Catch22 deliver a wide range of services, some commissioned by MOPAC, including the Youth2Adulthood (Y2A) Hub in Newham, and our Young Londoners' Victim Service. Inside London prisons, we provide custodial services, including the Offender Management Unit (OMU) in HMP Thameside, eXpand service for people on remand in HMP Pentonville and Wandsworth, Violence Reduction services in HMP Pentonville, Wandsworth and Feltham, and our Foreign National service in HMP Wandsworth. We further deliver through-the-gate and community-based support for those preparing for release or on probation via our Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS): Personal Wellbeing, Finance, Benefit and Debt, and Dependency and Recovery (for 18–25-year-olds). These services help prison leavers address barriers to reintegration, and ultimately, to sustained employment.

## SUMMARY OF OUR RESPONSE

Catch22 welcomes this London Assembly Economy, Skills and Culture Committee inquiry into employment for people leaving prison in London. It is timely in terms of the Mayor's pending Inclusive Talent Strategy to boost skills and ensure good quality jobs for Londoners as part of the London Growth Plan. Our response further aligns with the Mayor's Crime and Policing Plan priorities: reducing violence and criminal exploitation, tackling root causes of crime, improving partnership working, and building safer communities.

Drawing on our extensive frontline experience supporting prison leavers into education, training, and employment (ETE) across London, we know that employment is one of the most effective tools to reduce reoffending. Yet many leave prison without the support or opportunity to rebuild their lives, facing stigma, unmet basic needs, and disjointed services.

## Key barriers and recommendations

- **Joined-up approach**
  - The Mayor should ensure that relevant strategies are aligned and encourage closer working between the GLA Communities and Skills Directorate and MOPAS on improving employability of people leaving prison.
- **Inclusive Talent Strategy**
  - The Mayor should ensure that the Inclusive Talent Strategy addresses the specific employment and employability challenges of people living prison, which would also contribute to meeting the London labour market needs.
- **In-custody employability support** – In-custody preparation for employment is limited and inconsistent, with overcrowded reception prisons and a lack of coordinated release planning further hindering rehabilitation and access to work on release.
  - The GLA Communities and Skills Directorate should aim to work with the London Prisons Group to improve pre-release planning and expand access to GLA-funded training offers to Londoners in prison.
- **Post-release support and employer engagement** – Post-release support is fragmented. A lack of confidence, digital access, and information prevent people leaving prison from engaging with services, while stigma still blocks employment. Probation and resettlement support services are often unaware of the GLA employability and skills programmes.
  - The GLA should ensure that its skills and employability programmes are visibly inclusive and easily accessible for people leaving prison
  - The GLA should increase awareness of these programmes with the London Probation Service and voluntary sector community resettlement services (CRS).
  - The GLA should promote the benefits of hiring people leaving prison to employers and, where possible, collaborate with employers to develop specific programmes for this cohort to help to address skills gaps in the London workforce.
- **Scaling up best practice delivery** - Effective models to already exist. Catch22's Youth2Adulthood Hub in Newham, funded initially by MOPAC, supports 82% of young adults into ETE through co-located, sequenced, and relationship-based support. Our ACE pilot demonstrates the effectiveness of intensive support.
  - The GLA should consider replicating and investing in multi-agency, localised resettlement and CRS hubs that support a the full journey of a person from custody to sustained employment.
  - The Mayor should advocate for scaling up resettlement best practice models with the Ministry of Justice, as also set out in the Crime and Policing Plan.

A joined-up, person-centred approach to employment is essential to reducing reoffending and achieving the Mayor's vision of a safer, fairer London.

## **1. To what extent are individuals able to effectively prepare for entering the labour market whilst in custody?**

### **1.1 Prison type and rehabilitation support**

Access to employability support and training varies according to the type of prison. Many sentenced prisoners are incorrectly held in overcrowded so-called 'reception prisons', which offer little opportunity to prepare for employment, whereas many are in remand. These prisons prioritise safety and urgent issues, and offer very limited rehabilitative activity. In 2023–24 42% of prisons<sup>1</sup> rated as 'concern' or 'serious concern' for their overall performance – a 5% increase from the previous year.

Key barriers:

- Lack of access to training for remanded individuals.
- Sentenced individuals often held in prisons unsuited for long-term rehabilitation.
- No coordinated pre-release planning or continuity into community support.

The average employment rate six weeks after release from open prison is more than twice the national average at 43%<sup>2</sup>.

### **1.2 Geographical misalignment**

There must also be an alignment between the skills developed in custody and the labour market needs of the areas to which people return to after release. Around 40% of individuals returning to London are released from prisons outside the capital – often rural Category C training prisons. These establishments typically offer vocational training based on local, rather than London-specific, labour market needs. As a result, prison leavers often return to London without the relevant skills or qualifications needed to secure employment locally.

**1.3 Release on Temporary Licence** - We also advocate for the use of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to improve employment outcomes for prison leavers returning to the capital. ROTL allows people to gain real-world work experience and build relationships with employers ahead of release, easing the transition into work. The Assembly can use its oversight role to push for better coordination between prisons, employers, and local partners in London, such as through the London Prisons Group.

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<sup>1</sup> Inside Time (2024) *MoJ says 15 prisons are of 'serious concern'*. Available at: <https://insidetime.org/newsround/moj-says-15-prisons-are-of-serious-concern/>

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Government (2024) *How has performance in prisons changed?* Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-local/england-and-wales-prisons/how-performance-changed>



## Recommendations:

- Use the development of the Inclusive Talent Strategy to scrutinise the alignment between prison-based vocational training and London's labour market needs.
- Work with the London Prisons Group (LPG) to advocate for the relocation of sentenced individuals to training prisons where they can prepare for release.
- Explore expanding access to the Mayor's free training courses for those in custody in London – potentially via digital tools or offline alternatives like paper-based work.
- Encourage and champion joined-up pre-release planning, ensuring the progress made in prison is continued post release.
- Champion the use of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) opportunities into London-based employers, to help individuals to gain real-world experience, and ease the transition into employment.

## 2. What are the main barriers for individuals when looking for work after leaving prison?

**2.1 Basic needs and support cliff** - People leaving custody face multiple barriers around basic needs such as housing, income, mental health, substance use, confidence/work readiness needs often remain unmet. Support started in custody frequently drops off at the gate.

- The number of prison leavers spending their first night in temporary probation-provided accommodation has more than doubled – from 11% in 2019/20 to 25% in 2023/24. Meanwhile, the proportion moving straight into settled accommodation has dropped from 49% to 45%<sup>3</sup>.
- Mental health disorders are significantly more prevalent in prison, requiring integrated interventions: around 45% experience anxiety/depression, 8% psychosis, and 60% a traumatic brain injury<sup>4</sup>.
- In our Fixed-Term Recall Insights Paper<sup>5</sup>, evidence showed that recall rates are often driven by resettlement challenges, such as unstable housing and substance misuse. The challenges making someone susceptible to recall are often the same as the difficulties in obtaining or sustaining stable employment - so therefore many of the solutions are also the same.

*“When someone is in temporary or unstable accommodation, looking for work often isn’t realistic. They don’t feel settled or secure enough to focus on employment and pushing them too soon risks setting them up to fail.” - Service Manager of Catch22 Y2A Hub*

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Government (2024) *How has performance in prisons changed?* Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-local/england-and-wales-prisons/how-performance-changed>

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Mental Health (2021) *The future of prison mental health care in England*. Available at: <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/future-prison-mental-health-care-england/>

<sup>5</sup> Catch22 & University of Plymouth (2025) *Fixing Fixed Term Recall: An Insights Paper*. February 2025. Available at: <https://d1mdc3nx9zxiu4.cloudfront.net/prod/uploads/2025/02/Insights-Paper-Fixing-Fixed-Term-Recall.pdf>

**2.2 Stigma** - Stigma around hiring prison leavers is still present, and blanket exclusions mean that, even when organisations have the best intentions, people are still shut out of jobs. And while government policies, like the Ministry of Justice’s Employment Council initiatives, are welcome, there is more to do to shift employer attitudes and practices.

Offploy notes that some apply blanket bans on hiring individuals with certain offences (e.g., on sex or fraud convictions) – often based on risk perceptions that do not reflect the reality of the individual or the role. There is a need for more case-by-case decision-making to ensure people are not unfairly excluded from employment, especially when their offence is historic or contextually low-risk<sup>6</sup>.

This remains a major barrier to employment for prison leavers and needs to be recognised and addressed within wider government initiatives aimed at supporting employers to hire people with convictions, such as the Employment Council scheme.

**2.3 DBS checks** – Some, like Offploy<sup>7</sup>, have also raised concerns around the necessity of the types of DBS checks for certain roles. Currently the number of DBS checks by type (2023-2024) is: <sup>8</sup>

- 4.3 million Enhanced (with/without barred list)
- 363,000 Standard
- 2.7 million Basic

Standard and enhanced checks are only available for professions or roles exempt from the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. While this is obviously needed for professions working with e.g. children or vulnerable people, it should be ensured that the appropriate DBS is being carried out so that people are not unnecessarily screened out for a role.

### Recommendations:

- The GLA should promote the commercial and social benefits of hiring people leaving prison to employers (building pipelines of diverse talent, reducing staff shortages) and, where possible, collaborate with employers to develop specific programmes for this cohort to help to address skills gaps in the London workforce.
- The GLA employability and skills programmes could ensure their employer engagement initiatives promote case-by-case hiring decisions, rather than blanket exclusions.

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<sup>6</sup> Offploy CIC About. Available at: <https://www.offploy.org/about/>

<sup>7</sup> Offploy CIC About. Available at: <https://www.offploy.org/about/>

<sup>8</sup> Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) (2024) *DBS Annual Quality Account 2023 to 2024*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-annual-quality-account-2023-to-2024/dbs-annual-quality-account-2023-to-2024>

### 3. How effective is the current support provision in helping individuals who spent time in custody find and sustain employment after leaving prison?

**3.1 Lack of accessibility and awareness of existing programmes** - As part also of community resettlement support (CRS), an ecosystem of employability support for people leaving prison is already in place, with statutory and VCSE organisations often working together. However, current barriers people to struggle to access or sustain these.

Key issues:

- Probation and frontline workers are not fully aware of the opportunities available, including the GLA funded employability and skills schemes.
- People leaving prison often lack the confidence, information, or digital access needed to engage with employability or training programmes. Setbacks when looking for work or training then further knocks this confidence.
- Many people require assertive, not passive, support in taking the first steps towards employment.

Such issues are likely to also become pertinent in the London Connect to Work Trail Blazer schemes.

**3.2 Lack of in-work support** - Many prison leavers face ongoing challenges which can affect their ability to stay in work. Ongoing mentoring, particularly from trusted VCSE partners, helps people to manage setbacks and stay in employment. Please see also our response to question 4 below, which highlights good practice in this respect.

#### Recommendations:

- The Directorate for Communities and Skills should actively promote its employment and skills support schemes across London to on people leaving prison and those on licence, and ensure that Probation Service staff and VCS CRS teams are aware of these, providing also easy referral routes.
- Ensure that GLA-run employability programmes are visibly inclusive of prison leavers and designed with their needs in mind – ensure that probation/CRS staff are aware of these and have easy routes to refer.
- The London Assembly Committee could champion in-work support for people leaving prison, highlighting this as good practice and encouraging its inclusion in relevant GLA-commissioned employment schemes.
- Recommend to MOPAC the championing, funding and promoting of CRS services that offer assertive linkage or mentoring and sequenced support, rather than simple signposting, particularly in the early stages of release.
- The GLA should review and evaluate the accessibility and effectiveness of the London Connect to Work trail blazers for people with an offending and/or prison history.

## 4. Are there any interventions which have proven particularly successful in helping individuals who have been to prison in finding and sustaining employment?

**4.1 The Youth2Adulthood (Y2A) Hub<sup>9</sup>** – Catch22 helps to deliver the Y2A partnership, initially commissioned by MOPAC, to support young adults on probation in Newham, including helping them to move into ETE opportunities.

Between Nov 2024 and Apr 2025, 82% of young adults with an ETE need were supported into an opportunity.

We believe three elements drive Y2A's success:

1. Multi-agency delivery – services work together under one roof, reducing duplication and confusion, and making problem solving quick and easy.
2. Sequenced support – e.g., housing and health needs addressed before ETE, avoiding setting people up to fail.
3. Assertive linkage – mentors work with service users throughout their whole journey, including rejections and setbacks, to keep them on track – and they do not just signpost or refer them to other services.

**4.2 Code4000 Employability Programme<sup>10</sup>** – Delivered by Catch22 in partnership with the PA Foundation, Code4000 supports women in London who have criminal justice experience to develop the skills and support needed to access entry level jobs in the tech industry.

As men make up 96% of the prison population in the UK, there is a risk of female offenders being overlooked when it comes to allocating funding and programmes that improve work readiness for post-release employment. Code4000 addresses this by working with women in the community to provide entry level training in coding and employment support. The programme consists of flexible online training with a one-to-one tutor, adapting to each participant's schedules.

*'My experience with the Code4000 training was nothing short of transformative... Now that I have completed the course, I feel empowered and excited about the future. With these new skills, I can confidently pursue further learning in web development or even start working on my personal projects. I see this as the first big step towards my tech career, which previously seemed daunting but now feels entirely within reach.'* - Code 4000 participant

**4.3 The Achieving Compliance and Engagement (ACE) pilot<sup>11</sup>** – ACE was funded by the Ministry of Justice's Local Leadership and Integration Fund (LLIF) and delivered by Catch22 in strategic partnership with London Probation, HMPPS London Prison Group (LPG), MOPAC and Public Service Design Practice (PSDP). ACE focused on people released on licence who were

<sup>9</sup> Catch22 Y2A Mentoring. Available at: <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/find-services/y2a-mentoring/>

<sup>10</sup> Catch22 Code4000. Available at: <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/find-services/code4000/>

<sup>11</sup> Catch22 (2021) Catch22 to deliver pilot project to reduce prison recalls. Available at: <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/resources/catch22-to-deliver-pilot-project-to-reduce-prison-recalls/>

assessed as at high-risk of Fixed Term Recall (FTR), and provided structured, strengths-based support via dedicated 'Navigator Mentors'.

