

Welsh Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Prisons in Wales, HC 101

Wednesday 13 March 2024

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Stephen Crabb (Chair); Virginia Crosbie; Ruth Jones; Ben Lake; Mr Rob Roberts; Beth Winter.

Questions 136-189

Witnesses

I: Nicky Park, Director of Criminal Justice and Women's Services Development, St Giles Trust; and Yvonne Thomas, CEO, The Clink.

II: Darren Burns, Director of Diversity & Inclusion, Timpson Group; Tony Hughes, Commercial Director, Williams Homes (Bala) Limited; and David Abraham, Managing Director, Fulcrum Scaffold Safety & Training Limited.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Yvonne Thomas](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nicky Park and Yvonne Thomas.

Q136 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this session of the Welsh Affairs Committee. We are continuing our inquiry into prisons in Wales. I am delighted that we are joined by Nicky Park from St Giles Trust, which works with disadvantaged people, including people who come into contact with the criminal justice system, and Yvonne Thomas, chief executive of The Clink Charity, which does work at several prisons in Wales.

I will start the session by asking a very general question, starting with Ms Park. Describe how your organisation works with prisoners in Wales. What does that look like practically?

Nicky Park: We do a number of different things within the prison estate. We have the probation contact—the CRS contract for personal wellbeing across Wales for young adults and adult males. That is providing support within custody on things like family support and emotional wellbeing, but also on social inclusion, which is basically a through-the-gate element of the contract. That is across all the prisons in Wales.

We also deliver our peer adviser programme in Cardiff and Berwyn. That is training people in custody to support other people in custody and to gain a level 3 qualification in advice and guidance. But it is about more than just giving advice and guidance on resettlement support; it is also providing emotional wellbeing support to take pressure off officers and things like that. It provides support on basic things like completing applications, but it is also giving advice on housing and benefits and what they are entitled to and providing support on what to expect when they are released from someone who has been there and gone through similar experiences. We find that very valuable.

At HMP Berwyn we also provide ROTL support. We were the first to receive ROTLs out of HMP Berwyn and they work with our community services. In Wrexham we have the Pantry, which supports the local community. A number of men are working and gaining their level 3 qualification and are also in paid employment with us on ROTL.

Chair: What is ROTL?

Nicky Park: Release on temporary licence. Apologies for any acronyms.

Q137 **Chair:** It is just to get that on the record. You say that you work in all the prisons in Wales. Does that come as a job-lot contract with the prison service? Or are there individual contracts for each prison?

Nicky Park: No, they are a job lot. When the CRS—the community rehabilitation services—were commissioned in 2021, the personal wellbeing contract was done for Wales and the young adults was done as a separate contract. It is to work with men being released in Wales and those who are in custody. It is pan-Wales.



Q138 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Yvonne Thomas of The Clink Charity, can you give us an update on the work you do with prisoners in Wales?

Yvonne Thomas: We work in Cardiff and Swansea prisons, basically training people to become hospitality professionals. We work in the prison kitchens and are effectively a virtual college. We are a City and Guilds accrediting body. We deliver pre and post-release support into employment and accommodation for anyone who has trained with us and there is no limit to that support. The work in Wales of that nature is 100% charitably funded.

We also administer the Wales Turn2us fund, which is not just for our own students and graduates. That is a great fund for people in prison and on probation who are either in or returning to Wales. It is grant funding and it helps towards the cost of supporting accommodation and employment. We can award up to three months' rent—a rent deposit. We have bought people bicycles so they can get to work. We can buy them a mobile phone. It is very much our support workers on the ground who make that determination.

Finally, because there are no women's prisons or APs in Wales, we train women who are returning to Wales. In the last year that has been at Styal, where we have a major training site, and Eastwood Park, where we also have a number of training programmes. We have had women in Downview, where we have a professional training kitchen, and HMP Send in Surrey. Our support staff in England will identify them as returners to Wales, hand them over to our team in Wales and that is what we do. That is part of the bigger charity. We operate in 36 or 37 prisons across England and Wales. We trained and supported about 800 people last year.

Chair: Thank you very much. That is a very helpful introduction.

Q139 **Ruth Jones:** Good morning, ladies. Thank you very much for coming in this morning. It is good to see you. I will talk to Ms Thomas first about The Clink. I have been to The Clink in Cardiff and it was brilliant. It was a very enjoyable experience, but it closed in March 2023 as a result of the charitable funding being withdrawn. Is that right?

Yvonne Thomas: After 10 years of operation. We had a 10-year lease with HMPPS and its predecessors. My understanding is that the requirement from HMPPS was to repurpose that space as a visitor centre and therefore the lease was not renewed.

Q140 **Ruth Jones:** Is the Swansea lease also due for renewal, in 2025?

Yvonne Thomas: It is not a lease in Swansea. We wanted to retain a presence in Wales because we have been part of the Welsh rehabilitation efforts for so many years. We chose and through agreement went into Cardiff and Swansea prisons. They are not contracted. We are there and it is fully charitably funded. There is no Government funding for either of those projects. That charitable funding will run out in about March 2025.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q141 **Ruth Jones:** Thank you for clarifying that, but what happens then?

Yvonne Thomas: Unless there is replacement funding available from somewhere, there will be no Clink presence in Wales.

Q142 **Ruth Jones:** Do you see that as an issue? You are across England and Wales at the moment.

Yvonne Thomas: Yes. We like to spread our rehabilitation efforts wherever they are best placed. Wales has always been a very strong place for us to operate in and we were very disappointed when the restaurant closed. It was our biggest training site in England and Wales. We will work very hard to raise the sort of funding that will be needed to keep a good and meaningful presence in Wales. We still keep a team there and we support people from the estate in England who are returning to Wales, and I cannot see that there will not be a need for that going forward. The rehabilitation offer is fundamentally an unlimited support offer post-release, so we support people for as long as they need support, and we cannot do that effectively if we don't also cover Wales because so many people are held in England.

Q143 **Ruth Jones:** That support is post-prison across Wales?

Yvonne Thomas: Yes. We support wherever people are released to. From Styal we quite commonly have women going back to north Wales. From Eastwood Park it is normally south and mid Wales, and I think we had a woman from Bridgend in Send and a woman from Swansea in Downview. We do support back in Wales.

Ruth Jones: Thank you very much. I will hand back to the Chair.

