

Improving employment outcomes for women leaving prison

This paper draws on feedback from Clinks members working with women in contact with the criminal justice system, exploring the barriers faced by women leaving prison or with criminal records when attempting to secure employment opportunities. It follows on from a Clinks presentation at the most recent Women in the Criminal Justice System Expert Group meeting that set out these barriers and provides a range of practical recommendations as to how these barriers can be reduced. To feed back on this paper please contact sam.julius@clinks.org

The barriers to employment pre- and post-release

- 1. Restrictive employer-matching/lack of appropriate pathways reflecting individualised/tailored need:** for women coming out of prison (or those with criminal records), there remains a concern that pathways to employment are restricted to the large employers known for their work in this space, such as Timpson's, Greggs, and Pret. These organisations do brilliant work but are not the right option for all women seeking employment.
 - There must therefore be a recognition that each woman will be at a different stage of their journey
 - Some women will be "work ready", whereas others will be further away from the labour market and will require additional, more holistic support to ensure that all of their unmet needs are addressed
 - Employment opportunities should be match-based, taking into account the specific needs of each woman:
 - o What does that person want? For example, they may wish to work on a self-employed basis on release
 - o What are their aspirations?
 - o What is realistic?
 - o These questions should act as the starting point for addressing employment-related needs
- 1. Patchy/poor pre-employment work/pre-release planning:** this is a common concern raised by the sector. Despite additional resources – ensuring women have ID and a bank account on release, for example – women are still leaving prison without the basic requirements to get a job.



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- An additional “pre-release barrier” is that created by the Universal Credit System, which prevents women coming out of prison from applying for Universal Credit before release (this is not restricted to the women’s estate). This can greatly exacerbate financial stress and uncertainty upon release, causing potential barriers around accessing settled accommodation.
2. **Information sharing and coordination of support:** the resettlement space is a complex ecosystem with many organisations providing support in a vast array of areas meaning that there isn’t always clarity on what support is available; this, understandably, can be incredibly overwhelming for women coming out of prison, particularly women presenting with often complex, and overlapping needs.
 - Additional Government focus in this area – through the hiring of Prison Employment Leads (PELs) and new Heads of Education, Skills & Work (HESWs), and through the setting up of Employment Advisory Boards (EABs) and employment hubs in prison – is hugely welcome, though risks making an already complex picture even murkier.
 3. **Barriers relating to the disclosure of criminal records:** navigating the disclosure system remains difficult for many women coming out of prison; this ties in with issues around pre-release planning and requires a greater focus on explaining disclosure in the run-up to release to ensure women understand what they have to disclose/whether they have to disclose.
 - As the changes to disclosure periods, included as part of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act 2022, have yet commence, the sooner these changes come into force the sooner they can be effective for women in the community.
 4. **Siloed employment support:** women often present with multiple unmet needs on release from prison - including issues related to trauma, criminal/sexual exploitation, childcare responsibilities or the need for more practical support (e.g. settled accommodation), and the support in place must reflect this; there is, therefore, a pressing requirement to ensure that employment support is not offered separately to addressing this range of needs.

Proposals

1. **Well-planned and managed prison and community employment events** – with a focus on briefing and training employers alongside the work being done with job seekers.
 - These events – both in prison and in the community – must not be restricted to prison-employer engagement given probation’s vital role in supporting, particularly women, into employment given the distance to travel on release for many women leaving prison



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- The events must be held regularly and with continued and extensive follow-up with employers
 - Participants in these events should be made aware of, ahead of time, which employers are attending and the types of jobs that are available/the skills that employers are seeking
 - This should be supported by closer coordination with voluntary organisations working in this space to ensure that the women in prison have a much better understanding of the content of these sessions; [A Fairer Chance](#) do particularly effective work in this space
 - Interactions at these events need to be consistently registered and tracked with responsibility lying with the Prison Employment Lead
 - Each individual prison must maintain a database of local employers that will hire women coming out of prison (more below).
2. **Employment registers:** in combination with the first point, extensive and regularly updated local employment registers (attached to each woman's prison) would help to support prisons ensure that they have a clear picture of local employers hiring prison leavers, as well as providing real-time information on local skills gaps.
- These registers would take into account the fact that women are often serving custodial sentences in prisons away from where they resettled to on release, so will require close coordination between prisons
 - The registers must also ensure that they incorporate small and medium-sized employer representation.
3. **Extensive employer engagement on hiring women with convictions:** we urge the department to provide further support in educating employers on fair and safe recruitment practices.
4. **Embedding clearly established best practice across all resettlement activity:** covering both pre- and post-release activity that supports women into sustainable employment on release.
- For example, Working Chance do brilliant work on disclosure and helping women to navigate the complexity of the system
 - We must ensure that this expertise is leveraged by the department and embedded within the working practices of HMPPs, as well as being completed in a timely manner, ahead of release.
5. **Bolstering support helping women to navigate the disclosure regime:** there needs to be consideration of several factors related to the disclosure regime, including:
- Greater support for ban the box
 - More stringent rules on unlawful higher level DBS checks (which have a disproportionate impact on women)