These mentors worked alongside probation teams to support participants with needs assessments, building pro-social networks, and improving communication and engagement. The model provided consistent, empathetic guidance through the critical post-release period, addressing both compliance and wider desistance needs.

With the final evaluation due in December 2025, early indication is that the pilot was effective:

- 126 participants onboarded, with 90 completing the programme.
- Only 17.6% of participants were recalled to custody – significantly lower than the MoJ data showing that between April and June 2024 there were 73 recalls per 100 releases<sup>12</sup>.
- 86% of participants built new social networks, improving stability and reducing isolation.

*“Since completing ACE, I am engaging well with probation and have been out of prison for the longest time I have ever been. I am 6 months clean; I have employment, and I am back in contact with my family” – ACE service user*

The risk factors for recall – unstable housing, poor mental health, substance use – are often the same barriers to employment. ACE demonstrated that intensive, relational support can help individuals overcome these challenges and provide a foundation for sustained engagement with services, including employment.

### Recommendations:

- **Promote multi-agency, localised support models for prison leavers** – The London Assembly Committee could encourage the Mayor and MOPAC to champion the Y2A Hub model in discussions with local partners and the Ministry of Justice, advocating for the development of similar, localised, multi-agency hubs across London. These hubs should provide coordinated support across housing, health, and employment, and prioritise sequenced interventions and assertive linkage to reduce barriers and improve pathways to sustained employment.
- **Support expansion of relational, through-the-gate mentoring** – Drawing on the positive (interim) outcomes from ACE, the Mayor should advocate for Ministry of Justice funding for similar mentoring interventions across London, using also the current criminal justice reform opportunities.
- **Use the London Assembly’s oversight role to improve integration of existing provision** – We would welcome for the London Assembly Economy, Culture and Skills Committee to press for stronger alignment between employment and skills provision commissioned by the GLA (e.g. Adult Education Budget, Skills Bootcamps) and criminal

<sup>12</sup> Prison Advice and Care Trust (2024) *New figures show a 44% increase in prison recalls*. Available at: <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/latest/news/new-figures-show-a-44-increase-in-prison-recalls/>

justice partners. It could call for better signposting and access for people on probation or leaving custody, ensuring services that work with prison leavers (like Y2A) are connected to GLA-funded opportunities. The Committee could monitor this by seeking regular update on GLA ETE programmes engagement and outcomes data for people leaving prison.

## **5. What could the Mayor, local and central government do to help people who spent time in custody find and sustain employment?**

- **Increase in-custody access to GLA-funded training** - digitally or through alternative delivery methods
- **Specifically target prison leavers in GLA employment schemes** – A quick win would be to explicitly list people leaving prison as a priority group in the GLA’s “Jobs and Skills for Londoners” and more specific programmes, and therefore encourage applications by boosting confidence and removing imposter syndrome.
- **Improve awareness of and simplify information about GLA ETE programmes** – Humanise access to support (e.g., clearer language, peer support, in-person help for applications) and ensure that services supporting people leaving prison are aware of the programmes.
- **Review reach and effectiveness of the Connect to Work Trailblazers** for prison leavers and those on licence, and share the learning with DWP.
- **The Mayor should ensure that the Inclusive Talent Strategy addresses the specific employment and employability challenges of people leaving prison**, which would also contribute to meeting the London labour market needs.
- **Strengthening joined-up working between prison OMUs, probation, local authorities, and VCSE partners** - In line with the commitments in the Mayor’s Police and Crime Plan 2025–29 to reduce reoffending and support effective resettlement, the Mayor should encourage better joined-up working between prison OMUs, probation, local authorities, and VCSE partners to help individuals progress towards and sustain employment more efficiently and effectively, and to ensure coordinated, end-to-end employment support.
- **The GLA should consider replicating and investing in multi-agency, localised resettlement and CRS hubs** that support a the full journey of a person from custody to sustained employment.
- **The Mayor should advocate for scaling up resettlement best practice models** with the Ministry of Justice, as also set out in the Crime and Policing Plan.

## **Contact details**

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**Clinks Ref No. EAP003**

## London Assembly: Employment in London after Prison Call for Evidence Response

### Introduction

Clinks is the national infrastructure organisation for the voluntary sector in criminal justice in England and Wales. We support, promote and represent over 500 members and advocate on behalf of the estimated 1700 organisations working with people in the criminal justice system and their families.

Clinks is the current holder of the HMPPS infrastructure grant, and we manage the secretariat for the [Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group \(RR3\)](#). The RR3 convenes Special Interest Groups (SIGs) to advise on specific areas of policy and practice as the need arises.

In April 2024, we produced a [report](#) through a SIG on Employment which focused on the barriers to employment faced by people, both in prison and on their release into the community. It sets out a range of co-produced recommendations designed to mitigate these barriers. We have used the findings from this report, informed by a number of voluntary sector organisations working in this space, to produce our response for this inquiry.

We have also gathered additional feedback from a number of our members working in London, consulting with [StandOut](#), [Bounce Back](#), [Prisoners' Education Trust](#), [Working Chace](#), [Trailblazers](#), [Catch22](#), [Action West London](#), [Switchback](#), [Clean Sheet](#) and [Beating Time](#).

This response addresses the five questions posed in the inquiry's call for evidence. It outlines the challenges faced by Londoners who have served custodial sentences in accessing and maintaining employment; the adequacy of current support services offered; the effect of characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity on employment chances; and the effectiveness of interventions provided by the sector. We also outline what the Mayor of London, local and central government can do to most effectively support people in accessing and sustaining employment.

### What are the challenges faced by Londoners who have served custodial sentences in accessing and maintaining employment?

#### ***RR3 SIG on Employment findings:***

Londoners who have served custodial sentences face numerous and overlapping



challenges in accessing and maintaining employment. It is important to note that these challenges are not solely restricted to people leaving prison in London.

These challenges extend beyond simply finding and sustaining work in the community and include the addressing of complex needs such as mental and physical health issues, substance misuse problems, and barriers to accessing accommodation upon release, all of which can undermine a person's ability to gain and sustain a job. Where support for people with complex needs is available, it is often fragmented and short-term, making it difficult to provide the sustained, person-centred help required for long-term employment.

Financial insecurity is also a persistent issue. Many individuals enter custody with existing debts, such as rent arrears or credit card bills, and receive little support to manage them. Without early financial advice, these unresolved issues can feel overwhelming and discourage people from seeking work, especially if employment might trigger debt repayments. Low prison wages - [approximately £13-18 per week](#) – make it nearly impossible to save for release, leaving individuals without the basic resources needed to transition into work.

While there are voluntary organisations, such as Recycling Lives, delivering effective schemes in prisons that offer better pay and savings schemes, these are not widely available. For this reason, as set out in the RR3 Employment SIG report, we recommend trialling the provision of a resettlement access fund. This would be accessed by people on their release from prison and would be created through a reformed prison pay structure within which people would receive a fair wage for the work that they do. A proportion of a person's weekly wage – up to 40% - would be mandated as part of the access fund, to be accessed on release to support people with their resettlement

Further, delays in accessing Universal Credit (UC) also create gaps in financial support. People are unable to apply for UC until the day they are released, though we note ongoing pilots to reduce the challenges in this area, and deductions from benefits or earnings can make work seem financially unrewarding. These systemic issues reduce motivation and make it harder to focus on employment goals.

Another challenge is in engaging employers and training providers in a way that meets the specific needs of people leaving prison. Employers often lack consistent access to prisons and may be unaware of the support required to successfully hire and retain individuals with convictions. This consistency is important in ensuring people in prison can access appropriate opportunities in the labour market, and so that employers are not discouraged by logistical barriers.

Establishing transparency is essential in terms of the support that employers can realistically provide, as well as transparency regarding the support each individual



leaving prison requires to both start and sustain employment. For example, voluntary sector organisations such as the Recruitment Junction, who are based in the Northeast, and Beating Time, have specific expertise in translating job offers in prison into job starts and sustainment in the community. This success relies upon the provision of holistic support – both practical and emotional – and that starts while a person is in prison and continues after release.

Effective training provision within prisons is also vital to ensuring that people are work ready but is constrained by rigid procurement systems. This can exclude smaller, specialist providers and create barriers that lead to the exclusion of specialist organisations that would most effectively align in-prison training provision with local labour market needs.

SIG participants stated that the current Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) tendering process can act as a disincentive to smaller, specialist organisations. The current, lot-based tendering process groups smaller contract sections by elements such as service category, location, or contract value. Even though the intention was to encourage participation from small and medium-sized organizations, in practice, we have seen numerous difficulties arise for these organizations. For example, they often experience an increased administrative burden in terms of the complexity of applying for several lots to secure sufficient business, since each requires a separate bid or pre-qualification process. This takes up a significant portion of time and resources, which may be unfeasible for smaller organizations. Resource constraints are particularly problematic if they attempt to participate in several lots to increase their chances, which can prevent them from securing contracts.

Since many of these smaller niche organizations cannot effectively participate in the DPS, this limits service users' access to tailored, person-centred support, particularly for individuals with complex needs, which ultimately reduces their chances of securing and sustaining employment after release. Without these specialized services, many people leaving prison miss out on the individualized help they need to become job-ready, perpetuating cycles of unemployment and reoffending. On this basis, to better engage training providers, SIG participants called for a more focused, specialist approach on a prison-by-prison basis to incentivise a wider range of providers with specific specialisms.

Coordination among services can also be lacking, with high staff turnover and limited awareness of available support leading to missed opportunities for joined-up care. We note further down this response of the value of the Voluntary Sector Coordinator role which, if replicated across the prison estate, would help to better coordinate services.

For sustained employment outcomes, statutory stakeholders must leverage the

expertise of voluntary sector organisations with consistently outstanding outcomes in supporting people to both attain and sustain employment, with a subsequent reduction in reoffending rates. We have spotlighted the organisations achieving success in this area throughout this response.

Without attention being given to these challenges, and the implementation of more integrated support systems, the problems people face in accessing and maintaining employment after prison are likely to persist or worsen.

***Member engagement:***

As noted in the introduction, we consulted our London-based members in order to inform this response. The most consistently referenced challenges included: stigma and prejudice from employers; a lack of training and employment history; not knowing how to start looking for a job or writing a CV; a fear of rejection; a lack of self-belief and shame; not having ID, banking or other documents; and having a precarious or unstable housing situation.

Clean Sheet, who are a charity who help people with convictions to find jobs, referenced how the challenges can be varied depending on several factors such as: length of time inside; skills and experience level; the nature of a person's conviction; access to support networks; the stability of accommodation; and mental health and any substance addictions.

The role of education was also raised. In our consultation, the Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) highlighted the limited access to high-quality education in prison, which is particularly significant given that people that are in prison, generally, have lower levels of literacy and numeracy compared to the general population. This claim is supported by the Prison Reform Trust's (PRT) most recent Bromley Briefings Prison [Factfile](#). It highlights that in 2023–24, people in prison took a total of 47,722 initial assessments in English. 73% of assessment outcomes were at the equivalent literacy level expected of an 11-year-old or younger, which is almost five times higher than in the general adult population (15%). Nearly half (47%) of all adult people in prison [lacked formal qualifications](#). According to Catch22, there are also issues with people lacking adequate or up-to-date digital and technological skills, which can be exacerbated the longer a person spends in prison.

Bounce Back, who support people in prison and in the community who are at risk of or have a history of offending and substance misuse, reinforced our SIG findings on the lack of service coordination. They emphasised the specific challenge of insufficient data-sharing across services. A lack of access to adequate information makes it difficult for voluntary organisations supporting people leaving prison to most effectively address need. It can also lead to re-traumatisation and disengagement from services

due to people having to share their story multiple times across different services.

## To what extent is the support currently offered to Londoners who have been to prison adequate in helping them access and maintain employment?

There is a range of support on offer to people who have left prison in London to help them access and maintain employment. The support that is on offer is framed by the most recent [London Reducing Reoffending Plan 2022-25](#), which sets out a range of measures designed to improve employment prospects for people leaving prison.

The Plan was [updated](#) in September 2023 to incorporate HMPPS's introduction of a number of new roles, including over 100 Heads of Education, Skills, and Work (HESW) and Prison Employment Leads (PELs). Employment Hubs have also been established in resettlement prisons, alongside the introduction of Coracle laptops to facilitate remote and blended learning. The new Prison Education Service (PES) contracts will be going live, later this year.

In January 2025, the government launched [regional Employment Councils](#), building on the rollout of the Employment Advisory Boards attached to each resettlement prison.

These changes have contributed to the tangible progress that has been made in increasing the number of people obtaining employment on release from prison. Employment Outcome [statistics for April 2023 to March 2024](#) show that the proportion of people leaving prison in London finding work within six weeks of release increased from 13.4% to 17.1%. Even though this increase is a positive development, it is still below the national average of 19.3%. This figure rises to 27.9% after six months, again slightly lower than the national figure of [31.1%](#). These statistics reflect both progress and the ongoing challenge, that while employment rates for people leaving prison have improved, London remains behind national outcomes.

As noted earlier in this response, the adequacy of support also relies upon work in a number of areas, including education. PET noted that prison education across England is currently “nowhere near good enough”. In July 2024, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons expressed that “the quality of education and training is almost universally poor.” For those learners at the higher end of the attainment scale, there is limited provision of Level 3 qualifications or higher.

The RR3 SIG report on employment sets out how staff shortages represent a significant barrier to accessing education within prisons. This is because there are often not enough staff to escort people to sessions or workshops or adequately run them. This is compounded by concerns that existing staff are not adequately trained to support

individuals with complex needs, such as neurodivergence, though we do note that creation of the Neurodiversity Support Manager role across the prison estate.

Education attendance is also often paid less than work, which creates a prominent financial disincentive. This is despite [Ministry of Justice data](#) showing that people who participate in education while in prison are significantly less likely to reoffend within 12 months of release. As a result, we recommended aligning pay for education with prison work to remove this disincentive and improve resettlement outcomes.

PET also noted that people in prison have limited access to digital devices and the internet, which dramatically reduces the range of educational opportunities that they can access and reduces their ability to develop the digital skills that are essential in the community.