Q144 **Chair:** Before I bring in Rob, the charity is very famous for the restaurant it had in Cardiff, which was obviously outside the wall so the public could go in there. I ate there a couple of times about 10 years ago and had very good visits. I think there was some misapprehension, when it was reported that the restaurant was closing, that it was The Clink Charity no longer carrying on work. What you have explained is that a large body of work is carrying on with prisoners. How many restaurants that have members of the public coming into them do you have around the UK?

Yvonne Thomas: There is another three. We have 37-odd projects. We have the three restaurants, two of which are open to the public for booking and one of which is open to party bookings. There are about 30 Clink kitchens in various prisons where we train people who are cooking for the other prisoners. They are fully vocationally qualified at the end of that with City and Guilds. They all get the support model. Then we have an events business that provides very high-order events to places like the Guildhall and St Paul's and so on. That runs out of Downview women's prison in Surrey.

Q145 **Chair:** As it stands today, there is no Clink kitchen in any of the Welsh prisons.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Yvonne Thomas: There is a Clink kitchen where we teach other prisoners in HMP Cardiff and HMP Swansea.

Chair: Okay, understood, but it is no longer the restaurant that was open to the public. Thank you, that is very helpful.

Q146 **Mr Rob Roberts:** Good morning. Before I go into my question, which is about the population increase in prisons, Nicky was talking earlier about qualifications and you mentioned level 3 a couple of times. Just for everyone's benefit, because more people watch this online than "Match of the Day" throughout the country, where does level 3 sit? Is that a GCSE?

Nicky Park: It is the equivalent of two A-levels.

Mr Rob Roberts: Really?

Nicky Park: Yes. Level 3 is the highest qualification, outside of Open University, that you can do while in custody. Most education providers in the prison estate only offer up to level 2.

Q147 **Mr Rob Roberts:** Fabulous. That has cleared that up. On the population increase, we have been told that over the last few years the prison population has increased in size and its needs are growing more urgent and more complex, with mental health issues and all the things that come with that. What effect have developments like the population increase had on the work that you do with prisoners in Wales?

Nicky Park: Not only do we have an increasing prison population, but with that we also have more people who are transferred out of their local prisons and are then further away from home, which makes it a lot more challenging to be able to provide through-the-gate support. Often, not only are they transferred further away from home, but potentially they are still on short sentences and referrals come at very short notice. Being able to provide support, book legal visits—if we are even able to book legal visits—or do video links to receive and give support can be particularly challenging.

Not only have we seen an increase in the prison population, but I think we can safely say that we have seen a reduction in prison staff and that has also had a significant impact. We have seen higher levels of lockdown and split regimes, which have had a huge impact on people being able to access things like education. There is not enough provision for people to receive that element of support while in custody. If you have all of those barriers and you are expecting to be able to provide a rehabilitative service and support to those who are in custody, it becomes even more challenging.

You have crowded environments. There are not enough spaces within education for people to receive the support. Therefore you have waiting lists and high numbers of people potentially not being able to access those services because they are not being unlocked. If they are on a short sentence, the reality is that by the time a space becomes available



HOUSE OF COMMONS

they have been either released or transferred. Those are some of the challenges you face.

Q148 Mr Rob Roberts: Do you find there is a backlog—that there are a lot more people who want to engage with your services than you have spaces available?

Nicky Park: Yes, especially with the peer programme that we run. I think that within prisons you have such an amazing untapped resource and some hugely great transferable skills within the men's and the female estate. We find that there are so many people in the prisons who want to give back, want to provide support and do something purposeful with their time while they are there, especially those who are serving slightly longer sentences. Our programme is not funded through the Government; it is not statutorily funded. It is funded through either ourselves or charitable trusts.

We can provide only a certain number of courses and we always have a waiting list of men who want to do it. Not only is it something where they are using their time valuably while they are in custody and providing support to their peers, but they are also getting a qualification and transferable skills. We have had people from the construction industry who have done it and are not planning on being a caseworker when they are released, but it is something valuable for them to do with their time in custody.

We also have links in the community where we have employed people ourselves, and 66% of our staff in St Giles as an organisation have similar lived experience and 40% of those have criminal convictions. We are an active employer and we provide that support when they come out into the community. They can come and apply wherever we have a service in England or Wales, but we also have links with other voluntary organisations where we provide placements, references and links. It is valuable for people in custody to know that there is not just support in custody, but there is a real valuable, tangible opportunity when they are released, and support around that.

Q149 Mr Rob Roberts: On the subject of overcrowding, and not only where we are now, am I right in thinking that there are 88,000 in the prison estate and it will be potentially 10% more by this time next year? What are your thoughts on how big a problem that will be and how it will affect your work?

Yvonne Thomas: I echo much of what Nicky said. We are a qualification and employability-based charity, because that is what affects rehabilitation quite significantly. To get an NVQ level 2, which is what we deliver, takes between four and eight or nine months, typically.

Mr Rob Roberts: Again, just for the understanding, what is level 2?

Yvonne Thomas: It is GCSE grades A to C. We need a certain amount of time. We need stability for that person to attend learning and we find



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that prisoners are being moved at short notice to other establishments so they can't necessarily complete their qualifications. It is a bit of wasted time and effort and it is really demotivational for the individuals. If we can't track them down or they are not moving to a place that has Clink training, the chances of them being able to complete are nil. They are also losing the pre and post-release support at that point. That is the first thing we have noticed.

The second thing we have noticed is that our vocational training places in prisons are not being filled. We run at about 70% occupancy because staff in prisons are so under pressure that doing the assessments and the allocations to make sure that those places can be filled is one of the things that drops off the edges when there are time pressures. There are constant competing pressures for prison officer resources.

We see both of those as quite big challenges that are beyond our ability to control or manage. They are directly as a result of the prison population pressures and also the staffing pressures, although in Wales the staffing pressures are not as great and the quality of staff we engage with seems to be higher on the whole than we see in England. There is more stability in Wales.

Q150 Mr Rob Roberts: We will talk more about transfers later, but about 15% of all the people in prison in Wales are on remand. How much of a problem is that for delivery?

Yvonne Thomas: We used not to train people on remand at all. It got to the stage where it is such a large percentage of the prison population that a few months ago we extended our criteria. We now train people on remand awaiting conviction in Cardiff and Swansea and we do it elsewhere in the country as well. To do that we have looked at our curriculum so that we can offer slightly shorter qualifications and we try to accelerate people through those qualifications. As soon as they either go to court and get a conviction, and get their sentence, they may well be sent to another prison. We try to make sure that they exit with something, but it has had quite an effect on us in the way we have had to configure delivery and get people through.