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- An amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill that will legislate for pardons/erasure for women whose convictions relate to either sexual or criminal exploitation.
6. **Employment Advisory Boards (EABs) to engage with the voluntary sector delivering in this space:** given that the voluntary sector working to support women coming out of prison has the experience and knowledge to ensure that the EABs are working as effectively as possible.
7. **Clear lines of accountability and delineation of responsibilities:** it is vital that, for organisations supporting women coming out of prison or women with criminal records, that the roles and responsibilities of the new postholders (such as the PELs) are clearly defined and that information is shared promptly with the relevant organisations; priority must be given to ensuring that the new systems and responsible individuals have clear lines of accountability along with a clear picture of the range of support that exists on release (more information below) to ensure the efficient coordination and integration of support; within this, effective information sharing with organisations delivering services is vital. Further:
- We recommend that the training package for the new PELs is published, alongside the KPIs contained within the role
 - HMPPS to share details of postholders with Clinks in order to connect them with the necessary information regarding relevant sector events, to include them on relevant sector mailing lists and to connect them with the wider sector.
8. **Mapping of support both pre- and post-release:** the work of the PELs and HESWs would be bolstered by greater clarity around the support that is available in the run up to and post-release.
- We would therefore recommend a mapping exercise – for each women’s prison – ensuring that staff, both in prison and in the community, have sight of the entire range of support that exists for women coming out of prisons
 - This work would build on Clinks’ existing directory of services and ensure that all women in prison – both pre- and post-release – have access to the information and services that they need
 - Through continued Clinks-HMPPS collaboration, the availability of this directory will be communicated to all relevant staff in prison, in the community, to the women themselves, as well as to the organisations delivering in this space (to ensure that the entire range of services on offer are incorporated into the directory)
 - We also wish to highlight the work of the National Women’s Justice Coalition in developing a women-specific directory for services – for women in contact with the criminal justice system – ensuring ease of access for services that women need; this will take the form of a public facing website and will launch at the end of July



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- More timely access to people in prison ahead of release in light of an increased level of referrals to women's CRSs, with demand – according to HMIP – higher than anticipated; the same HMIP report also stated referral processes are 'often not well understood' – especially for women – with probation and provider staff having different views on the level of intervention needed
 - We therefore recommend continued focus on increasing the period of pre-release contact.
- 9. A voluntary sector coordinator in each women's prison to support in both the production and coordination of improved pre-release work.**
- Modelled on the now defunct partnerships manager role which was responsible for coordinating external agencies going into prison
 - Whilst drawing on best practice established through Women in Prison's Creating Community Connections (CCC) project – which created two link worker roles in HMP Styal, linking women in prison with the necessary resettlement support ahead of their release; these roles were developed through a model created by the Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance
 - The learnings from the CCC project – which has now progressed to the piloting of a reformulated link worker role in 6 women's prisons (with a specific focus on domestic violence and abuse) – would inform the piloting of a new voluntary sector coordinator embedded in each women's prison combining responsibility for linking together existing support whilst ensuring that it is easily accessible for all women ahead of release.
- 10. Increased access to education, training, and work experience opportunities for women while in custody:** including through:
- A greater focus on neurodiversity (including those with acquired brain injuries) in order to improve outcomes for neurodivergent women within the criminal justice system
 - This requires a cross-government approach bringing together the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Education
 - The increased use of ROTL
 - Ensuring access to laptops in prisons along with other relevant digital capabilities.
- 11. Collecting and publishing women-specific data:** on employment outcomes, as well as data on intersectional experiences and outcomes.
- 12. Addressing the barriers to the effective resettlement of women:** including through reforms to the Universal Credit system to mitigate against financial insecurity/uncertainty on release.



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- We recommend that steps are taken to ensure that women (and all prison leavers) are able to submit their application for Universal Credit before they are released.
13. **Renewed focus on community sentencing options for women:** so that robust alternatives are available to sentencers weighing up custodial or community options.
- This must incorporate the effective and greater use of tools at the disposal of sentencers, including community sentence treatment requirements, given the clear and well-established evidence available illustrating the importance of access to high quality treatment in the reduction of re-offending.