Focusing specifically on support in the community, Working Chance, who support women with convictions, highlighted challenges in providing effective support within job centres. These challenges include: work coaches often lacking adequate knowledge of criminal records, including the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act and spent convictions, which results in poor guidance, legal risks, and diminished trust in the system; the authoritative environment of Jobcentres, including the presence of security guards, which can retraumatize women with convictions; and issues linked to chronic understaffing and frequent changes in work coaches which hinder relationship-building and consistent support. In addition, there are barriers to accessing the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) which, despite being intended to help with employment-related costs, is inconsistently applied, and many eligible women are unaware of it or denied access due to staff ignorance or gatekeeping which may contribute to lower rates of employment after prison.

## To what extent do characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity affect the chances of Londoners who have served custodial sentences in the job market?

We know that there are numerous and often overlapping characteristics which result in further difficulties in securing and maintaining employment for certain individuals.

### **Age**

According to anecdotal evidence from Beating Time, we know that age affects individuals' chances in securing a job after being incarcerated. They have observed that for young people, there may be a "sweet spot" for employment chances for those in their early-to-late 20s, since they typically have a higher chance of finding employment than others outside of this cohort. This may be due to several factors, including

sympathy, or the notion that it is easier to “mould” younger people into becoming better employees due to their age. These findings are supported by the most recent Employment Outcome [statistics](#) from April 2023 to March 2024, which show that people between the ages of 25-29 have the highest reported rate of finding employment at six weeks (17.7%) and six months following release (30.5%) compared to all other age groups. Those aged 21-24 have the [second highest](#) reported rate of finding employment, at 15.7% at 6 weeks and 26.5% 6 months after release.

On the other end of the spectrum, according to Catch22, although there are no official statistics, older individuals may struggle with digital literacy or find it harder to re-enter the workforce, particularly if they have been in prison for a long period of time.

## **Gender**

Based on [employment outcome statistics](#) from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) from the period beginning April 2020-March 2021 to April 2023-March 2024, we know that there are notable differences in employment outcomes for men and women after prison. Employment rates at 6 months post-release from custody have significantly increased from 14.6% to 32.0% for men leaving prison. The figure has risen from 39.5% to 49.3% for men on community sentences. For women leaving prison, employment rates at 6 months post-release from custody have increased from 6.5% to 17.0%, and from 23.2% to 31.2% for women on community sentences.

Despite these statistics, according to Bounce Back, of those who engaged with their services in the 2024-25 fiscal year, women show a higher job start rate than men, however, men outperform women in job sustainment, with 71% remaining in work at 13 weeks and 43% at 26 weeks, suggesting better retention once employed than women.

Bounce Back and Working Chance both suggest that this could be because women typically face more unique challenges such as care-giving responsibilities, a decline in part-time or flexible roles available in the job market, stigma and discrimination based on social expectations of women, and history of abuse and poor relationships that could make their re-entry into the labour market, and subsequent sustainment of work, more difficult than for men.

## **Ethnicity**

Trailblazers highlighted how ethnicity has the potential to disadvantage people coming out of the prison due to factors such as institutional and systemic racism and discrimination more generally. Similarly, Bounce Back has noted that employers are less likely to hire applicants with non-white names even with identical CVs, and the addition of a criminal record can potentially further reduce the likelihood of securing a job. There is also evidence that people with criminal records, and who were of a Black

and Asian background, were less likely to be referred to job or training schemes according to a [2023 report](#) by HM Inspectorate of Probation. Despite this, the most recent Employment Outcome [statistics](#) show that people of Asian or Asian British ethnicity tend to have higher employment rates following custodial sentences, at 17% at 6 weeks post release (compared to 15.1% of white people and 11.2% of black or black British), which rises to 26.9% after 6 months post release.

In their [2023 report](#) on race, migration, criminalization and mental health, Hibiscus highlighted the entrenched disadvantages and compounding effects of ethnicity and gender. They found that black, minoritised, and migrant women face compounded challenges including violence, criminalization, financial instability, housing insecurity, and healthcare barriers. These findings have been reiterated by Working Chance, who found that racially minoritised women are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. They are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and sentenced to harsher punishments, ending up with criminal records that last longer, compared to white women which severely impacts their employment prospects. When they do find work, racially minoritised women face barriers to career progression, volunteering, and apprenticeships, trapping many in underpaid and precarious jobs.

### **Neurodiversity and Mental Health**

As noted by Action West London, educational disadvantages can also be linked to undiagnosed neurodiversity issues and underlying mental health problems. For example, if a person has Dyslexia, they may have a harder time doing things like crafting a CV and reading job descriptions without some form of support in place.

Findings from Catch22's [Personal Wellbeing Service](#) illustrate that when wellbeing and stability are prioritised, people are significantly more likely to engage with training and employment opportunities and maintain them. However, in practice, individuals with more complex needs or offending histories frequently receive generic or short-term interventions that fail to tackle the root barriers and rarely provide access to long-term support.

### **Which interventions have proved effective at helping Londoners who have served custodial sentences into employment and why?**

For the purposes of this question, we have focused our answer predominantly on the voluntary sector interventions that are proven to have support people leaving prison into employment. The success of these interventions is based upon the provision of coordinator, tailored and sustained support, both before and post-release.

### **The Good Prison Project – Voluntary Sector Coordinator**



Between 2016 and 2017, Clinks [piloted the Good Prison Project](#), which enhanced voluntary sector coordination in prisons including HMPs Dartmoor, Exeter, and Guys Marsh, through the creation of a voluntary sector coordinator role. The role continued in Dartmoor and Exeter until 2020. This role supported the mapping of existing services, identifying gaps, and ensuring that both voluntary sector and statutory staff were well-informed about all aspects of the prison regime and population.

The role of the voluntary sector coordinator has now been reinstituted in HMP/YOI Isis and is essential to ensuring the strategic involvement of voluntary organisations in helping to meet the immediate needs of people in prison, as well as supporting them in preparation for their resettlement.

### **Clean Sheet**

Clean Sheet is a national charity which supports people with convictions to find work by providing practical support, including CV preparation, disclosure guidance, job suggestions, and interview coaching to enhance employment readiness. People across England and Wales can self-refer to receive 3 years of remote support, and for 12 months once in employment, from a dedicated Employment Team Adviser. They are also given access to Clean Sheet's Employers Directory of over 100 employers and 30 training providers. The service's distinguishing feature is its ongoing, non-judgmental, and individualized support. Through their tailored advice, Clean Sheet builds people's confidence and restores a sense of value and hope, which are key factors in motivating sustained job search and employment after difficult experiences. Their most recent [impact report from 2021](#) shows that they were able to help 209 people find employment, 12 of whom founded their own businesses, and helped 45 people undertake training.

### **StandOut**

Working in HMPs Wandsworth, Pentonville and Wormwood Scrubs, StandOut offers a unique, three-phased programme. The first phase is an intensive 12-day course where group work is combined with in-depth, individualized one-to-one sessions. It includes modules which support participants to build confidence, motivation, self-worth, communication and teamwork skills, engage with willing employers, and understand employment more practically, such as how to work with probation, write disclosure statements and develop CVs and interview skills.

Following the course, coaches continue working with participants to ensure they have the basics in place for release, including ID, a bank account, access to accommodation and health services. This is combined with ongoing coaching, group sessions exploring themes identified through discussions with participants, and encouragement to engage with other forms of purposeful activity at the prison.





After a person is released, they receive ongoing practical support and individualised coaching, including help in securing stable housing and with benefits applications, addressing issues with family or difficulties with mental health, and connecting participants with employers open to hiring those with criminal convictions.

In their [annual report for 2023-24](#), StandOut revealed that the people they worked with were twice as likely to remain out of prison 12 months after release, and over three times more likely to be in work than the average person leaving prison. The positive effects of their programme were not limited to employment. In fact, 86% of participants in the full programme also reported an improvement in their mental wellbeing.

### **The Recruitment Junction**

[The Recruitment Junction](#), although primarily operating in the Northeast, demonstrates effective practices that are relevant for London. Their approach includes sustained, face-to-face support throughout the recruitment process, practical assistance with essentials such as ID, bank accounts, and CVs, and collaboration with agencies such as the DWP and Probation. They also provide financial support for rent, utilities, and interview costs, as well as ongoing support for up to a year after employment begins. This comprehensive, individualized support has resulted in a 71% job retention rate and a reoffending rate of just 2%.

### **Beating Time's 'Inside Job' programme**

The [Inside Job programme](#), piloted at HMP/YOI Isis and HMP Northumberland is a peer-led initiative designed and run by people in prison (before, currently and formerly). It employs a three-step model. The first involves people serving sentences being trained and paid to recruit candidates within prison. The pay they receive is saved in Beating Time's accounts for each recruiter, with savings accessible upon release. Then, the organization brings employers into prisons for interviews. Lastly, Beating Time provides specialist support upon release.

Their community team is made up of consultants, with each consultant responsible for one prison. They support the recruiters in prison to build a pipeline of candidates and prepare them for interview. The same consultant then supports all the candidates coming out of that prison into work.

By engaging with this initiative, candidates receive both practical and emotional support to secure and sustain employment. The programme's effectiveness is clear, given that participants have a 76.2% employment retention rate at 9 months post-release and a 5% reoffending rate.

***Examples of Interventions Funded or Directly Supported by the Mayor of London:***



There are numerous initiatives that have been funded or otherwise supported by the Mayor of London which demonstrate the Mayor of London's ongoing commitment to reducing reoffending by providing practical support, skills training, and employment opportunities to people leaving prison, helping them to reintegrate successfully and contribute positively to London's economy.

### **The Right Course & 'Escape' Restaurant**

The Mayor of London has partnered with The Right Course, a charity founded by Fred Sirieix, to transform prison staff restaurants into training grounds that replicate real high street businesses. The ['Escape' restaurant at HMP Wormwood Scrubs](#), supported by City Hall funding, provides prisoners with practical work experience and hospitality qualifications. This initiative aims to equip prisoners with the skills and experience needed to secure jobs in the hospitality sector after their release. Training is delivered by Novus, the UK's largest prison education provider, ensuring high-quality education and practical learning. Despite some challenges, The Right Course has reported that in 2023, 47% of learners achieved at least one qualification, and 67% of released learners secured employment. In addition, two graduating learners are taking on enhanced roles and completing mentoring training.

### **Skills for Londoners Capital Fund**

As part of a broader investment to upskill London's workforce, the Mayor of London has committed significant funding through the [Skills for Londoners Capital Fund](#). This fund supports the creation of modern facilities and the purchase of up-to-date equipment to help Londoners from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds, including a particular focus on prison leavers, develop the skills needed for employment. The Skills for Londoners Capital Fund has made over £100 million available to invest in London's further education estate, with an emphasis on making skills provision more inclusive and accessible for all Londoners.

### **Y2A Specialist Support Hubs for Young Adults in Newham**

In collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, the Mayor for London's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) launched a £3 million [specialist support hub](#) specifically targeting 18–25-year-olds leaving prison based at Newham Probation Office. This hub provided enhanced support services, including employment pathways, to reduce reoffending among vulnerable young adults and help them successfully reintegrate into society. Despite ending in March 2023, a [2024 evaluation](#) by the MoJ revealed that despite challenges like coordination across services and sustaining the model long-term, the hub was implemented effectively, and that participants (both staff and young adults) were positive about the model, with benefits including improved engagement and tailored support for young people.

## Partnerships with Job Centre Plus and Employers

MOPAC collaborates with Job Centre Plus and other partners to develop [employment pathways](#) for people who have previously committed offences. This includes pilot projects with employers aimed at placing individuals into jobs upon release. MOPAC also supports resettlement projects funded by the European Social Fund, with a strong focus on helping people who have previously committed offences in secure sustainable employment.

Overall, interventions that combine practical, emotional, and sustained support, coordinate services, and actively involve both employers and peers have proved most effective at helping Londoners with custodial sentences into employment. These approaches are successful because they provide tailored and coordinated support, ensuring individuals receive the assistance most relevant to their needs. Practical and emotional help, such as support with ID, CVs, housing, and finances, effectively address barriers to employment. Peer-led and employer-engaged models foster trust and create genuine job opportunities. Crucially, sustained support after release helps individuals maintain employment and significantly reduces the risk of reoffending.

## What can the Mayor, local and central government do to support ex-offenders to access and sustain employment?

### ***1. Establish Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector Community Employment Leads (CELs)***

To support prison leavers in accessing and sustaining employment, it is essential that the Mayor of London, along with local and central government, establish Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector Community Employment Leads (CELs). These roles must be embedded within every resettlement prison, working alongside existing Prison Employment Leads (PELs), statutory agencies, and third sector providers. By doing so, government can ensure that individuals receive tailored guidance into employment following their release, rather than leaving this critical transition to chance.

The CEL project builds on the VCSE's proven track record and years of supporting prison leavers, much of which has been discussed above. Government backing for CELs would ensure that the voluntary sector and the government can collaborate to address the shared goal of significantly increasing the number of people leaving prison who secure and sustain job opportunities. By building on the work of PELs, this approach creates a viable, evidence-based employment pathway from prison into the community, an approach that is demonstrably effective in supporting rehabilitation.



A key reason for urgent government intervention is the high attrition rate, which is estimated at 30–50% from in-custody referral to job start upon release, as highlighted by HMPPS data from the West Midlands Prisons Group and national anecdotal evidence from PELs. The CEL project directly addresses this challenge, seeking to generate new employment outcomes for those who may not have secured a job pre-release and ensuring a seamless transition between custody and community. This provides critical post-release support and protecting employment opportunities created within prison. Voluntary sector organisations already show significant impact in securing job starts, achieving high job retention, and reducing reoffending rates. Government support for the CEL initiative would build on these successes and scale them across London and the UK.

CELs are expected to manage a caseload of 80–100 people per year, with 40–50 anticipated to secure paid employment annually. By supporting prison leavers both with and without job offers, CELs would help raise the national average of 19% of leavers entering employment within six weeks of release, a target that government should champion. CELs deliver a comprehensive range of services, including pre-release engagement (6–12 weeks prior to release), immediate through-the-gate post-release support, employment and employer engagement, holistic support, programme exit assistance, and GDPR-compliant information sharing between stakeholders. These are precisely the wraparound services that government must prioritise if it is serious about rehabilitation and reducing reoffending.

By embedding a CEL within every resettlement prison, the government would not only improve access to employment for people who have previously committed an offence but also reduce the need for ongoing financial support and strengthen the evidence that employment is fundamental, not optional, to successful rehabilitation. The CEL project also addresses current gaps, such as the lack of a formal mechanism to track job starts (especially since Performance Hub Data 2025 excludes prison leavers released without a licence period, despite their inclusion in government unemployment statistics) and the absence of formal employment support after release.