Nicky Park: One of the other challenges for those on remand is that under the CRS services that probation is providing, remands did not come up to the criteria when they were commissioned in 2021. For the personal wellbeing contracts that we deliver, remands do not come into scope. One of the challenges is that either someone has been on remand for a long time and due to backlogs and things like that they often get time served and then they are released with nothing, or they might have a week left to serve and then a quick and rushed referral is made and you are trying to find capacity to go and see them for an emergency referral. You find a significant number of men being released with very little or no support at all simply because they spent a large amount of time on remand. That is a huge opportunity to provide some important resettlement and rehabilitation support.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Rob Roberts: That would seem to be the biggest crack through which people fall.

Nicky Park: Yes, but fortunately through the recommissioning exercise that has happened with the market engagement, remands are now in scope. Those on remand are not a new phenomenon, so it is slightly frustrating that they are ignored.

Q151 **Mr Rob Roberts:** The length of remand is rather new though, isn't it?

Nicky Park: I would love to say that, but I have 19 years of working within criminal justice, and when I first started in Brixton prison on the landings I would come across men who had served a year on remand. It is not new. It is absolutely more frequent now, but there have always been delays in getting sentencing and court dates and very little support for those on remand and it has been the case. There has always been an excuse or a reason behind why people on remand are not entitled to support.

Q152 **Beth Winter:** Why do you think there has been an increase in the numbers on remand, and what would resolve that? I think I know the answer but you are the experts. If somebody is fortunate enough to be able to access employment and training in prison, I am interested in how that impacts their ability to find employment on release. From my experience, there is such a lot of stigma attached to leaving prison, unfortunately. It is very difficult for former prisoners to access it. What is that link for their release?

Yvonne Thomas: Obviously a backlog built up during covid when courts were closed, and then there were the added pressures of the various strikes from the legal professionals, which has contributed to a big backlog. It is just what it is, I guess.

On the support into employment, we have a very good network of employers in Wales. Our pre and post-support and resettlement model basically matches our Clink graduates who are ready for work—because not all are coming straight out of prison—with employers that we work with. Our support workers support both the employer and the graduate coming out. We put 52% of supported graduates into work last year and they stay in work because of that support model. They may need that level of support for three months, one month, 18 months. It does not matter to us, they just get it: they get what they need and so does the employer.

We have a national employer manager who is based in Wales and is the former manager of our Clink restaurant in Cardiff. He is the one who goes out, approaches hospitality and food production employers, explains the benefits of working with people who have an offending background and happen to have fantastic training and qualifications now as well. We probably have more jobs that we could put graduates into than we have



graduates, but not everyone is ready to work when they come out of prison. That is how we do it and it seems to work pretty well.

Nicky Park: It is similar for us. If we are working with someone, especially through the peer programme, and they want to follow that path in the community, we have networks that we utilise, as well as our own services, to provide those opportunities. It is an easier transition to make for anyone who is linked in with an organisation that provides in-custody and through-the-gate community support. Often things get missed for those who are linked in or attend education or do other kinds of training courses, but there is not the through-the-gate element. It is often because people forget that life admin and just life gets in the way. When you are in custody you do not have the same kind of challenges.

I remember working with one gentleman who had served a very long sentence and his family had shielded him from a lot of those issues. Then of course he was released and they were like, "Right, now it is on you," and suddenly life became very hard. The employment opportunities that we had set up—and he was set up to work with us—we needed to put a hold on and say, "We will just put him in that for now," because there were so many other things that he needed to do first to get used to suddenly being back out into the community and what that meant.

There are so many times where that is forgotten. People have all the best intentions in the world when they are in custody and you know that they truly mean them, but then they walk through the gate and there is that shift. Often there needs to be wraparound pastoral support for them that recognises that you cannot just expect someone to have woken up Monday morning in HMP Berwyn and walk through the gate at 10 in the morning a free-ish man and then Tuesday morning walk into a job. It is unrealistic for us to put that expectation on someone, especially if that person might not have worked a legitimate day and might not understand what a professional expectation is.

A lot of work needs to be done around employability, building up self-esteem and confidence, ensuring that people understand what is expected, and what is the real world. Prison does not provide that. We have had people who have had paid work on release on temporary licence for over a year, but that is still a shelter. Then they are released and suddenly they have to pay rent, work out their bills, budget and go food shopping, all of those kinds of things that suddenly become a lot. The transition works very well when you have organisations that are both sides of the gate, but if you don't, the reliance on someone to dig deep can be a particular challenge.

Chair: Thank you. That is very helpful.

Q153 **Virginia Crosbie:** Thank you for coming today. I want to ask you about covid-19 and how the pandemic impacted you in providing support. Is it business as usual now?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Yvonne Thomas: We continued with a very small amount of training, primarily in Brixton in England, but we were unable to deliver any training in Wales during the covid period. Post covid we opened the training projects in Cardiff and Swansea because the restaurant had closed by then. Nationally we are absolutely back in full swing with a vengeance now.

Nicky Park: Pre-covid was a time when CRCs were still in existence, so Transforming Rehabilitation was all there. Probation had not come back together—it had not reunified. Through covid everything that was being delivered in custody became particularly challenging. It was not in the same way you had in the community. In custody, all services needed to be delivered in custody to be able to provide that rehabilitation support. That was particularly challenging. You were not able to have the same access because men were not out. A lot of things had to be done in cells. You had to create almost in-cell advice packs and things such as that, which we did, and in order to continue with elements of training, we transferred it into in-cell learning. We have continued using those today to be able to provide additional support to complement in-person training.

Coming out of covid-19, one of the challenges was, as I said earlier, the fact that there are more lockdowns, so it has more of an impact. One of the good things that has come out of it is the use of technology in a slightly better way. Before covid-19, I think we were stuck in the dark ages within working in prisons, whereas now Teams works in a prison. Who knew? Things like that have benefited and helped with being able to bring external organisations almost into the prison without them having to physically come in. In those areas it has worked well. Now it is business as usual. The prisons are probably pretty much back to their new normal, but we have been able to take a lot of the learning and create a new way of working that works well.

