



**Insights**  
*Report*

# Unlocking Potential

Employment Pathways  
for Prison Leavers  
in the UK



**We change lives. One individual at a time. And in the same way, we're going to change society. We lead the way in creating social value**

## UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS FOR PRISON LEAVERS IN THE UK

**Studies show that around 800 people per month leave prison with no home, no job and very little idea of where to begin to turn their lives around. Conversations with prison leavers reveal that the barriers to employment are often immediate and incredibly difficult to overcome.**

**Many employers remain hesitant to offer opportunities, and individuals frequently encounter stigma that undermines their confidence and chances during interviews.**

We know, however, that employment is one of the most powerful tools we have to reduce reoffending. A stable job provides more than just income, it offers purpose, structure, and a sense of belonging. Yet, for thousands of people leaving the justice system, the path to meaningful work is shaped by systemic barriers, fragmented support, and persistent societal stigma.

While employment is a powerful tool for reducing reoffending, its effectiveness is closely tied to the development of education, skills, and work readiness. Research such as the Five Prisons Paper highlights the transformative impact of structured learning and vocational training within custody. A deeper understanding of how these elements contribute to rehabilitation is essential—not just in prison, but through the transition into probation and community reintegration.

That scenario was the starting point for a roundtable convened by the Social Recruitment Advocacy Group (SRAG) earlier this year.

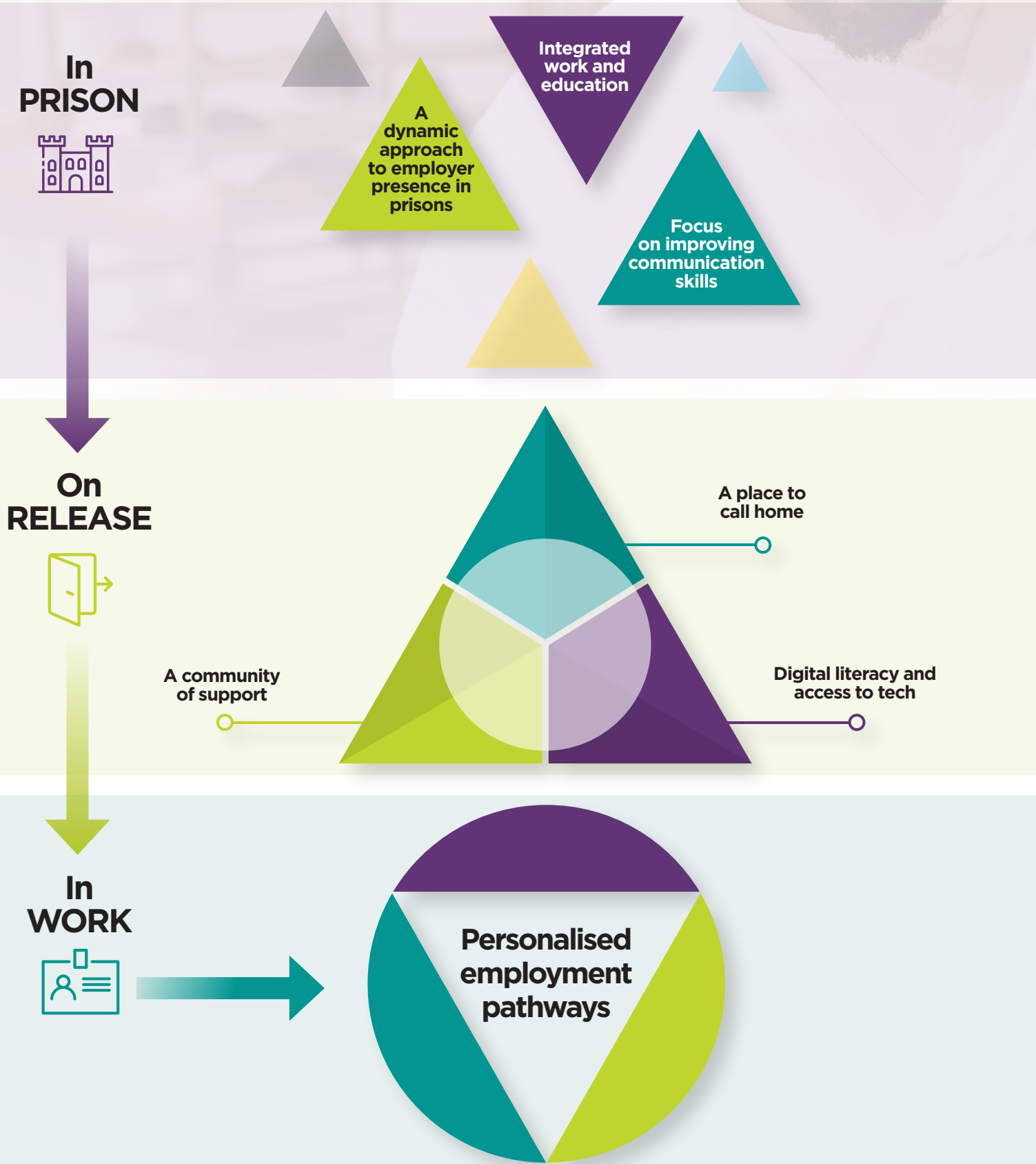
This paper draws on insights from the roundtable, recent UK employment data, as well as positive case studies from employers and individuals who are changing the way they recruit and support prison leavers within their organisations.