By filling these gaps, the Mayor of London and government at all levels can drive higher employment outcomes, mitigate attrition rates, and ensure a seamless transition from custody to community. This evidence-based, collaborative approach is not only necessary but urgent if we are to transform the employment prospects of prison leavers and build safer, more inclusive communities.

## ***2. Collaborating and Engaging with the Voluntary Sector***

To support prison leavers in accessing and sustaining employment, it is also essential



that the Mayor of London, along with local and central government, foster increased collaboration with the voluntary sector. This should incorporate ongoing engagement with the sector in order to leverage its expertise and to respond to changing needs. Doing so will strengthen much-needed partnership working and enable voluntary organisations to build on years of best practice.

In February 2024, Clinks convened a roundtable discussion with 20 London-based voluntary sector organisations focused on how to improve employment outcomes for people leaving prison.

At this discussion, PET emphasized the challenges caused by high staff turnover in prisons and the lack of understanding among new staff about the role of voluntary organisations. They advocated for a Voluntary Sector Coordinator in every prison and highlighted the underutilization of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), especially in London, as a missed opportunity for education and employment preparation. In our consultation, they have also emphasised that the Ministry of Justice should prioritise increasing funding for prison education, supporting the recruitment, development and retention of prison teachers, and improving access to digital devices and the internet for people in prison.

Bounce Back praised the growing role of Prison Employment Leads (PELs) but noted that better coordination with voluntary organisations is needed.

StandOut pointed to the lack of suitable space in prisons and poor communication with probation officers as major barriers. They also stressed that many employment-related issues, such as documentation and basic needs, should be addressed before release to allow organisations to focus on actual employability support.

Other organisations, including Switchback, NACRO, the Rees Foundation, and Action for Race Equality, echoed similar concerns about communication gaps, unrealistic expectations around immediate employment post-release, and the need for more inclusive and flexible support systems. Entrepreneurship and self-employment were also highlighted as underutilized pathways, especially for those facing stigma.

During our consultation for this call for evidence, we heard from Beating Time and Clean Sheet, who recommended introducing accessible initiatives to encourage employers to hire people who have been in prison to build on initiatives such as the Going Forward into Employment (GFIE) recruitment scheme, and ensuring time inside prison is utilised to gain skills in areas where there is demand, so individuals are more work-ready upon release.

Catch22 recommended investing in services that combine wellbeing, housing, and employment support. Similarly, Action West London suggested delivering integrated



support services encompassing mental health, neurodiversity assessments, and housing assistance.

Working Chance recommended including more individuals with lived experience in training and educating the probation service and allocating more funding to gender-specific services to ensure they are as effective as possible. They also suggested the establishment of women-only probation teams and women-only locations for probation appointments all over the UK. This would allow for more gender-informed conditions that could improve the quality of probation supervision by ensuring probation practitioners are equipped to use a gender-informed, trauma-informed approach.

## Conclusion

Despite welcome progress and promising examples of effective practice, the employment outcomes for Londoners leaving prison remain below the national average and fall short of what is needed to support successful rehabilitation. Incremental reforms and isolated programmes cannot alone address the entrenched barriers of stigma, fragmented and inconsistent support, and chronic underinvestment in services. To effectively improve employment outcomes for people who have been in prison, it is essential that the Mayor, local government, and central government partner with the voluntary sector and prioritise integrated, sustained, and properly resourced interventions. By building on the voluntary sector's expertise, the Mayor of London can work towards closing service gaps and respond to the diverse and complex needs of people leaving prison. Only with a holistic and ambitious strategy can we ensure every Londoner leaving custody is given a fair chance to rebuild their life, reducing reoffending and strengthening communities for all.

# LONDON ASSEMBLY

## Prisoners' Education Trust Ref No. EAP004

### **Evidence from Prisoners' Education Trust to the London Assembly Economy, Culture and Skills Committee's inquiry on employment in London after prison**

#### ***About Prisoners' Education Trust***

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) is an independent charity that offers distance learning courses and related advice and guidance to people in prison. We provide access to around 130 different courses – including GCSEs and A-levels, Open University Access modules and a wide range of professional courses – enabling people in prison to gain the skills and qualifications they need to secure employment on release.

Analysis by the Ministry of Justice's Justice Data Lab, which compares outcomes for participants with otherwise similar non-participants, shows that people supported by PET to access distance learning courses in prison are more likely to get a job within one year of release and are less likely to reoffend within one year of release than otherwise similar people in prison who PET does not support.<sup>1</sup>

PET's services are available in all prisons in England and Wales, including all prisons in London.

#### ***Response to the Committee's questions***

PET welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry and have responded below to the questions that are relevant to our areas of expertise.

1. *To what extent are individuals able to effectively prepare for entering the labour market whilst in custody?*

Evidence shows that accessing education while in prison increases the chances of securing employment on release, as set out in response to Question 4 (below). Ensuring that people in prison can access high-quality education should therefore be a priority.

Ensuring access to education for people in prison is beneficial, including in enabling access to employment, because there is a high level of educational need among people in prison. Literacy and numeracy levels are, on average, significantly lower among people sent to prison than in the general population. The contrast in literacy rates with the broader population is particularly stark – 71% of people in prison have literacy levels at or below Entry Level 3, compared to

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/954465/Prisoners\\_Education\\_Trust\\_PET\\_4th\\_analysis\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/954465/Prisoners_Education_Trust_PET_4th_analysis_report.pdf)

# LONDON ASSEMBLY

14.9% of the general adult population. The equivalent figures for numeracy are 73% of people in prison compared to 49.1% of the general adult population. These core functional skills are key to securing employment.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, nearly half of people in prison have no formal qualifications. Research found that just 53% of people in prison reported having at least one qualification (including GCSEs or equivalent and higher qualifications, and trade apprenticeships) prior to entering prison. By comparison around 85% of the general population had at least one qualification.<sup>3</sup> Qualifications can be essential in securing employment.

By improving the skills of people in prison and enabling them to secure the qualifications that employers need, participating in education while in prison can help ensure that people leaving prison are as well placed as possible to enter employment. In general, however, prison education provision is currently nowhere near good enough.

This is true across England, with the education provision at 54% of the prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs) inspected in 2023–24 judged by Ofsted to be ‘inadequate’ (the lowest rating available). 33% were judged to be ‘requires improvement’. Only 13% (five prisons) were ‘good’ and none were ‘outstanding’. Reflecting this, the Ofsted Annual Report for 2023–24 noted that “prison education remains weak, almost without exception”.<sup>4</sup>

This is also the case for adult prisons in London, as set out in the table in Appendix 1.

The vast majority of men’s prisons in London were given an overall rating of ‘inadequate’ at their last Ofsted inspection. The exceptions are HMP Thameside, which was rated as ‘requires improvement’, and HMP Wormwood Scrubs. The last inspection at HMP Wormwood Scrubs was carried out in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic so Ofsted did not give an overall rating. However, it was assessed as ‘reasonably good’ for purposeful activity by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP).

There are two women’s prisons on the outskirts of London, HMP Bronzefield and HMP Downview. HMP Bronzefield was given an overall rating of ‘good’ by Ofsted when it was last inspected in 2022. HMP Downview was not given an overall rating by Ofsted when it was last inspected in 2021, as it was in the process of recovering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was assessed as ‘not sufficiently good’ for purposeful activity by HMIP.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-and-accredited-programme-statistics-2023-to-2024>

<sup>3</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/199224/compendium-of-reoffending-statistics-and-analysis.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/199224/compendium-of-reoffending-statistics-and-analysis.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202324-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202324>

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Not only is education provision not of sufficient quality, but not enough people can access it. In total 63,744 people participated in a course in prison in England in 2022–23. This is significantly lower than the peak level in 2014–15, when 101,600 people took part in a course. In 2023–24, 49,965 people participated in a course in prison. A change in methodology means that these figures are not directly comparable to previous years, but it is safe to say that the number of people participating in educational courses is still nowhere near the levels of a decade or so ago.

Figures for individual prisons are not available, but we know that in a number of prisons in London there is not sufficient capacity in education, training and work for the number of people that the prisons are now holding. For example, a recent inspection of HMP Pentonville noted that there were fewer than 600 activity spaces for a population of 1,207.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover prisons are not consistently making full use of the education capacity that they have available. Of the five prisons in England that had attendance rates in education in 2023–24 of less than 50%, three – HMP/YOI Feltham B, HMP Wandsworth and HMP Wormwood Scrubs – were in London. Three more London prisons – HMP Belmarsh, HMP Pentonville and HMP Thameside – had attendance rates of less than 60% (the average for prisons in England was 72%). This is caused, at least in part, by overcrowding and staffing shortages across the prison estate, which leads to people in prison spending too much time in their cell and not enough time engaged in purposeful activity (including education and training) that would help them to get a job on release.

In addition, while some progress has been made in improving access to digital devices (e.g. a laptop or tablet) and the internet, most people in prison do not routinely have access to either. This means that they cannot develop the digital skills that are now essential for life outside prison, including in the workplace, and they do not have access to the vast array of digital educational resources that are available in the community. It also presents challenges for the provision of distance learning. While PET continues to provide paper-based courses for people in prison, distance learning in the community is now largely provided online. Access to the internet is therefore essential in ensuring that prison education keeps up with what is routinely available in the community.

For people under the age of 18 there is one YOI in London, HMYOI Feltham A. At its last inspection in 2024, Ofsted assessed its education, skills and work provision to be ‘inadequate’. HMIP assessed their provision of purposeful activity as ‘poor’. This reflects the provision of education in YOIs generally, with a joint review by HMIP and Ofsted finding “a bleak picture of steadily declining educational opportunities and quality, reduced work experience and work

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<sup>5</sup> [https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris\\_reports/hmp-pentonville-urgent-notification/](https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-pentonville-urgent-notification/)



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opportunities, and sharply reduced time out of cell for children”.<sup>6</sup> Oasis Restore, the secure school in Kent, is a new model of custody for young people that is intended to be more education focused, but it is too early to say what impact it will have.

Despite this concerning broader picture, there are a number of charities and other external organisations that look to complement and extend the core education provision in prisons in London.

This includes our work at PET to enable adults in prison to study a distance learning course, which can enable them to secure skills and qualifications that will help them to get a job on release. As noted above, PET offers access to more than 130 courses and our most popular courses are often employment focused.<sup>7</sup> During 2024, PET received 3,082 applications from people in prison and funded 1,540 courses. This included 163 in prisons in London (from 332 applications) – see table below.<sup>8</sup>

Prison	Applications (2024)	Successful applications (2024)
HMP Belmarsh	39	15
HMP Brixton	20	7
HMP Bronzefield	22	13
HMP Downview	33	17
HMP/YOI Feltham B	64	30
HMP High Down	81	52
HMP Isis	32	12
HMP Pentonville	10	3
HMP Thameside	10	4
HMP Wandsworth	13	6
HMP Wormwood Scrubs	8	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>332</b>	<b>163</b>

As set out below, evidence shows that accessing a course provided through PET increases the likelihood of securing employment on release. We are keen to see as many applications as

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<sup>6</sup> Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thematic-review-of-the-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-yois/a-decade-of-declining-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-the-systemic-shortcomings-that-fail-children>

<sup>7</sup> Details of our 10 most popular courses in 2024 are available at <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2025/01/2024s-top-distance-learning-courses-in-prison/>

<sup>8</sup> PET only funds courses for people who have been sentenced, not people on remand. This may affect some prisons in London, which currently predominantly hold people on remand.

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possible from people in prison in London, to enable them to study courses that support their rehabilitation.

There are a range of other organisations that provide education or training in prisons in London to complement the core education on offer. For example, there is The Clink restaurant in HMP Brixton, the tattooing course provided by the Elever Training Institute in HMP Pentonville<sup>9</sup>, barista training provided by Redemption Roasters in HMP High Down and the Vocalise programme, which is led by trainee barristers and provides training in public speaking and debating. While it tends to have limited capacity, this diverse provision is wholly welcome and should be part of what all prisons offer, tailored to the needs and interests of their populations.

In addition, there have been some positive developments in prison education in recent years. Employment Advisory Boards (EABs) have been introduced, to act as a link between prisons and employers and ensure that the education and training available will give people the skills that they need to secure a job on release.<sup>10</sup> Regional Employment Councils, which will involve the Probation Service and the Department for Work and Pensions as well as prison and employers, have recently been announced to complement EABs.<sup>11</sup> The New Futures Network was also established to work with employers to help create job opportunities for people leaving prison. In addition, Heads of Education, Skills and Work, a new senior role in prisons to focus on education, were introduced. These changes were all positive steps that PET supports.

In response to this question we have focused primarily on prisons in London. It should be noted, however, that not all people from London or planning to settle in London post-release will necessarily be held in a prison in London. Most adult prisons in London are now reception prisons, supporting the courts in London and holding people on remand, with fewer resettlement prisons available to hold people due to be released in London. This may be a barrier for people returning to London in seeking work on release. In particular, there are no open prisons in London so anyone held in an open prison will need to be held outside London, even if they plan to live there on release.

## *2. What are the main barriers for individuals when looking for work after leaving prison?*

If people cannot access education in prison then they are less likely to have the skills they need to thrive in the labour market (including 'soft skills') or the qualifications they may need to access specific jobs. In a competitive job market, where people leaving prison may already be

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<sup>9</sup> <https://insidetime.org/newsround/pentonville-offers-first-tattoo-course-for-prisoners/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/leading-uk-business-bosses-help-prison-leavers-get-work-in-crime-cutting-drive>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/top-bosses-join-forces-to-get-thousands-of-offenders-into-work>

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disadvantaged due to their criminal record, this is an additional barrier that people may struggle to overcome.

As mentioned above, people leaving prison may particularly lack the digital skills to look for and secure work on release. Digital skills are of growing importance in the modern economy, and in looking for and applying for jobs, but a lack of access to laptops and tablets and to the internet in prison prevents people from developing these crucial skills.