Q154 **Virginia Crosbie:** Thank you. Yvonne, on the post-covid learnings that Nicky mentioned, we had a lot of evidence talking about things such as mental health and self-harming and how we can provide support going forward. What have been your learnings?

Yvonne Thomas: The length of time it took to remobilise. Prisons were locked down for an awful lot longer than the rest of us. They came out very late. It was almost the forgotten part of the pandemic. It was challenging. I think that now, if we were faced with something similar, it would be helpful to have a remobilisation plan ready with all the partners that work in a prison to set the expectation of how long it should take to return to pre-incident levels. While I would agree that the access to technology in prisons has moved from the dark ages, it has probably moved into the middle ages. Giving access to technology, virtual workshops, teaching environments and so on would make a terrific difference. That is still problematic.

Q155 **Ruth Jones:** Following on from Virginia Crosbie's question, I am looking



at the link between education and training. We had a good visit to HMP Cardiff recently and we saw some of the digital technology, such as iPads and things like that, in cells as well as in the education centre, and almost like passports that can go with the prisoner when they transfer—I am sure you will tell me whether that is a good idea. We were told that a lot of prisoners turn up unable to read or write. Getting them to be able to read a story or a book is a massive step. To what extent does that lack of prior education hamper your ability to train and take people forward?

Yvonne Thomas: If you are teaching people to be professional chefs, they have to be able to read and follow recipes. They have to be able to weigh and measure things. We find that it is a wonderful environment to improve basic literacy skills. We are starting to deliver apprenticeships in Styal prison in Wales. By the time you get to the end of an apprenticeship, you have to hit a certain level of functional skills. We are confident that we will be able to coach and support those women through that journey because our expectation is that their starting level will be an average of about the age of 11 or 12, if indeed people can read or write at all.

We are innovative in our use of developing supporting materials for the City and Guilds curriculum so that we do not just use the standard stuff. Bringing together vocational skills and using those as the practical opportunity to help people with their English and maths is something that is currently kept quite separate in the world of prisons. You do functional skills over there and then you do vocational training over here and those two are not connected. I think that the opportunity to bring those together would be fantastic. That is how we do it. We do it through teaching people how to cook.

Ruth Jones: Yes, and it is brilliant way of incentivising people to learn. Nicky, do you want to add to that?

Nicky Park: The only thing I would add to that is that prison education is very traditional. What we all know and what evidence always shows us is that those who are in prison have not benefited from a traditional education system, yet we still think that we should teach them in a traditional way. That does not work. A particular session within prison is three hours. My attention span is far shorter than three hours, especially if I struggle with something, yet we are expecting them to learn in that way.

We need to look at how best someone can learn, and I think we need to focus on individuals. We also know that there are higher diagnoses or non-diagnoses of neurodivergence within the prison setting, who do not learn in those traditional ways. It is important that we sit back and look at how a curriculum can be delivered in an exciting and interesting way for learners, such as incorporating it into learning how to cook. It is an amazing way to learn about measurements and everything else. For me, that looks like a no-brainer and an easy way to bring that excitement



HOUSE OF COMMONS

back into it. It is the same for different forms of industries within the prison setting.

It needs to not be seen in isolation, as it is at the moment. I think that all that needs to be reworked to ensure that you create a safe place for men to learn. Using peers is an amazing way to do that. It breaks down some of those barriers of having a teacher. A number of people within the prison setting have a particular trauma often associated with schools, with authority and therefore with teachers. The impact that has can naturally put up a barrier to learning. We need to think about how we break that down.

Q156 Ruth Jones: That makes sense. Prisons, like every other place, are obsessed with measuring performance, outputs and all the rest of it. You mentioned level 2 and level 3 vocational qualifications. Thinking about distance travelled, if somebody comes in unable to read and write and then can go home and read a story to their child at bedtime, the distance travelled is massive. What do you think about how performance is measured at the moment?

Nicky Park: I absolutely wholeheartedly agree. There is a lot of focus on the KPIs around being released into permanent accommodation and being released into a job, forgetting that there is so much more that needs to be done in order to get someone into a place and a position where they are ready to be able to do that with stability and safety.

I think one of the challenges is how you measure the distance travelled. It is also about confidence, self-esteem and life skills that provide someone with the foundations to be able to move on to the next step. There needs to be a closer look at someone's position when they come in and when they leave. There also need to be clear opportunities in custody for people to access that support. As we have said, because of a growing population, a limited number of spaces and the fact that it is all very traditional, how people access those services and the ability to be able to do that poses a particular challenge in being able to measure the distance travelled.

For me, there is also a particular challenge if you want to understand their situation when they come in compared to when they are released. When someone first comes into custody, they are assessed within an inch of their life. They are not in a place to be able to be assessed effectively because their world has just been turned upside down. They are experiencing trauma at that moment in time, yet somehow we think that within those first two weeks is the most efficient time to assess them for all of their needs. In order to be able to truly understand the journey, that initial part needs to change.

Ruth Jones: Thank you. Yvonne, do you want to add anything to that?

Yvonne Thomas: The most common feedback we get from people we work with contains words such as "confidence" and "self-respect". If that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is what we have achieved, irrespective of whether they get a job within six weeks, six hours or six months, that is a huge step forward. That is the core of everything.

As has been rightly said, people's worlds fall apart when they go into prison, particularly for the first time, and it is traumatic. It remains traumatic through that experience. The work we do in prisons as well as pre-release and post-release helps people to be stronger in order to be able to deal with what they are going through at the time and what they are going to go through at the end. We are a rehabilitation charity. We are not an employment charity. It is rehabilitation. That can take many different forms. We use a training and employment route to achieve it, but the important thing we do is support, mentor and build people's self-belief. There are no KPIs for that in prisons, and in fact many of the KPIs that exist would be things that we don't feel are the right things to do, so we just do not do them.

Ruth Jones: Thank you very much for clarifying that. I will hand back to the Chair.

Q157 Chair: Thank you very much. Ms Thomas, that is an interesting point you make. You are not an employment charity: you are a rehabilitation charity. You said a few moments ago in answer to a previous question that you have done a good job in getting a network of employers in Wales. Of course, as well as taking an interest in the rehabilitation of an offender, their interest is to fill a job vacancy, isn't it? Is it sometimes a bit of a mismatch? How do you make sure that your intentions and expectations are aligned with that of the business?