This paper ***Unlocking Potential: Employment Pathways for Prison Leavers in the UK*** sets out recommendations for the government and employers, along with a plan of action from the SRAG with a clear aim to create as many opportunities as possible for people leaving prison.



## Insights from Employers

The SRAG roundtable focused on the key barriers that prison leavers face when seeking employment. **“These barriers are more than numbers—they reflect the lived experiences of individuals striving to rebuild their lives after prison.”**



**Take Sarah\* for example.** After her release, she struggled with housing instability, moving from one temporary place of accommodation to another. Without a stable home, finding and keeping a job was nearly impossible. Her mental health suffered, and she felt overwhelmed by everyday tasks.

**John, another prison leaver leaving HMP Wandsworth,** faced a lack of digital access and struggles to get into work. With limited access to technology and digital skills, he found it difficult to search for jobs and apply online. Employers were uncertain about hiring him, and his confidence was at rock bottom. Facing stigma and systemic barriers, this story is not unique – and is a real challenge for rehabilitation into society.

This is an arbitrary choice of three months from last year. [Gov statistics detail 57,227 offenders released from custody in 2024\\*\\*](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024#releases) There are thousands of people like Sarah and like John who dream of a better future, for that to happen we need to recognise the **pivotal role that employers play in the rehabilitation journey of prison leavers.** By offering meaningful employment opportunities, they do more than fill vacancies, they help individuals rebuild their lives, restore dignity, and reintegrate into society. A stable job provides structure, purpose, and financial independence, all of which are proven to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. When employers commit to inclusive hiring practices and create supportive work environments, they become agents of change, unlocking potential, strengthening communities, and contributing to a safer, more equitable society. This type of supportive employment environment does require a different approach which builds trust into the relationship. On their own, traditional employer engagement methods, such as job fairs, often lack the depth needed to build meaningful connections. A more dynamic approach—such as immersive workshops, mentoring schemes, and co-designed training—can better prepare individuals for the realities of work and foster trust between employers and prison leavers.

To enable employers to play their vital role in rehabilitation, it's essential to recognise the equally important contributions of probation services and community organisations. These support systems; providing housing, transport, and personal guidance must be integrated into the employment pathway. Without this coordination, employers may lack the confidence to recruit, and prison leavers may lack the stability needed to succeed in work.

A more integrated approach between prison education and probation services will also help to evaluate “what works” in terms of sustained employment outcomes. By tracking individuals across the justice pathway, we can begin to identify which interventions—educational, vocational, or relational—are most helpful in securing long-term work and reducing reoffending.

## Case Study

### Timpson – Unlocking Potential Through Second Chances

Timpson, a well-known UK service retailer, has earned national recognition for its commitment to employing prison leavers. Approximately 10% of its workforce is made up of individuals recruited directly from prison, reflecting the company's belief in rehabilitation and second chances. Timpson works closely with the prison system to identify candidates who are ready to reintegrate into society, offering them meaningful employment, training, and support. This not only helps reduce reoffending rates but also provides individuals with a renewed sense of purpose and stability.

## Case Study

### Greggs – Fresh Start for Prison Leavers

Greggs, the UK's popular bakery chain, has been a leading example in supporting prison leavers through its **Fresh Start programme**. Recognising the potential in individuals with past convictions, Greggs has actively recruited ex-offenders, offering them structured employment opportunities and a chance to rebuild their lives. In 2022, the company joined the government's **Employment Advisory Board** initiative, working directly with prisons to ensure individuals are job-ready upon release. Roisin Currie, Greggs' CEO, highlighted the “passion and energy” that prison leavers bring to the workplace, reinforcing the company's belief in second chances. By integrating these individuals into its workforce, Greggs not only helps reduce reoffending but also strengthens its own team with motivated and loyal employees.