4. *Are there any interventions which have proven particularly successful in helping individuals who have been to prison in finding and sustaining employment?*

Evidence is clear that accessing education in prison increases the likelihood of securing employment on release. The evidence on the efficacy of prison education, including in securing employment post-release, is summarised in 'Prison education – A review of the evidence'<sup>12</sup>, a report written by PET and published by Clinks (the national infrastructure body supporting the voluntary sector working in criminal justice).

This evidence includes a report published by the Ministry of Justice in 2018 which found that people who had accessed education in prison were more likely to be in employment one year after release and were less likely to reoffend within one year of release than people in prison who had not participated in education.<sup>13</sup>

These positive findings are echoed in other research reviews. For example, a rapid evidence assessment of the effectiveness of prison education in reducing reoffending and increasing employment, conducted by academics at Manchester Metropolitan University and published in 2017, found that participating in education increased the likelihood of gaining employment by 24%.<sup>14</sup> A comprehensive meta-analysis of the available evidence by RAND similarly found that the likelihood of obtaining employment post-release among people who participated in education in prison was 13 percent higher than for those who did not participate.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, analysis of the impact of PET's work, mentioned above, found that 40% of the people who received grants for distance learning through PET were employed during the one-year period after release. This is significantly more than the comparison group (33%). It also found that people who accessed courses through PET were less likely to reoffend than

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<sup>12</sup> Available at <https://www.clinks.org/publication/prison-education-review-evidence>

<sup>13</sup> Available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/708156/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initial-impacts-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708156/evaluation-of-prisoner-learning-initial-impacts-report.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Available at <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/618360/>

<sup>15</sup> Available at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR266.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html)

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otherwise similar people who did not.<sup>16</sup> These findings echoed the findings of earlier JDL analyses of PET's impact published in 2014, 2015 and 2018.

## *5. What could the Mayor, local and central government do to help people who spent time in custody find and sustain employment?*

As set out above, the quality and availability of education in prison is currently not good enough. Addressing this should be a priority for central government.

In September 2024, PET published a briefing setting out 10 recommendations to improve prison education.<sup>17</sup> These recommendations focused on the changes that should be made by the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS nationally to make prison education work. In particular the Ministry of Justice should prioritise increasing funding for prison education, supporting the recruitment, development and retention of prison teachers, and improving access to digital devices and the internet for people in prison.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that prison education does not operate in isolation – it is part of the broader prison regime. It is therefore important that broader improvements to prisons are made, including increasing staffing levels, tackling overcrowding and improving the physical state of the prison estate (including education departments and workshops).

Locally, in thinking about skills development in London and as part of the Skills for Londoners initiative the Mayor should consider how training providers and further education and higher education providers in London could be encouraged and incentivised to work in partnership with prisons in London to augment and complement the education currently provided in prisons. Partnerships between further education colleges and prisons, for example, can be very effective in enabling people in prison to gain employment-related skills and qualifications.

The Mayor should also consider how work to identify and close skills gaps in London can include people leaving prison. This could include considering how the Mayor's team could contribute to the work of EABs and of Heads of Education, Work and Skills in prisons to ensure that the education and training that people receive in prison aligns with the needs of employers in London. Finally, the Mayor and members of the London Assembly should use the profile of their roles to champion the employment of people leaving prison.

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<sup>16</sup> Available at

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/954465/Prisoners\\_Education\\_Trust\\_PET\\_4th\\_analysis\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/954465/Prisoners_Education_Trust_PET_4th_analysis_report.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Available at <https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/resource/getting-prison-education-right-priorities-for-the-new-government/>

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## Appendix 1: Education data for adult prisons in London<sup>18</sup>

Prison	Inspections by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Ofsted		Annual prison performance ratings for 2023-24 <sup>19</sup>			
	Overall Ofsted rating at last inspection (date in brackets)	HMIP assessment on purposeful activity at last inspection <sup>i</sup>	Attendance at education courses <sup>ii</sup>	Progress in English and Maths <sup>iii</sup>	Achievement of vocational qualifications <sup>iv</sup>	Percentage of prisoners in purposeful activity <sup>v</sup>
HMP Belmarsh	Inadequate (2024)	Poor	59.6%	4.8%	79.8%	50.5%
HMP Brixton	Inadequate (2024)	Poor	76.6%	3.2%	93%	64.8%
HMP Bronzefield	Good (2022)	Reasonably good	-	-	-	-
HMP Downview	-	Reasonably good	74.4%	10.3%	86.6%	78.4%
HMP/YOI Feltham B	Inadequate (2023)	Poor	47.6%	7.9%	89.8%	44.2%
HMP High Down	Inadequate (2023)	Poor	60.2%	4.2%	85.3%	54.0%
HMP Isis	Inadequate (2022)	Poor	61.6%	8.1%	82.4%	33.2%
HMP Pentonville	Inadequate (2022) <sup>20</sup>	Poor	52.8%	0.9%	92.5%	52.2%
HMP Thameside	Requires improvement (2025)	Not sufficiently good	57.3%	4.6%	88.8%	-
HMP Wandsworth	Inadequate (2024)	Poor	48.9%	0.2%	90.2%	51.7%
HMP Wormwood Scrubs	-	Not sufficiently good	49.0%	1.5%	79.4%	40.5%

<sup>18</sup> For this analysis we have included HMP Bronzefield, HMP Downview and HMP High Down, which are all in the greater London area.

<sup>19</sup> Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-performance-ratings-2023-to-2024>

<sup>20</sup> HMP Pentonville was inspected in 2025, and an [Urgent Notification](#) has been issued, but the full report has not been published yet.

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<sup>i</sup> Purposeful activity is activity for people in prison that is likely to benefit them. As part of each prison inspection HMIP assesses it as “good”, “reasonably good”, “not sufficiently good” or “poor” as part of their healthy prison test.

<sup>ii</sup> The percentage of people in prison attending classroom or workshop lessons in custody, as a proportion of the number of lessons the prisoner is expected to attend. Average (mean) for prisons in England is 72%.

<sup>iii</sup> The percentage of people in prison, initially assessed as being below level 2 in English and/or Maths, who make progress by achieving an accredited qualification in either or both of these subjects while in custody. Average (mean) for prisons in England is 8.4%.

<sup>iv</sup> The percentage of vocational courses which are successfully achieved by people in prison. Average (mean) for prisons in England is 88.9%.

<sup>v</sup> The percentage of people in prison in at least half-time purposeful activity, as a proportion of all people in prison in scope. Average (mean) for prisons in England is 69.7%.

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## Stand Out Ref No. EAP005

### **StandOut Programmes' submission of evidence to the London Assembly Economy, Culture and Skills investigation into employment after prison in London, July 2025**

#### **1. About StandOut Programmes**

2. StandOut is an award-winning charity that empowers people to make positive change, realise their potential, and rebuild their lives after prison. Our unique programme at HMPs Wandsworth, Pentonville and Wormwood Scrubs begins in prison with coaching and practical support and continues after release, for as long as someone needs us. On our intensive course in prison, people can discover who they are and what they want to achieve. It's here that they develop a relationship with StandOut that forms the foundations of our work with them after prison. Each journey is individual, and leaving prison isn't easy, it's why StandOut provides one-to-one coaching and support that bridges the transition between prison and the community. We are determined that more people leaving prison are empowered to make positive change that has an impact on them, their families, and society.

#### **3. Introduction**

4. StandOut welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the London Assembly's investigation into employment after prison in London.
5. The criminal justice system does not always set people up for success and, to move out of it for good, people need the best possible chance to rebuild their lives. However, the solution isn't as simple as finding a job. What people need first is stability.
6. We know from our experience and the experiences of our participants that often, before a person can begin working, they must be supported to create stability through stable accommodation, rebuilding family relationships, improving mental health, and recovery from substance misuse.
7. In our submission to this investigation, we focus on the challenges people leaving prison face in achieving the stability they need to find and sustain employment.
8. Our response focuses on the experiences of people who are released from London's prisons. We would also encourage the Committee to consider Londoners who are released from prisons outside of London. People can be held on remand or as sentenced prisoners and, depending on the stage of their sentence, can be released from a range of different prisons – including Category B local, Category B training, Category C and Category D prisons. Available work, training and employment opportunities vary depending on the category of the prison.

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9. **Question One. To what extent are individuals able to effectively prepare for entering the labour market whilst in custody?**

10. While StandOut aims to work with those who are towards the end of their sentences, we believe that preparation for release should begin the moment an individual first steps through the gates of the prison. Regardless of sentence length – whether short or long – the focus should be on supporting individuals to make the most of their time in custody, while also preparing them for life on the outside.
11. Over recent years, prisons have made progress embracing the question of employment for people leaving prison. New roles have been created to deliver on this, with Heads of Education, Skills and Work overseeing the offer of workshops and training and Prison Employment Leads making connections with employers to support people leaving prison into work. These developments, together with government policy to encourage employers to hire people leaving prison, has led to an increase in employment outcomes for prison leavers. However, the work is often limited to practical employment resources, such as CV development or meeting employers. This doesn't go far enough and is often not designed to support people whose backgrounds are more complex – because of offence type, mental health or substance misuse issues.

12. Purposeful activity

Purposeful activity (the term used to describe structured and meaningful programmes and services that learners can engage in while in prison) is limited. HM Inspectorate of Prisons consistently raises the issue of a lack of purposeful activity in prisons, as well as curriculums that do not cater to the needs of the prison population and are not sufficiently aspirational. With the right support in place, a prison sentence could be an opportunity for someone to get ready for work, by engaging in programmes that upskill them. There needs to be a radical shift in the availability and quality of purposeful activity in the prison estate, making it more relevant to the world outside prison and potential employment.

13. Preparation for release

The StandOut programme is designed to prepare people for life after prison. Leaving prison isn't easy, people are disconnected from family and communities, deskilled from their time in custody, and have often suffered a significant loss of confidence and self-esteem – all factors that can make the transition into the community an overwhelming and anxiety-inducing experience. Being intentional in preparing for release helps build self-confidence and motivation and increases the likelihood of a person successfully resettling into the community.

14. People leaving prison are rarely ready and able to go straight into employment. Prison is traumatic and life changing, and, in our experience, we find that people



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need on average two to three months before they are ready to consider employment. The transition from prison is a high-risk time, which is why StandOut offers open-ended support for people that bridges prison and the community. StandOut's approach – informed by participants – is designed to be seamless, which we believe to be fundamental to successful resettlement.

15. Our experience is that, for some people, tailored, personal support at the gate on the day of release can have an immediate practical and positive impact – allaying fears and helping to support them to manage a high-stress event. This can consist of accompanying people to appointments and supporting with practical things such as a mobile phone (essential to communicate with probation), a hostel, or clothes and food.
16. Most people leaving prison are on licence. In our experience, very little work is done to prepare people to understand what this means for them personally and yet it may impact where they can go, where they live, and what they can do. People in prison often also lack a clear understanding of the role of probation. The risk is that this sets people up to fail.
17. In our experience, what works best when supporting people to resettle into the community after prison is relational working – a relationship with a known, trusted organisation that starts inside prison and continues through the gate.
18. “StandOut is more than just employment. They get to know your ambitions, your passion. If StandOut's mission was to help me get a job, then they have achieved that. But they want more for me. They want me to reach my ultimate goal. That's why I don't like to call StandOut a charity, because when I think of a charity I think of those people that leave you as soon as you walk out of the gates. It's been two years since I left prison, and StandOut is still here beside me.” – StandOut Participant.

19. **Question Two. What are the main barriers for individuals when looking for work after leaving prison?**

20. As outlined above, for many people, at the point of release, the essentials required for stability tend not to be in place.
21. In our response to this question, we outline some of the challenges we have identified in our work that people face when leaving prison, which they must overcome in order to be able to access and maintain employment. These challenges are practical, systemic and personal.

22. Stable accommodation

Housing is one of the most significant challenges experienced by the people we work with. In 2024, 15% of people released from prison in London were released homeless – including a number of our participants. StandOut provided emergency

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accommodation grants to 10% of the last 50 participants to take up our support after prison.

23. The housing shortage can mean that people are rehoused away from family and support networks – risking isolation and loneliness – and in unsuitable accommodation. A lack of accommodation makes it hard to sustain employment.

24. Accessing benefits

Often people leaving prison are not aware of the support they're entitled to, due to a lack of timely, accurate information. For example, we recently came across a probation officer who was unaware of the helpline that exists for people leaving prison who are trying to access Universal Credit. This demonstrates the lack of knowledge even amongst trained professionals. Due to this lack of knowledge and support, we often see that people have to really persevere in order to access anything they're entitled to.

25. On top of this, applications for Universal Credit are not completed in prison and take 5-6 weeks to land in a bank account. The delay in being able to access money to live off puts people who don't have access to any other resources at immediate risk of reoffending.

26. ID and bank account

Many of those we work with are released from prison without access to a form of ID and a bank account, both essential for employment. Support with ID and banking is inconsistent across prisons. There are insufficient staff to meet the need for support and system issues mean that when people leave prison, they often find accounts have not been opened as they have failed fraud checks.

27. Physical and mental health

A lot of people enter prison with pre-existing physical and mental health conditions and more will leave with conditions that have been exacerbated or caused by spending time in custody.

28. Substance misuse

As well as entering into custody with pre-existing substance misuse issues, due to boredom and the availability of drugs in prison, some people develop issues with substance misuse while in prison. Just as with healthcare, support around substance misuse is inadequate.

29. The release process

The release process can be inherently disorientating but is exacerbated when scant information is provided and release takes place (for example on Home Detention

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Curfew) with relatively short notice. System processes add challenge: for example, credit is removed from prison phone accounts 24 hours in advance of release, leaving people unable to coordinate arrangements with family and friends.

30. Most people will have a series of appointments to attend on the day of release. Being released without the ability to plan and, in some cases, with no phone or means of making contact with anyone means that we are setting people up to fail.

31. Access to technology

People who have served longer sentences will often be deskilled as a result of the rate of development of technology. There is very little preparation in prison to support people to navigate some of these details.

32. Debt

Debt can be a significant issue. Some people take debt into prison and are then not able to deal with it, meaning they leave prison to find that their situation has worsened. Others are drawn into situations while in prison that can lead to the accumulating debt, which can affect them during and after their sentence.

33. Confidence, resilience and life skills

It is often unseen factors that hold people back, and this is what StandOut was specifically designed to address. We work with people to develop confidence, resilience and life skills, and support them to take up opportunities to pursue training or employment.