Yvonne Thomas: That is an important point. One of the key skills of our support workers is matching that individual with that employer. It has to be done carefully. Because we have one support worker who will work with an individual all the way through, unless they have been transferred from England, there is a proper relationship and a proper understanding. That support worker will have worked with their chef trainer as well. They know what they are like in the workplace and they discuss the vacancies that are available. It is a careful process, but it has a high success rate because more time is taken at the front of that process.

Q158 Chair: Thank you. Given the current emphasis on requiring people in the workplace to have basic maths and basic English, do you find that there is almost a greater requirement in the workplace to have those paper qualifications, effectively pushing jobs out of reach for the cohort of prisoners you are talking about?

Yvonne Thomas: Not in hospitality. People turn up with a good NVQ level 2 in food production or front-of-house and employers do not really want to see anything further.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Nicky Park: I agree. Especially within our sector, the level 3 in advice and guidance provides a standard. It also shows that they are able to work to a professional standard.

Q159 **Chair:** Will that get them across the threshold of the company?

Nicky Park: Absolutely. There are other opportunities once you are in employment to improve those skills. Most employers provide those opportunities so they will then go for those.

Q160 **Ben Lake:** Thank you both for your time this morning. The Committee has been told that being in a prison far from home can have a drastic impact on an individual's prospects for resettlement and rehabilitation. Listening to some of the answers you have given already to my colleagues, that would align with your experiences in the work that you do. Is that correct?

Nicky Park: Yes.

Q161 **Ben Lake:** How do you think that we could improve upon the situation, if at all?

Yvonne Thomas: These conversations have been happening, to my knowledge, since the mid-2000s. The match between the number of people from Wales and the number of prison places in Wales and the absence of a women's facility or women's approved premises in Wales means that there is an inevitability about the situation. That puts a lot of pressure on charities such as ourselves because we follow people. I suspect that if you tried to fund that type of service, people would say it is not economically viable so you cannot do it. You can do because we do it. Whether you could systemise it is a different matter. I don't think that there is an easy solution. I don't see there being a perfect match between the types of prison places that you need for people from Wales and the supply of those within Wales. Therein lies the core of the problem, bluntly.

Nicky Park: Also, at the moment HMP Berwyn has around 70% of English people serving a custodial sentence. Is that because there is no need for those to be Welsh beds, or is it because there is such a high need within England that men are being transferred over the border?

I would also say that one of the things that needs to be worked on is consistency. Each prison works within its own little ecosystem and often their education records do not leave one prison and enter the other prison with them. Hopefully things might change with the introduction of the resettlement passports. We will wait and see. I am not sure that they are the silver bullet that everyone hopes for and thinks they will be, if I am perfectly honest.

Q162 **Ben Lake:** Why is that? What are your concerns or reservations?

Nicky Park: The challenge is that it is a deep-rooted systematic problem, and systems within themselves don't talk to each other as they



should. I want to be proved wrong, I truly do, because I know people who have worked on the resettlement passport. The intentions are there and a lot of work has been done around the co-design and co-production of it. I need to see that it is not just a sticking plaster that does not address the root causes. Fundamentally these are inconsistencies and people do not communicate. Who takes ownership and responsibility of ensuring it is up to date? This is only as good as the information that is put into the system. I think that is potentially where it could fall short.

- Q163 **Ben Lake:** That is very useful. Ms Thomas, you touched on the fact that we do not have a women's facility in Wales and the impact that has on education, resettlement and rehabilitation. Of course, that is a concern we heard as a Committee, and the Welsh Government's Hanson review highlighted this as a particular area of concern. How do the support needs of Welsh women in custody in England returning to Wales differ from the needs of men in custody in Wales? How would you describe the key differences and challenges that arise for female offenders returning to Wales?

Yvonne Thomas: If we take a woman coming out of Styal returning to north Wales, from a resettlement perspective we will have to help them to liaise with accommodation providers and local authorities at a distance. They are in prison waiting to be released. Their life was pretty chaotic before they came in and they have not had the opportunity to sort that out while they are in there. They might be serving a sentence, they might have a qualification and behaviourally things may be different for them, but all the chaos they left behind is there when they come out. The physical distance makes it far more difficult for them to talk to friends and family or to sit down in a visit.

If you add that to the issues that we talked about earlier—they may have lower literacy levels and they probably will have some form of mental distress—and put distance into the equation, it makes for a challenging situation. Eastwood Park to south Wales is not such a big issue because the geography is not as bad and the transport links are better. Styal is quite difficult to get to from mid Wales or north Wales. The same issues apply even to Eastwood. You are not near home, you are not down the road from Cardiff or Newport, you are a bit further out.

- Q164 **Ben Lake:** With the education in Styal or Eastwood Park, are there any issues arising with the fact that they are Welsh women in those prisons? Is their experience different to their compatriots?

Yvonne Thomas: Not from my experience. Both of those establishments take the education and training extremely seriously. We provide exactly the same as well. I think they are both good prisons from that perspective.

Nicky Park: On the assessment and rehabilitation for women, it is often because the providers within the female estate of those services don't have the local links and the contacts within Wales to be able to provide



that seamless support. Eastwood Park is a good example of where that does happen because the provider there is the Nelson Trust, which also provides the service for women in Wales. There is a slightly more seamless transition there. It will be able to share those networks.

If you are in Downview, you have a London provider in there which is not necessarily based there all of the time, so it does not have that connection. If the women there want any support, it is done remotely. There will not be someone from the Nelson Trust in Wales in Downview. If anything, it might be done through a video link. It is very unlikely that there will be legal visits. The person supporting them will potentially not have even met them face to face. They will have no relationship with them, no trust in that person they are going to.

Also, on release they are released into an area that they have no idea how to navigate. It is just, "Out you go." In Downview, if they have never been to London before, they have to get a train to maybe get the Tube and they don't understand how that works. It places women who are in many cases vulnerable into an even more vulnerable situation. I have spoken to women in Eastwood Park who have never been to Bristol or anywhere, so they do not understand. That added anxiety is placed on to those women. For those who are further away—we talked about distance and families—in some cases they will not have seen their families while they are in custody.

Q165 Beth Winter: Thank you for all the work you do. This is fascinating. It reminds me that about 20 years ago I did a lot of work with homeless people, a disproportionate number of whom were ex-offenders. Reading the brief, things have not changed substantially with regards to housing. What can and should be done to improve the housing situation of offenders when they are released? Clearly it is one of the biggest problems facing ex-offenders.