These examples show that with the right support, prison leavers can thrive and so can the businesses that employ them. **What we need to do is provide more support to employers so that they benefit from prison leavers within their talent selection process.**

\* Sarah is a young mother, released from HMP Drake Hall whose name has been changed.

\*\* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-october-to-december-2024#releases>



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## CREATING THE RIGHT EMPLOYMENT LANDSCAPE FOR PRISON LEAVERS: A STRATEGIC RATIONALE

To build a more inclusive and supportive employment landscape for prison leavers, we must address both the systemic barriers they face and the opportunities for employers to engage meaningfully. The recommendations outlined below are grounded in the insights shared at the April 2025 Employer Roundtable and reflect the collective ambition of employers, justice experts, and social value leaders to drive real change.

### 01 Develop a Cross-Programme Candidate Referral Scheme

Currently, many employer-led prison leaver programmes operate in silos, limiting the potential for scale and consistency. By introducing a set of agreed quality standards, developed by industry partners, and an accompanying 'stamp of assurance' we can build trust across sectors and enable cross-referral between partners. This would allow employers to confidently offer guaranteed interviews to candidates from accredited schemes, streamlining access to talent and reinforcing inclusive hiring practices.

### 02 Incentivise Employers

Financial incentives have proven effective in shifting employer behaviour. The government's National Insurance holiday for veterans is a prime example, by reducing the cost of hiring, it has helped increase employment rates among ex-service personnel. A similar 12-month NIC holiday for prison leavers would send

a strong signal of support, reduce perceived risk, and encourage more employers to open their doors. Coupled with the Social Value Model in procurement, this would reward businesses that invest in second chances.

### 03 Strengthen Employer Support

Stigma remains a significant barrier. Many employers lack the knowledge or confidence to recruit prison leavers, despite the proven benefits. An industry-led national employer programme, building on the work of organisations like Working Chance and Clean Sheet, would provide practical guidance, challenge misconceptions, and showcase success stories. A central knowledge bank of case studies and data would further empower employers to make informed, inclusive decisions.

### 04 Address Structural Barriers

Employment cannot be sustained without addressing the practical challenges prison leavers face on release. Lack of stable housing, digital access, and transport can derail even the most promising job offer. Piloting employer-led befriending schemes and streamlining processes like DBS checks and Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) would ease the transition and improve retention. These are not just social interventions, they are smart investments in workforce stability and public safety.

### 05 A Job-Matching Platform for Prison Leavers

Prison leavers often struggle to access employment opportunities that are tailored to their circumstances and potential. Many jobs advertised can be from employers who do not recruit prison leavers. A dedicated platform, backed by Government, with roles advertised by companies with a policy of recruiting those who have been in the criminal justice system would prioritise a "jobseeker-first" approach, avoiding the historical bias embedded in many public recruitment datasets, where candidates are screened out if they have served a custodial or community sentence.

To ensure fairness and legal compliance, any AI used must include bias audits, human oversight, and regular review. A government-backed pilot of this approach could demonstrate how technology can empower prison leavers, reduce discrimination, and help employers find motivated, overlooked talent.



# CONCLUSION

The employment of people who leave prison is not just a justice issue – **it's an economic and social opportunity.**

With over £18 billion lost annually to reoffending, investing in employment pathways is both a moral and fiscal imperative. By aligning employer support, policy incentives, and lived experience, we can unlock the potential of thousands of individuals and build safer, more inclusive communities.

Employment plays a central role in the desistance model—not just as a source of income, but as a gateway to social inclusion. It helps individuals build autonomy, links effort to reward and supports a reintegration back into societal norms. However, work is only viable when basic needs are met: stable housing, access to technology, and a supportive network of professionals and peers. Employers like those participating in the Justice Recruitment Advocacy Group (a sub-committee of the SRAG) are demonstrating how effective this relational approach is in helping prison leavers build new social networks and create lasting change.



How can employers take action?

Sign the [Social Recruitment Covenant](#)



Join the [Social Recruitment Advocacy Group](#)



Or to discuss the report in more detail and take further action on the recommendations email [engagement@peopleplus.co.uk](mailto:engagement@peopleplus.co.uk)



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