34. We also often find a knowledge gap and self-limiting beliefs around what employment opportunities will be available, that lead people to assume that certain careers and industries are closed off to them, when in fact they aren't. One StandOut participant is quoted as saying, "you feel like when you come out of prison, people can smell prison on you." This is the kind of internalised stigma people leaving prison are dealing with.

35. Being on licence

When released on licence, support to find employment will often depend on a probation officer's awareness of what's available and appropriate, and their capacity to put in place any support required. Licence conditions often dictate that a person's probation officer approve someone taking up employment.

36. The precarity of life while on licence and at risk of recall can feel overwhelming. The rate of recall has almost doubled in the last 15 years and has increased by 27% in the last year alone<sup>21</sup>. It is important to note that almost three-quarters of recalls are

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<sup>21</sup> [The Prison Recall Report](#), Switchback, June 2025

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due to a failure to comply with licence conditions, rather than the committing of a further offence. The reasons for non-compliance are complex, but in our experience, it is rarely as simple as wilful refusal.

37. Recall can shatter the progress a person has made in the community – risking loss of housing, relationships, and employment. StandOut is a member of the Recall Reform Coalition, which advocates for fairer and more proportionate recall system.

## 38. Employers and recruitment processes

Practically speaking, it is important to note that, if a person has worked before, finding employment might not be as simple as going back into the same kind of role. Sometimes a person's offence will be related to the job or sector they were working in before or may exclude them from certain roles.

39. At StandOut, we work with a group of employer partners with inclusive hiring practices. However, more work is needed to support employers to understand the role they can play in supporting people from prison, who are among the furthest from the workplace, into employment. The area is complex, and employers need advice and guidance to understand the issues and potential risk, and to develop fair processes (for example managing disclosure).
40. StandOut's experience is that people leaving prison often require additional support in the workplace, including but not limited to flexibility around attending probation appointments, and sensitivity to housing situations. One participant we supported gained employment at a professional services firm. The company helpfully delayed his start date so that he could find stability after release. However, he started work while homeless and did not feel able to tell anyone, as there was nobody else with a similar experience to him there.
41. It is also important to note that it is not always clear to people applying for jobs what an employer's 'red lines' are (i.e., the types of offence they will not consider). In our experience, there is not always a consistent approach across the organisation, with different staff members having a different understanding of the company's red lines. This can be frustrating for people applying for roles, and lead to time wasted on job application processes that go nowhere.
42. It is also important to note that the bias someone leaving prison faces from an employer may be compounded by other biases – such as race, ethnicity, disability, or age – which layer disadvantage and create additional barriers to employment.

## 43. **Question Three. How effective is the current support provision in helping individuals who spent time in custody find and sustain employment after leaving prison?**

44. In response to question one, we outlined the support available to people in custody. For this question, we will turn to look at the support that is available in the

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community. It is important to note that, with so little preparation for release in prison, and so little information available, the transition to being in the community and being expected to manage all of this can be very difficult for people.

45. **Probation:** Most people leaving prison will serve the remainder of their sentence on licence in the community, working with a probation officer to adhere to their licence conditions and resettle into life on the outside. Support to find employment often depends on the knowledge, experience, and capacity of individual probation officers. In our experience, a probation officer's knowledge of available opportunities can be quite narrow, and supporting someone to find employment is often not a priority. As such, accessing a range of options that suit a person's skills and experience can be a matter of luck or having a strong support network.
46. **Benefits:** Often people leaving prison are not aware of the support they're entitled to, due to a lack of timely, accurate information. For example, we recently came across a probation officer who was unaware of the helpline that exists for people leaving prison who are trying to access Universal Credit. This lack of knowledge, even amongst trained professionals, is symptomatic of the piecemeal provision of support.
47. **"Into work" projects:** We know from people we have worked with that "into work" projects are often tick-box in nature – 10-minute appointments for a limited period of time that are not sufficient to support people to resolve some of the challenges they face.
48. **Stigma:** The stigma felt by people who have been to prison and assumptions around how they will be treated – for example at a job centre – deter people from working effectively with support agencies.
49. **Question Four. Are there any interventions which have proven particularly successful in helping individuals who have been to prison in finding and sustaining employment?**
50. For most people leaving prison, the critical need is to be supported to build stability – an essential prerequisite for someone in finding and sustaining employment. The StandOut programme recognises this need, and by doing so has achieved significantly higher positive outcomes than the average.
51. According to Ministry of Justice figures, only 18% of men released from London prisons in the past three years were in employment six months after release, and 42% were reconvicted within 12 months. However, StandOut participants who engage with our programme post-release have significantly higher positive outcomes than the average; 48% of those eligible to work find employment within six months and fewer than 19% re-offend within 12 months of release.
52. The StandOut programme has three phases: the StandOut course, preparation for release, and post-release support and coaching. A coaching approach is deeply

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embedded throughout; a tool that raises awareness, triggers a sense of responsibility and motivation, and empowers individuals to maximise their personal and professional potential.

53. It's this unique combination of practical support and coaching in prison, through the gate, and into the community that is essential if we are to empower people leaving prison to transform their lives, realise their potential, and leave the criminal justice system behind – for good.

54. The StandOut Course

Support begins in prison with an intensive 12-day course to prepare people for life outside. Group work is combined with in-depth one-to-one sessions so coaches can get to know each person's needs and hopes for the future. The interactive and engaging course includes modules which support participants to:

- develop positive mindsets and new ways of thinking; build confidence, motivation and self-worth.
- strengthen essential skills in communication and teamwork.
- engage with employers who have a positive attitude towards people leaving prison.
- understand how to navigate practical elements after release, such as working with probation and writing disclosure statements.
- work with volunteers to develop CVs and interview skills.

55. Preparation for release

56. Following the course, coaches continue working with participants to ensure they have the basics in place for release: ID, a bank account, access to accommodation and health services. This is combined with ongoing coaching and group sessions to maintain motivation and the relationship with StandOut.

57. Post-release support and coaching

The hard work really starts when people leave prison. Our community-based support looks different for everyone. It combines practical support and individualised coaching, including help in securing stable housing and benefits applications, addressing issues with family or difficulties with mental health and connecting participants with employers open to hiring those with criminal convictions. For those who are particularly anxious about the day of release and don't have someone to meet them, our coaches will meet people at the prison gate, to offer immediate support on day of release, helping people make critical appointments and ensuring that they understand their licence conditions. Ongoing support after release enables people to develop the stability that is essential if they are to thrive so that in time they can move forward into training, employment or education.

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## 58. Other successful interventions and projects

In our experience, effective work supporting people after prison is delivered by small third sector organisations. We would particularly identify Switchback whose model of support after release also adopts a relational, person-centred approach.

59. We would also recommend the work of XO Bikes. XO Bikes have developed a bike mechanic training course with a delivery model that reflects the needs of participants for a staged approach to pre-employment training, offering skills-based training along with person-centred support.

## 60. **Question Five. What could the Mayor, local and central government do to help people who spent time in custody find and sustain employment?**

### 61. Witnessing a person's journey from prison to the community

62. We encourage the Mayor and London Assembly members to visit London prisons, through the work of a third sector organisation, to hear firsthand the experiences of people in prison. Spending time in an inner-city prison, it is impossible not to see the entrenched crisis that our prisons have sunk into and comprehend the urgency of the situation in which many Londoners are living.

63. We would then encourage the Mayor and London Assembly members to participate in a "gate meet", whereby a third sector organisation – like StandOut – meets someone at the prison gates on the day of their release, to support them on that complex first day in the community. On a "gate meet," StandOut coaches travel with someone to their first appointment with their probation officer, get them settled into their accommodation, put them in touch with mental health or substance misuse services, and supply them with essentials such as toiletries, clothes, and a mobile phone. A gate meet would give an insight into the ups and downs of a person's first day out of prison. These early days after release are crucial, and it is at this point that a person's challenges and the gaps in statutory support can often be seen most clearly.

64. Finally, we recommend the Mayor spend time with statutory services such as Probation and the Job Centre, as well as third sector organisations such as StandOut that support people leaving prison in accessing them. The best insight into what works – and what doesn't – comes from people who have walked that journey. We recommend the Mayor spend time with people with lived experience of prison, such as StandOut's Experts Beyond Bars group.

### 65. Model employment of people with convictions

66. The Mayor of London and the London Assembly are employers, contract out to organisations, and have many suppliers. We encourage the Mayor – and local and national government – to lead by example by developing recruitment practices that

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ensure roles are open to Londoners with experience of the justice system, and by pushing for contractors and suppliers to do the same.

67. The Mayor could invest in a campaign to change public perception of people leaving prison and encourage employers to hire people with convictions.
68. By implementing initiatives to reduce stigma and support employers in adopting inclusive hiring and retention practices, we could transform London into a centre of excellence for the employment of people leaving prison.

69. Further recommendations:

70. The Mayor should push for the return of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) - also known as day release - for people preparing to leave prison in London. ROTL supports people to reintegrate into the community through the opportunity to undertake education, training and work, and/or rebuild family relationships.
71. Each person leaving prison receives a Subsistence Payment (formerly known as a Discharge Grant) of £89.52. The sum is the same regardless of where in England and Wales a person is released, and therefore regardless of the cost of living in the area of release. The Mayor should advocate for London weighting of the Subsistence Payment, to account for the higher cost of living.



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## Switchback Ref No. EAP006

### Switchback Response to Employment, Culture and Skills Committee Hearing: Employment after prison in London

19-08-25

#### About Switchback

1. [Switchback](#) is an award-winning charity supporting young Londoners to find a way out of the justice system and build stable, rewarding lives after prison. Switchback's model is centred on a meaningful 1-to-1 relationship between Switchback Mentor and Switchback Trainee, beginning in prison and lasting as long as it takes after release.
2. By working intensively with a skilled therapeutic practitioner, alongside real-work training and new experiences, Switchback Trainees are supported to take control and make real, lasting change. This is new territory for most Trainees: a frank, non-judgemental relationship with someone who is there for them on a daily basis, helping to navigate the turbulent transition from prison to community.
3. Our pioneering approach works: in stark contrast to the national average – which sees nearly half of prison leavers back inside within a year – only 9% of Switchback Trainees reoffend, while over half move into long-term work. Alongside responding to the five main questions of this committee inquiry we have also provided context about the major social and economic benefits of supporting prison leavers back into the workforce.

#### What are the potential benefits of embedding best practice in employment support for people leaving prison?

##### Primary Benefits

- Increase number of people leaving prison in stable employment.
- Improved job sustainment for people leaving prison.

##### Secondary Benefits

- **Reduced rate of reoffending and crime:** Research by the Ministry of Justice has found that stable employment can significantly reduce the risk of reoffending.<sup>ii</sup> Reoffending is one of the primary social challenges impacting the UK and is estimated to cost the UK £18 Bn.<sup>iii</sup> per year. Nationally, 80% of all crime is reoffending<sup>iv</sup>. Addressing the high rate of reoffending is crucial to reducing the crime rate and the number of victims of crime.
- **Alleviate pressure on overstretched prison and probation service:** The prison and probation services are both facing a significant capacity crisis. Prisons are over-capacity and have been forced to release thousands of people early to manage capacity

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challenges. The probation service are so overwhelmed that they have had to stop working with individuals during the last third of their sentence. In March 2024 the National Association of Probation Officers warned that its members are “burning out due to the relentlessly high workloads.” Reduced reoffending and improved employment outcomes would reduce pressure on these services.

- **Support government priority to address economic inactivity and address labour shortages in key industries:** The new government has pledged to address high levels of economic inactivity in the recently published Get Britain Working whitepaper<sup>v</sup>. The government has promised £240 million to this agenda and has pledged to work with local leaders, such as Mayors, to help support people back to work. Nearly 50,000 people are released from prison every year, yet 7 in 10 people released from prison are still not in employment after 6 months<sup>vi</sup>. Improving outcomes among this group could significantly contribute to greater economic participation and growth and there may be opportunities to apply for funding through this strategy.

## **What are the main barriers for individuals when looking for work after leaving prison?**

4. **Housing insecurity:** Lack of secure and stable housing is the biggest barrier that prevents individuals who are looking for work from succeeding. Delays in pre-release planning, both from prison/probation and local authority teams, often cause delays in housing support being provided. Although the policy is that probation and prison staff should work proactively with local authorities to begin the process of seeking housing support weeks in advance, very often no work is carried until the day of release. Sometimes support is not provided for weeks post-release or is not provided at all. Ultimately, even when plans are made in advance, there are too few options. Most prison leavers do not qualify for priority need support and so have to rely on renting. Rental options can be unaffordable, and prison-leavers frequently encounter discriminatory practices. In London Local Housing Allowance is set at a rate which makes the majority of private rented options unaffordable.
5. Schemes like CAS-3 (Centrally commissioned 10 weeks of transitional accommodation for prison leavers at risk of homelessness) and Accommodation for Ex-Offenders (a central fund which local authorities can apply for funding for) have made some impact, but challenges persist which limit their impact for our cohort. There is a lack of move-on support or planning in CAS-3 accommodation. We have seen many people leave CAS-3 accommodation homeless. The AfEO scheme has had very little benefit for our cohort, which we believe is caused by many schemes being dependent on clients' housing benefit entitlement. People under 35 receive a lower rate of housing benefit and it can be uneconomical for housing providers to work with this cohort. The availability of schemes such as AfEO must also be publicised so that prison leavers, and the services which support them, are better able to advocate for themselves with local services.
6. Issues with housing also include inappropriate and poor-quality housing. Many prison leavers have PTSD and neurodiversity, making many housing options unsuitable for

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their needs. This can include some of the temporary accommodation provided by the prison service.

7. When individuals cannot find stable accommodation, it is very challenging to sustain employment. The stress and anxiety of homelessness can be overwhelming and make it very difficult for individuals to focus or apply themselves in other areas of their lives.