Nicky Park: I can't remember what the acronym CAS3 stands for—apologies—but one of the things that came out of covid was the fact that people were still being released, and because of everything that was happening, they were being placed into temporary accommodation, often hotels. That was funded through HMPPS. Prior to that it had not been because there was a thought process that it is not MOJ and HMPPS's responsibility to provide accommodation once someone is released. That changed when they saw that there was a benefit. Through that, the scheme continued, then CAS3 was introduced for those who identified as homeless or at risk of homelessness. This is a duty to refer or the process has been done in order for them to be able to access accommodation.

They are almost in that waiting or limbo moment because they technically still have accommodation while they are in prison. That has helped, but it still very much a sticking plaster. Often local authorities think they now have accommodation when they are released so they no longer need to source something for them. There is still a challenge that when CAS3 comes to an end there is an opportunity for them to fall back



into homelessness. There still needs to be a link. You might remember things such as floating support, which helped to bind all of those things together. Things such as that are needed.

Also, although accommodation is often deemed as suitable, it is not safe nor stable, and people often have no say whether or not it is a safe environment for them. It is potentially putting them back into places and environments that make them additionally vulnerable. There needs to be something with landlords to ensure that there is a standard of what is expected that local authorities hold landlords to. Although we think that happens, in reality I am not sure it does.

Chair: Sorry, we will have to pick up the pace a little bit. We are running up against it.

Nicky Park: Sorry. I would say that that is one of the main challenges.

Yvonne Thomas: The CAS accommodation has absolutely improved matters, but it is kicking the can down the 180-day road. Before that scheme was around, about 38% of our released graduates were without accommodation. It is now about 23% to 24%. Those are national figures, not Wales figures, but Wales is not very different.

Chair: Thank you very much. Forgive me, but we have slightly run over the time that we allocated for the first session. There is probably a lot more that we could talk about, and in fact there are a couple of questions that we wanted to ask, but if it is okay with you we will follow up in writing. I want to make sure that there is enough time to for our second panel. We will pause the broadcasting now and we will move over to panel 2. Thank you both; it was excellent evidence.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Darren Burns, Tony Hughes and David Abraham.

Q166 **Chair:** Welcome to this second section of today's evidence session looking at support for prisoners in Wales. For the second panel, we are joined by a number of representatives from companies operating in Wales: Darren Burns, director of diversity and inclusion at the Timpson Group; David Abraham, one of the founders of Fulcrum Scaffold Safety & Training Ltd; and Tony Hughes, a director of Williams Homes.

Perhaps I can kick off this part of the discussion by asking each of you to give us a bit of insight into what motivated your business to engage with the prisoner community and seek to provide opportunities to prisoners.

Darren Burns: Good morning, everybody. It all started by accident. Our CEO, James Timpson, went to visit a local prison. He met a young serving inmate who he thought would make a great addition to the Timpson business. We then began to proactively recruit ex-offenders into our



HOUSE OF COMMONS

organisation. We are now one of the largest employers of ex-offenders in the UK—currently 12% of our entire workforce—and we end up with people who have convictions. We very quickly realised that there is lots of potential in prisons. By giving people a second chance and offering them that opportunity, it can have huge benefits to our business and organisation.

Tony Hughes: Good morning. We were approached by our business adviser at the Welsh Government with an opportunity in HMP Berwyn to take on one of its workshops to offer skills training and employment opportunities. We deliver low-cost, affordable housing across north and mid Wales, so we opened a workshop producing timber frames and various products within the prison, delivering skills and training. It is working very well.

Chair: Give us a sense of how many prisoners at Berwyn typically work in those workshops.

Tony Hughes: Currently we have about 30 prisoners full-time in there. I think we have had over 100 people come through our workshop and offered release on temporary licence opportunities and employment upon release into the business and on our active sites. The skills they have learned through the workshop have transferred to employment after release.

Chair: Outside of that scheme, you have full-time regular employees—if you want to call it that—right now who have come through Berwyn and have come through the project?

Tony Hughes: Yes, correct.

Chair: Brilliant. Mr Abraham, will you give us a bit more insight?

David Abraham: Good morning, everyone. We were approached by the MOJ and one of our funding partners, Procure Plus charity, some time ago to work in the prisons. The biggest thing we have seen is the construction industry shortage. We struggle to get people in the construction industry, so it was a no-brainer for us. We decided to come in on the project to obviously fill that skills gap in the construction industry and give someone their second opportunity on release.

Q167 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Mr Burns, obviously Timpson is probably the brand name in the UK that is most associated with providing employment opportunities for prisons. Can you give us a sense of numbers of your employees in Wales who have been offenders?

Darren Burns: Yes. We employ throughout the whole group approximately 5,000 colleagues in Wales. We have 91 outlets, which include Timpson outlets, Max Spielmann outlets—our photo business—and Johnsons Cleaners as well. Out of the colleagues we employ in Wales, 46 of them are what we would consider to be foundation colleagues or ex-offenders, who have either been directly recruited from



HOUSE OF COMMONS

custody or who have an offending background. When you compare that to the 650 live foundation colleagues that we have in the business, we have about 46 to 50 in Wales.

Q168 Chair: Thank you very much. What encouragement would you give to other businesses in Wales that are thinking about their skill shortages?

Darren Burns: It has been a huge benefit to our business. Anecdotally, the people we recruit from prison and give opportunities to are very loyal. They are highly productive. They are statistically more honest than people we recruit from other streams and they stay with us longer. Often we are able to attract former professionals who wouldn't really consider working with Timpson but, quite frankly, because their options are limited, they will consider working for us. People are often able to turn their criminal tendencies into entrepreneurship. A lot of the skills people have, when channelled in the right way, can be transferable and they tend to be a very good fit for our business. People also bring with them a great deal of life experience and personal resilience and it genuinely makes our organisation a more interesting, fun and rewarding place to work, but kind of societally as well. We very much see it as our obligation.

Timpson is a big business, and very successful, but we have a huge social conscience and we genuinely believe in giving people a second chance. For us, it has proven hugely beneficial. There are 14 million people in the UK with a conviction more serious than a driving offence, so for us as an employer to throw that huge swathe of the population on the employment scrapheap and wrongly assume that they are worthless, inherently dishonest and untrustworthy just does not make sense. Where many employers effectively turn their nose up at people with convictions, we don't, and we are able to attract that talent into our business.