**“Look at John. He was about to start Dusty Knuckle, he was about to start a college course and he was making really good progress and then he ended up sleeping out on the street. Without support from somewhere like Switchback he might have really struggled in that moment.”**

**Switchback Mentor**

**“If someone’s not housed it’s so hard to engage with Switchback support even if they want to because housing is so forefront in their mind.”**

**Switchback Mentor**

8. **Financial instability:** When people are released from prison they are given a subsistence payment of just £89.52. After being released from prison, the only options people have to secure a stable income are; to get into stable employment, receive benefits or make money illegally. Benefits claims take weeks to process and are paid in arrears. Most jobs are also paid in arrears, this means even if prison leavers are able to get straight into employment, they are contending with serious financial instability. If it takes longer, as it does for most people, then they may be struggling financially before they even start working dealing with issues like debt. Having the basic means to live (travel, groceries, suitable clothing) can be a major barrier that inhibits individuals ability to gain or sustain employment. It creates a strong disincentive away from travelling the right path away from crime. This can create a vicious cycle that leads people back to crime.
9. **Mental ill-health:** in 2023 we held in-depth workshops with Switchback trainees to explore the relationship between mental ill health and prison release. We published a report on this [work](https://switchback.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Switchback_Mental_Health_and_Prison_Release_Report_2024_single.pdf). ([https://switchback.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Switchback\\_Mental\\_Health\\_and\\_Prison\\_Release\\_Report\\_2024\\_single.pdf](https://switchback.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Switchback_Mental_Health_and_Prison_Release_Report_2024_single.pdf)) Our Experts by Experience shared in great depth about the mental health challenges they faced on release from prison. The impact of trauma, often experienced repeatedly, starting in childhood and throughout their experiences with the justice system, was raised repeatedly. Participants described how these experiences had profound impacts on them. Making them feel constantly vigilant and under threat, even when navigating experiences that others may consider normal. Participants spoke about finding it very difficult to trust anyone and finding the adjustment from prison to life in the community overwhelming.

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These challenges, which are consistent with traumatic disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, can make sustaining employment challenging. The impacts of trauma can show up in behaviours that can be challenging in a workplace environment. These behaviours are often the tip of an iceberg of deeper issues and challenges. They can sometimes manifest as displays of high emotion but can also show up as withdrawing or avoiding situations that are triggering or overwhelming.

**“At Liverpool St, you know you see it in the movies, so many people moving and lights everywhere. I felt lost in my own city. I didn’t know what to do, I felt stuck. I was lucky I had great support. It was like waking up in a different time zone.”**

## Switchback Trainee

10. It is possible to overcome these mental health challenges, with the right support for individuals to support emotional regulation and self-awareness. Workplaces can also be supported to become trauma informed, by equipping staff with the knowledge and skills to understand trauma and the way that impacts individuals in the workplace.

**“For some of us that was already instilled in us before we went to jail. You are already on alert anyway. You go to jail, crammed in a building, and it’s even worse. You come out and it’s even worse.”**

## Switchback Trainee

11. **Inexperience/lack of understanding of workplace norms:** Many prison-leavers, especially younger people, may never have worked before or held down a stable routine. At least 1 in 3 Switchback Trainees had never worked before starting the programme. Adjusting to workplace norms, unspoken rules, and etiquette can take time. All of these factors can make it challenging for prison-leavers to achieve the consistency that is expected by most employers. This can lead to disappointment and loss of confidence for both employers and prison-leaver

## How effective is the current support provision in helping individuals who spent time in custody find and sustain employment after leaving

12. The Government established the New Futures Network in 2018 with the goal of improving employment opportunities for prison leavers. Work has focused largely on connecting businesses and industries to offer more employment opportunities to people leaving prison. This work has had successes in addressing stigma relating to prison leavers in the workplace and in connecting work ready prison leavers with employers. Crucially this work has also helped to greatly increase the number of businesses interested in employing prison leavers. Recently several major employers, such as Iceland and Greggs, have established programmes to employ greater numbers of prison leavers. In our experience, the work of the New Futures Network has largely supported the most employment ready individuals to transition into work after custody.

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**“If you get put in a job without dealing with your problems, you just explode and don’t go back to the job. You go back to your comfort zone: smoking cannabis or drinking, or whatever that person does to make them feel alive. I wouldn’t expect anyone to hold [a job] down to be honest, without something like Switchback and the [training] café in between.”**

## **Switchback Trainee**

This is hugely welcome, however there are many individuals who may require additional support and training. This is because they are trying to overcome the barriers described above; housing insecurity and homelessness, financial instability, mental ill health and lack of workplace experience. The wider holistic support available to address these problems is in complete crisis. The Probation Service lacks the capacity to support effective resettlement. The National Association for Probation Officers have warned that many probation officers are at risk of burnout. His Majesty’s Inspectorate for Probation (HMIP) recently concluded that the Government’s model for pre-release resettlement planning was ‘not working’ and the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee’s reports on resettlement support for prison leavers came to similar conclusions. Both concluded that there had “been a decline in the quality of resettlement services in recent years” and that, “HMPPS are not consistently preparing people leaving prison for release.” These issues are preventing many prison leavers from making the most of improving employment opportunities.

**“They’ve come out they’ve got a job but they are struggling with their anxiety. They are in a place they are panicking they don’t know what to do. Sometimes they just run away, they really want the job but they don’t know how to handle it.”**

## **Switchback Trainee**

**Are there any interventions which have proven particularly successful in helping individuals who have been to prison in finding and sustaining employment?**

## **Switchback and the Dusty Knuckle Bakery**

13. London’s businesses and charities are pioneering a way forward, creating supportive environments to equip prison-leavers with the skills to succeed at work. At Switchback we work in partnership with The Dusty Knuckle Bakery and café located in Dalston and Haringay to support young prison-leavers to learn how to sustain work in a supportive, incremental environment.
14. We provide a crucial partnership to equip prison leavers with the skills to succeed. When a Switchback Trainee is released from prison, they come into our office to meet their mentor. We provide the relational approach that is missing from most statutory employment work with prison leavers. We create a space for trainees to work through their challenges and to set goals for themselves. We also provide access to opportunities

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to support them to be successful.

15. Real work training environments are a key part of this. Many Switchback Trainees train at The Dusty Knuckle, a bakery that uses its busy operations to help young people who are yet to find their career path adjust to work through on-the-job training and mentorship. They have the chance to create excellent products in a live, thriving business environment, working for an exciting brand they are proud to work for. This opportunity can equip young people with basic skills for work and life, a positive professional network, and high-quality progression opportunities.
16. Trainees are assessed on which sections of the business best align with their goals, skills, innate qualities, and experiences, rather than expecting them to conform to any vacancies the business may have. The induction at Dusty Knuckle is a 3-tiered and incremental process to build a trusting, honest relationship before shifts can begin. Young people start gradually, on shorter shifts that gradually extend as they get used to work. This phased approach sets people up for success without overwhelming them, at an especially stressful and disorienting time. The Dusty Knuckle Training Programme establishes healthy travel and morning routines while creating a sense of achievement through realistic start times.
17. The program is led by trauma-informed practice from the outset, with Trainees working alongside chefs, bakers, and baristas from day one, who all receive in-house training to provide blame-free, detailed, and high-quality instruction, live on the shop floor. This radical immersion promotes a timely and effective feeling of belonging.
18. Switchback Mentors continue to support Trainees throughout this process, alongside other pathways, while meeting regularly with Dusty Knuckle to discuss progress. The Dusty Knuckle and Switchback have worked in successful partnership since 2019, supporting prison-leavers into sustainable work.

**What could the Mayor, local and central government do to help people who have spent time in custody find and sustain employment?**

**What could the Mayor of London do?**

**1) Provide leadership for pan-London reducing reoffending efforts**

19. Existing funding and initiatives to support prison leavers are highly disconnected and suffer from being delivered by different parts of the state (probation, prison, healthcare, housing etc) without the right level of join up. The Mayor of London should take a leadership role in providing a central point of leadership in relation to reducing reoffending and preventing homelessness initiatives for prison leavers in London. Local coordination and planning is key to ensure that services are being delivered in a way that is joined up and responsive to the needs of people leaving prison.

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20. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority have taken this approach. They have agreed additional devolution powers with the Ministry of Justice and has taken a wider role in the commissioning of probation services to reduce reoffending.
21. One example that demonstrates that value of this approach has been the approach to commissioning temporary accommodation (CAS3) for prison leavers. The Government has commissioned 10 weeks of temporary accommodation for all prison leavers with the goal of reducing the impact of homelessness. This is a welcome step forward, but too often temporary accommodation postpones homelessness rather than preventing it. To prevent homelessness, it's crucial to provide holistic, person-centred support to help people to find stable housing when they move on. Greater Manchester have used it's role as a commissioner for probation services to commission CAS3 support with integrated support.

## **2) Continue to invest in mentoring support for young Londoners**

22. Mentoring and relational support are crucial to supporting young Londoners to be able to build stable, rewarding lives outside of the justice system. Switchback's approach, shows the impact that mentoring can have in supporting people to sustain work after prison. The Mayor's investment in mentoring through the new deal for young people is welcome and should be continued.

## **3) Embed a focus on resettlement and prison-leavers in violence reduction work**

23. We support the work and approach of the Violence Reduction Unit who have embedded a focus on grassroots organisations and holistic support in work to prevent youth violence. However, there is a gap in London's violence reduction work, there is not enough of a focus on preventing reoffending. 80% of all offending is reoffending. Applying the infrastructure, model and culture of the VRU to resettlement issues for prison leavers could lead to a more holistic approach to supporting young Londoners to sustain employment and stop reoffending. This support could take several forms.

- Further investment in mentoring and relational support for prison leavers
- Upscaling and replicating real work training environment like the Dusty Knuckle Bakery.
- Capitalising on existing funding streams such as CAS3 and Accommodation for Ex Offenders funding to create clear pathways into housing for prison leavers.
- Specialist mental health support for prison leavers

## **4) Provide training and support to employers**

24. A growing number of employers are showing an interest in employing prison leavers, but many struggle to put this ambition into reality. High quality HR and induction processes can make a huge difference in this area. Creating trauma informed workplaces that can support prison-leavers during the transition into employment would be invaluable to both businesses and wider society. The Mayor of London's office could work in

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partnership with organisations like Switchback, Standout, Catch 22, Dusty Knuckle, Offploy and others who specialise in providing employment support for prison leavers, to develop training and guidance for employers who are working with prison leavers.

## What could local government do?

### 1) Support prison leavers into stable housing pathways

25. The number one challenge facing prison leavers who want to engage in employment is difficulty securing long term housing. Local Authorities can provide greater support to prison leavers to enable them to find pathways into stable housing. For example by making use of accommodation for ex-offenders (AfEO) funding provided by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to provide specialist support to prison leavers such as loans to support tenancy deposits, specialist staff to find suitable accommodation options. Local authorities should also work proactively with probation staff and support services to provide support before homelessness occurs (EG when people are coming up to release or eviction from CAS3 housing)

## What could Central Government do?

### 1) Introduce a national resettlement framework

On a national level we are calling for the government to introduce a national resettlement framework – that coordinates support at central and local levels. Based on our evidence and engagement with young prison leavers the framework should include;

- **Skilled 1-to-1 support**, including a named single point of contact, for every prison-leaver
- **Minimum standards** of support for every prison leaver
- **A localised approach**, whereby delivery partners are incentivised to work collaboratively around the needs and goals of the person leaving prison and the local environment to which they are returning
- A **'basic essentials' commitment** to offer a phone, photo ID and a bank account to every prison leaver who needs one
- A plan to be able to pay **benefits** from Day 1 on leaving prison
- A commitment to ensure every prison-leaver has a pathway to **long-term housing**, building on recent transitional accommodation initiatives
- A plan to support prison-leavers to thrive at work with a focus on **employability** and stability to sustain work long-term
- A plan to ensure consistent **mental health** support is available through-the-gate.

A plan to improve the involvement of **voluntary sector providers** in service delivery, including expansion of grant-funding, building on the new Probation Grants model





**Working Chance Ref No. EAP007**

## **RESPONSE TO LONDON ASSEMBLY'S CALL FOR EVIDENCE: 'EMPLOYMENT AFTER PRISON' - JULY 2025**

This submission to the London Assembly's 'Employment in London after prison' call for evidence has been prepared by the policy team at [Working Chance](#). Our response is written with specific reference to women with convictions as this is where our expertise and mandate lie.

This response makes use of feedback from our frontline staff who support women with convictions every day, as well as input from women with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

Our response also speaks directly to the reasons why a gender disparity of employment outcomes exists for people with convictions; in the year to March 2024, 49% of men with convictions were in employment six months post release, compared to just 17% of women with convictions (source: [MoJ](#)).

**What is the name of your organisation and what support, or intervention, do you deliver to Londoners who have been in prison and wish to secure employment?**

Working Chance is the UK's only employment charity exclusively for women with convictions, supporting women across England and Wales. Our mission is to support women to create independent purposeful lives through helping them to build careers, and to educate and inspire employers to embrace inclusive hiring. We exist to support women with convictions to find sustainable work or education, with the key objective of helping them to build lives with purpose, hope, and financial independence. In doing so, we work towards a vision of society in which no woman is held back by a conviction.

**1. To what extent are individuals able to effectively prepare for entering the labour market whilst in custody?**

While there have been some positive developments in prison education and employment support, Working Chance believes there are still significant gaps that limit how effectively people can prepare for the labour market while still in custody.

We welcomed the introduction of the Prison Employment Leads (PELs) and Employment Hubs across the prison estate. However, in practice, the support provided by the Employment Hubs and the pressure exerted by PELs onto prison residents to secure employment can sometimes undermine their effectiveness. For instance, we have encountered women accessing our services with CVs and

disclosure statements prepared in custody that do not meet labour market standards. One recent example was a CV that was considered “work ready” that included the woman’s prison number. This highlights a disconnect between the support offered in prison and the realities of what is needed for the labour market. Also, a balance must be struck between pushing people into employment straight after release and acknowledging that newly released individuals face competing priorities, such as housing, mental health care, and family reunification. This is particularly true for women who face higher rates of trauma and caregiving responsibilities which can complicate finding and sustaining employment. Pushing someone into employment before they are ready can have a negative impact on someone’s mental health and ability to stay in a job, which will not only harm the person, but the employer. Instead, employment readiness should be part of a phased and supportive reintegration process.

Our clients tell us that prison education and skills training is patchy and does not set them up for employment upon release. Current offerings across the female estate often fall short - many programmes are capped at Level 2 NVQs, however most employers seek qualifications at Level 3 or higher. One example of this is Personal Training where qualifications in prison are capped at L2, but a L3 qualification is needed to become a personal trainer in the UK. Ensuring qualifications align with labour market needs can better equip prison leavers for meaningful employment after release.

For those in custody who have access to Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), this can support them to work, to transition back into society and to rebuild connections with their families while serving their sentence. Evidence shows this fosters a greater sense of accountability and personal growth, as well as ensuring a smoother reintegration into the community, resulting in increased employability on release and thus reducing the risk of reoffending (source: MoJ). However, ROTL is being underused with the number of people benefitting from ROTL opportunities remains significantly below pre-pandemic levels. An increase in the usage of ROTL would contribute significantly towards improved outcomes.

Finally, people in prison need opportunities to engage in purposeful activities during their time in custody. These activities include, but are not limited to, vocational training, education and qualifications, therapeutic programmes, employability support, and physical or social activities. These help people to develop new skills, build CVs and disclosure statements, prepare them for interviews, and foster positive identities about themselves beyond their convictions – improving their chances of employment upon release. However, we routinely hear from women that they were only allowed one hour per day of purposeful activity. This is often due to understaffing and lack of resource and creates a barrier to rehabilitation.

## 2. What are the main barriers for individuals when looking for work after leaving prison?

Firstly, one of the major barriers faced by people leaving prison is the lack of housing options. A stable home is vital for rebuilding a person's life and finding employment, but many people leave prison without a fixed address or stable accommodation. This not only worsens mental ill-health and general instability but raises the risk of reoffending just to survive. We have found that many private landlords and letting agents are reluctant to rent to people with convictions. While landlords can ask prospective tenants about convictions, challenging discrimination from landlords is hard as they are not legally required to provide reasons for rejecting people. Additionally, one survey found that 38% of landlords were unwilling to rent to someone receiving housing support such as Universal Credit. Many landlords wouldn't rent to someone with a history of rent arrears (90%) or county court judgements (78%) - disproportionately affecting people in poverty and people with convictions (source: [MoHCL](#)).

Similarly, clients who have been required to live in Approved Premises report that securing employment can actually worsen their financial situation. Once they begin earning, the rent at these premises becomes far more expensive – often exceeding what they can afford. This creates a counterintuitive and discouraging scenario where people are deterred from seeking work despite the many benefits it offers beyond income, such as offering structure and purpose to life and contributing to society.

Prison leavers also face significant barriers to employment through discrimination and stigma from employers. According to our own research, 30% of employers say they would automatically exclude a candidate who declared an unspent conviction – even though just 15% said it was their organisation's policy to do so. We have found that it is extremely common for job offers to be rescinded when the employer finds out that the applicant has a conviction. Some women with convictions report to us that the prospect of disclosing is enough to make them not want to apply in the first place. That may mean someone stays unemployed or can hinder career progression. One woman with lived experience told us that *“the experience of constantly explaining yourself is enough to stay in a job just so that you don't have to disclose again.”*

Finally, we consistently see the shattering effect that the criminal justice system has on women's confidence which becomes its own barrier to employment. Confidence typically reflects preparedness, competence, and reliability and often leads to a more favourable impression overall during interviews. Moreover, confidence and self-belief are pivotal when advocating for yourself, such as when negotiating salaries or benefits.

### 3. How effective is the current support provision in helping individuals who spent time in custody find and sustain employment after leaving prison?

Specialist third sector services are often the most effective at helping them find and sustain employment. In section 4, we highlight the vital role of these organisations. However, considering statutory provision, the main source of employment support for prison leavers is accessed through Jobcentres, analysis of which comprises the rest of this section.

#### Gaps in training, understanding and empathy

Evidence from women with convictions and frontline staff at Working Chance reveal systemic gaps in Jobcentre staff training on supporting people with criminal records.

*“I've often been told by clients that their work coaches 'don't know what to do with them' ... They themselves don't know what types of jobs clients can go for, they don't know what spent convictions are, etc.”* - Keyworker at Working Chance

Many work coaches lack understanding of the complexity of criminal records and the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, making it difficult for them to provide meaningful guidance. This knowledge gap can have detrimental consequences, even encouraging people to apply to inappropriate roles:

*“There was a significant lack of knowledge about how my conviction impacted the types of jobs I could apply for. For example, I was encouraged to apply for retail management roles, despite having a theft conviction.”* - Woman with lived experience of the criminal justice system

Such misinformation from the people supporting them into employment erodes women's confidence in the system, leaving them feeling hopeless about their chances of finding work or staying engaged with their job searching.

*“My conviction led to other complexities, such as housing instability and mental health challenges. My work coach didn't understand that living in temporary supported accommodation meant I couldn't work more than 16 hours a week, and it had to be at minimum wage. Anything above that would require me to pay a significant amount towards housing benefit, which was unaffordable... It felt like my work coach didn't know how to support me.”* - Woman with lived experience of the criminal justice system

While some work coaches want to help more, the lack of mandatory training leaves a persistent knowledge gap. This knowledge gap can also be attributed to work coaches not asking claimants whether they have previous convictions or not. Clients consistently report that they were not asked about any past convictions,

leaving it up to them to disclose this information to their work coaches. Without knowing whether someone has a conviction, work coaches remain unaware of an individual's support needs and restrictions they may be subject to.

### Sanctions

Women tell us that work coaches impose sanctions - or threaten to do so - too quickly when they believe a Job Seeker's Agreement has been breached. Even when people have valid reasons for missing appointments, such as attending probation meetings, mandatory programmes, or carrying out unpaid work requirements, some Working Chance clients report feeling pressured and threatened with sanctions rather than feeling supported or encouraged. While clear guidelines exist for handling such situations (the Decision Makers' Guide), they are not always followed, leading to unnecessary financial hardship and anxiety for already vulnerable people.

One client we supported had a restraining order across multiple postcodes and could not attend an interview her work coach had arranged for her as it was in a restricted area. When she explained that she could not attend and would be at risk of being fined or returned to custody, the work coach simply told her that if she did not attend, she would be sanctioned. Another woman shared her recent experience of being threatened with a sanction, despite being on time for her online appointment:

*"I was meant to have a meeting [with my work coach] and was waiting on Zoom. I was waiting for a long time and was constantly messaging through the app asking where they were. After a few hours, I got a message asking why I did not turn up to the meeting and had to fight my way out of getting a sanction because they didn't turn up."* - Woman with lived experience of the criminal justice system

Both examples show how quick some work coaches can be to threaten sanctions, through no fault of the claimant. This approach disregards individual circumstances and fails to acknowledge the additional challenges faced by people with convictions.

### Power and punishment

The inherent power dynamic between work coach and claimant led women we support to draw parallels between Jobcentres and prison or probation. Women who have experience of the criminal justice system spoke with us about the power that work coaches have and the resulting anxiety it causes.

*"There is an anxiety that stays with you because more people have a hold over you. It doesn't matter to them if you don't know how you are going to feed your kids or pay your rent. It's the same as in prison - you are just a number."* - Woman with lived experience of the criminal justice system

Other clients have said they felt “triggered” by Jobcentres due to the punitive atmosphere and the presence of uniformed security guards. For many women with convictions, seeing security guards bring up past trauma or interactions with authority figures, such as arrest, sentencing, or experiences in custody which can trigger feelings of powerlessness, fear, and anxiety.

#### Understaffing

The chronic understaffing of Jobcentre Plus often prevents work coaches from being able to provide effective and meaningful support to claimants with convictions. High levels of staff turnover, staffing gaps, and unmanageable workloads have resulted in people feeling isolated and disconnected from their work coach. We frequently hear from clients that they have extremely short (ten-minute) meetings with their work coaches. This is an insufficient amount of time to provide any meaningful support to those seeking help from the Jobcentre.

Another implication of high levels of staff turnover is that women we support are frequently assigned a new work coach, forcing them to repeatedly disclose their convictions, which can be deeply traumatic and triggering.

#### Limited awareness and access to the Flexible Support Fund (FSF)

The Flexible Support Fund (FSF) is designed to help job seekers with extra costs associated with getting into and starting work. However, its discretionary nature and inconsistent application from work coaches creates barriers for those who need it. We regularly see instances where work coaches have denied FSF support despite women meeting the criteria or have failed to inform women about the fund when it would have significantly helped them.

One woman was struggling to find work as she did not have photo ID, yet her work coach initially refused to grant FSF support. She asked her work coach for five months to reconsider, but it was only when she escalated the matter to a manager that the FSF funding was granted. Another client’s application to the FSF took a long time being passed between staff as “*they were oblivious to its existence*”.

The FSF can be a lifeline to many people with convictions to get back into work by providing them with the necessary tools and documents. Work coaches must promote the FSF to people who need it, rather than gatekeeping it.

#### **4. Are there any interventions which have proven particularly successful in helping individuals who have been to prison in finding and sustaining employment?**

Third sector organisations hold specialist expertise and so are uniquely placed to support prison leavers to find and sustain employment. Unlike statutory services,

these organisations use person-centred, trauma-informed approaches and foster supportive and inclusive environments which build trust.

Working Chance has strong evidence of our impact in helping people with convictions into employment. From September 2023 to date, 88% of women we supported were still in their role after 12 months<sup>1</sup> proving that the large majority of women we support who find jobs stay in them.

Additionally, to measure the impact of our employability service we use Work Star, an Outcome Star tailored to our service. This provides pre- and post-intervention scores in 5 areas (Job skills & Experience, Aspiration and motivation, Job search skills, Stability, Health & wellbeing) for which the total score forms our operational definition of 'increased employability'. Using this measure, we saw 89% of women who received support from us improved in one or more of these areas. The change in scores between the pre- and post-readings was tested and found to be statistically significant to a 99% confidence level.

In addition to this, feedback from our client surveys shows the positive impact of our specialist intervention.

Feedback from our client survey:

- *"If it wasn't for Working Chance doing all of this work to get employers to consider and recruit us and give us a chance I don't think I'd be where I am now. I'd still be in that vicious circle."*
- *"I enjoyed working with [my keyworker] who made me feel comfortable talking about my criminal history and support with finding employment."*
- *"My key worker was fantastic! She was very supportive and really helpful with CV and disclosure but really helped with my confidence. I feel ready for a brighter future because of our relationship."*
- *"Working Chance were amazing... They listened to me, advised me in the right direction, put me on confidence building, CV building, interview exercises and experience to build up my confidence within myself. They really made me learn to not be embarrassed by my conviction and that I can move forward and that there is hope"*

Additionally, 93% of clients reported increased confidence in disclosing their convictions, 96% felt more confident to search and apply for jobs, and 100% felt more hopeful about the future.

## **5. What could the Mayor, local and central government do to help people who spent time in custody find and sustain employment?**

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<sup>1</sup> Of the women who responded to our in-work survey



To address the challenges faced by people with convictions in accessing and sustaining employment, there are several actions the London Mayor, local and central government can take.

Firstly, there must be increased funding for gender-specific services. Evidence shows that women-specific support services are extremely effective in supporting women with convictions. Women-specific organisations provide specialist support that addresses key issues like housing, mental ill-health, addiction and domestic violence – factors that hinder employment outcomes. Despite their impact, these services face fierce competition for limited funding opportunities, so greater investment is needed to maximise their effectiveness.

Secondly, we recommend that all work coaches in Jobcentres be adequately trained in supporting people with convictions and must be required to ask all claimants whether they have a conviction. This simple step would allow work coaches to better understand each person's circumstances and tailor their support accordingly. Without this information, work coaches risk missing important factors – such as licence restrictions – that can impact someone's employment options. Asking about convictions can ensure no one falls through the cracks and that everyone receives the support they need to find and sustain employment.

Thirdly, the London Mayor, local and central government must work to address the stigma and discrimination against people with convictions. Changing the narrative around what it means to have a conviction and challenging harmful stereotypes around people with convictions is essential to improving employment outcomes. For example, the Mayor of London can play a key role in leading this cultural shift by working with employers who already recruit people with convictions by showcasing positive experiences, such as “86% of employers who had previously recruited someone with a conviction reported a good experience”. They can also highlight employers' successes and encourage others to follow suit. The Mayor could also launch public awareness campaigns that promote positive stories of people with convictions to shift public perceptions. By using their platform, the Mayor could help create a more inclusive and supportive society for people with lived experience of the criminal justice system, making it easier for them to find and sustain employment.

### **To what extent do characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity affect the chances of Londoners who have served custodial sentences in the job market?**

Characteristics such as ethnicity, age, and gender significantly shape the employment prospects of Londoners who have served custodial sentences, with racially minoritised women facing the most severe disadvantages. As highlighted in



our research 'Worst Case Scenario', these intersecting identities – ie. being a racially minoritised women with a conviction – create unique barriers to re-entering the job market.

Ethnicity plays a crucial role in shaping employment outcomes upon release from prison. As we know, racially minoritised women are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and sentenced to harsher punishments than white women. Consequently, these women experience more prolonged barriers to employment due to longer times before their convictions become spent, requiring ongoing disclosures in job applications for longer. 'Worst Case Scenario' also found that racially minoritised women face barriers to career progression, volunteering, and apprenticeships, trapping those who do find work in underpaid or precarious jobs.

Gender also affects the chances of Londoners finding employment after serving custodial sentences. Specific and gendered barriers, particularly around childcare, can make finding work that accommodates caring responsibilities difficult. For example, many women struggle with the lack of flexible work options, the high cost and limited availability of childcare, and the continued expectation that women take on the majority of childcare responsibilities. These structural challenges are compounded by the psychological impact of the criminal justice system which often leaves women with extremely low confidence and self-belief. When applying for jobs, many women can undersell themselves in interviews, doubt their employability, or feel it necessary to settle for work that does not reflect their career aspirations or capabilities. Low confidence and self-belief also tend to manifest into feelings of shame, internalised stigma, and fear of judgement from employers, especially given the societal tendency to view women – particularly mothers – with convictions as morally unacceptable.

Older people also struggle with finding work after prison. For example, many older women within our service have been out of work for some time and can struggle with technology or online application forms. This is daunting and contributes to feelings of being out of touch with modern hiring practices. Also, older clients describe fears of ageism either in the workplace or in the recruitment phase. Many fear that their experience or qualifications may be overlooked in favour of younger candidates.

Age, gender and ethnicity all significantly affect the chances of people leaving prison find employment. These intersecting identities create unique and complex barriers when searching for work, with older racially minoritised women facing the most significant challenges.