For us it is simple: by offering people a second chance through employment, everybody wins. The offenders win because they are not wasting their lives in custody and offenders' families win—husbands, wives, partners and children—because they are not losing loved ones for long periods of time in custody. The taxpayer wins because the £18 billion per annum burden is significantly reduced for reoffending. More importantly than that, we are all winners as a society because our communities are safer and there are fewer victims of crime. Yes, it is a hugely successful part of our business.

Q169 Chair: Yes, 100%. Thank you very much. Mr Hughes, has the experience of working with the prisoners at Berwyn made your organisation an advocate for encouraging other businesses in Wales to provide those opportunities too?

Tony Hughes: Yes, I believe so. What we have done is getting quite a bit of publicity. I don't think it has been done previously—operating a production facility within the prison, delivering modern methods of construction, which obviously is addressing the shortage of affordable



HOUSE OF COMMONS

housing. It is real-world work, so the prisoners who are there, they come in, every day is different and it is just like any other working environment outside the prison. It gives them an opportunity to learn those skills.

A number of people who have come into the prison have never worked a day in their life, so they have an opportunity to see what a working environment is like, working to standards and quality, and they get a real sense of purpose. The people who are there enjoy it. They see it as a big benefit so you are getting quite a lot out of them. Add to that the skills and training, which gives them the opportunity upon release, because obviously construction is a big industry and there are opportunities there for people who have convictions. It is a workstream that can overlook possible convictions. We also provide CSCS training through HMP Berwyn, so they get those health and safety cards that give them the opportunity to go on to construction sites.

Q170 Chair: Darren Burns spoke about both the business case for hiring ex-prisoners and the sense of social obligation the company feels. Do you feel that is enough? Do you think the UK Government should be providing some greater financial incentive to encourage businesses to hire more prisoners?

Tony Hughes: It does bring with it challenges, working in the prison industry and employment after. While we try our best to make opportunities available, I think if there was more support, that would be taken up by more people. Housing is a big issue, so that is one of the main challenges we have where people have been released. They may go out of the area, and if they want to stay in north Wales, providing the housing and accommodation to allow working on construction sites is something that is a bit of a limitation.

Q171 Chair: Mr Abraham, how would you answer that question? Do you think there is enough incentive coming from the Government level to encourage companies like yourselves to hire more prisoners?

David Abraham: Yes. The way our system works is that obviously we go into the prison and train the prisoners. What we then do is look for the outcome for them, so we look for employment for them, either on temporary licence or on release. We have been lucky enough because we have the National Access and Scaffolding Confederation, and also the Scaffolding Association, which have between them over 1,200 members, and they have bought into the project. It is good that we can go to them and say, "We have people on release within your areas. Do you need any labour at this moment in time?"

Sometimes we have a fall because obviously social values is big now in construction. It would be better if the Government could get more involved in that to insist that more principal contractors say to their subcontractors, "Look, we want so many people coming into the scheme here." I think that would help massively.



Chair: That is very helpful; thank you.

Q172 **Ruth Jones:** Thank you, gentlemen, for coming in this morning. You have mentioned the great things about attracting prisoners and ex-offenders into your businesses. What about the challenges that you face, say with prison staff shortages—sometimes that affects people coming in or being able to attend training—and what about the physical constrictions as well? I just wonder whether things like short-term sentences or even just transfers within the prison population impact on your ability to do your job?

David Abraham: To be fair, the prison shortage doesn't affect the training when we go in because it is a planned day—or five days is what we do—so it is not affected. The prison is pretty organised in that part, so even if there is a shortage at that time, with staff being off or sickness, whatever it may be, the training still goes ahead. We haven't had that issue at this moment in time. Normally the only issue we have is getting the material and the tools into the prison on the first day, because it is scaffolding. Once we are over the first-day hurdle it is fine. We don't have any of those issues with staff shortage at all.

Darren Burns: There are huge issues for us. Staff shortages affect us in two main ways. The first way is we have a number of training academies in prisons in England and without the appropriate number of staff to process people through the risk assessments, to allocate them to a place in our academy, we can end up in a situation where we have two or three prisoners in our academies when we have capacity for 16, which is always a real shame.

In addition to that, we have a number of people out working on ROTL—day release—and effectively what we are finding now is we will go into custody, we will interview men and women in prison and we will assess their suitability to come out and join our organisation. When we find suitable candidates there is a huge delay between the licence paperwork being completed, the checks that are necessary on that individual, actually leaving prison and coming out and working in our stores.

Probably the worst example was a fairly recent one. It has taken about five months from the interview to a job offer to that individual joining our business. That is all down to staff shortages and not having the admin staff. Lots of prison staff are now being drawn into more operational roles as well. The operational staff either leave or go off sick, and then some of your more senior staff who look after resettlement are then being drawn into these operational roles and it has a big impact.

Short sentences as well are an absolute nightmare for us. The problem with short sentences is that it tends to be women who suffer the brunt of them. Women get these very short sentences, often six to eight weeks, and when you consider that women are often the linchpin of the family unit, that can have devastating consequences. They can get children taken off them and put into care. They can lose accommodation. For us



HOUSE OF COMMONS

as an employer, they are there for such a short time, typically a six-week sentence. That will automatically be halved to three weeks, but in reality it will be two weeks because people will be released on tag or home detention curfew.

What that means for us as an employer is that we cannot offer ROTL, because we don't have the time to do the paperwork. I just mentioned that it can take up to five months, and we cannot train anybody in one of our academies because obviously that takes time. All we can do in those situations is meet people, assess them for being work ready more generally and arrange to meet them when they get released and offer them a job that way. The saddest thing about short sentences for me is that prisoners aren't able to access the services that they need in terms of drug and alcohol services and so on.

Ruth Jones: Yes, you make the point very concisely and clearly there, thank you. We heard it from other witnesses as well.

Tony Hughes: One of the things we worked quite closely on with HMP Berwyn was to make our workshop an essential workshop, so that allows the workshop to operate when there are staff shortages. Where other workshops in the industry will be closed due to the shortages, ours is kept open as much as possible. On training days, we will have an allocation of staff to ensure that the facility operates and runs. As a business, that is important to us because we plan our work so that the production meets our targets.

In terms of short sentences, it is not something we have experienced too much of. The training programme that we do through our classroom to provide qualifications as well as a 12-week programme is a relatively short programme. I don't think we have had any instances where people have failed to complete that due to short sentences. What we have found though is that when cat Ds are offered a lot of the prisoners will choose to move away from HMP Berwyn, and we see that as a bit of a loss because people that have come through the process will get a cat D option and—

Ruth Jones: Cat D?

Tony Hughes: Yes, like an open prison. They will then choose to transfer and that can be one or two days' notice. We are quite lucky in that the workshop we have, because of the environment and the true job satisfaction, is very popular and we do have a lot of people who want to come into the workshop. Replacing them is quite easy, but obviously you come back with people who need training from the beginning. We have a core number of people who we try to use as mentors and that is something that we have rolled on and learned as we have gone.

Q173 **Beth Winter:** My question is to Mr Abraham. You deliver courses and a future skills programme; is that right?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

David Abraham: Yes, that is right.

Beth Winter: What has been your experience of doing that?

David Abraham: We were doing it previously before the new contract came through with MOJ. The experience has been good. We were already operating it anyway in England—mainly in cat Ds—so we had a lot of ROTL there, released on temporary licence. I don't think there are opportunities as much in Wales. Berwyn does have a cat D wing there—housing—but there is not that many coming through it. One of the things is that if you can get more people released on temporary licence, it does help them and coming back into society is a lot easier. It makes it a lot easier for them because what happens is on release they are already used to being into work, so they don't want to spend as much time at home with the family, back around the family. It sounds terrible, doesn't it? They want to get back out into the working environment because they are used to work. We found when we had been doing it in the England setup the cat Ds have been a lot easier going through that system.

I think it was mentioned earlier on by the other panel that when they get released, it is a bit harder for them coming straight back into society. Some people who are coming straight back into society have been in prison for 10 to 20 years, so they find there are a lot of changes. They have to adapt to those changes—it is about getting back into normal day living—whereas when you do a cat D where you can go out on release on a temporary licence process it makes it an easier lead-in process going back into society, if that makes sense, so we find that part very good.

On the cat C side of it, it does become harder because you will get people leaving prison and their support people contacting us to say, "They're not ready. You're going to have to wait for a bit." In some cases in Wales—as you will know yourself—you have isolated villages where the bus route doesn't start until half past 10 or half past 9 in the morning going to the village. It is them getting used to public transport or ways of transport to get to the job. If they are on a temporary licence they will already have that system in place, if that makes sense.

Q174 **Beth Winter:** The programme is due to end in 2025, I think. What are your feelings about that? Do you think it should be extended?

David Abraham: I think it should be extended, but I think a better system could be in place where it is release on temporary licence, so we are bringing the people through on a proper rehabilitation.

Q175 **Beth Winter:** At the moment, they do the course in prison and then it stops after they have come out.

David Abraham: At the moment it is a five-day course. What happens then is that they get interviewed and offered a job. Obviously we have to keep in mind that they are being offered a job at that point and some of them might not be getting out for another number of months. The job option might not still be there, but everyone who attends the course, we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

find them a potential employer when they get released from prison. That is where it becomes best if you can get released on temporary licence, because obviously they are getting into a routine rather than being released and then having to wait two, three or four weeks getting into a routine.

Beth Winter: There is ongoing support.

David Abraham: Ongoing support, yes.

Q176 **Virginia Crosbie:** Welcome, gentlemen. My questions are for Darren. You gave us some great stats, but I want to pin you down on that in terms of the number of colleagues you have across the UK and what percentage of those would be foundation colleagues. Also in terms of numbers for Wales, what number would be foundation colleagues in Wales?

Darren Burns: Our colleagues are circa 5,000 in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Our foundation colleagues are about 12% of our entire workforce, so that equates to about 650-ish live foundation colleagues. The reason we make that distinction in terms of being live foundation colleagues is that when people join us from prison or say that they have an offending background, they are classed as a foundation colleague for two years and then they will naturally fall off that list. In reality, we estimate we probably have in excess of 1,000 colleagues across the business who have either joined us from prison or who have an offending background. We started doing this in 2002, so we have people now with 13, 14 or 15 years' service who we have recruited from prison.

Virginia Crosbie: That is a UK-wide stat; what are the stats for Wales?

Darren Burns: We probably have about 2,500 outlets, which encompass Timpson, Max Spielmann and Johnsons. We also have our hospitality arm as well, so we have a number of pubs and restaurants, some of which are in north Wales. Our coverage in terms of branches for Wales is 191, so that includes Timpson, Max and Johnsons and foundation colleagues for Wales is about 46 to 50.

Q177 **Virginia Crosbie:** So that 12% figure is for the whole of the UK. What is that figure for Wales?

Darren Burns: I will have to check, I'm afraid.

Virginia Crosbie: If you can get back to me.

Darren Burns: Yes, apologies.

Q178 **Virginia Crosbie:** You have the New Futures Network and the training academies in both England and Wales. How does your experience differ in providing that support in Wales—in a devolved Administration?

Darren Burns: We don't have them in Wales. The academies we have are in HMP Downview, which is a women's prison in Sutton, another one



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in a women's prison in Wakefield, HMP New Hall, and we have an external academy in Kent which is fed by five or six prisons in the Kent cluster. In addition to that, we have three commercial academies in HMP Thorn Cross, which is a prison in the north-west. We do work with the Welsh prisons. We have a number of people on ROTL from HMP Prescoed. We work closely with Berwyn and we were instrumental in setting up the employment advisory boards, which have been a huge success.

In terms of any notable differences in terms of provision or our work that we do in the foundation, I cannot think of anything that springs to mind. The sad thing for us is that obviously we are a commercial business, and we are all about recruiting good people and giving them a second chance, but we need a vacancy. We don't receive any Government funding, and we do not have charitable status, so all this is paid for through the business. Whenever we offer somebody an opportunity, there has to be a live vacancy and the sad reality is that with Wales obviously being smaller than England, we don't have as many vacancies there, hence why we cannot offer as many opportunities.

Q179 **Virginia Crosbie:** Thank you. In your experience, are prisons in Wales facing different challenges—unique challenges—to those in England?

Darren Burns: No. I think they are all facing lots of challenges obviously in terms of budgetary restraints, staff shortages and the general culture. We seem to be locking more people away and the prison population is set to increase to 109,000 by this time next year—I think—which is pretty frightening. Yes, I think all the challenges are pretty universal.

Q180 **Chair:** Mr Burns, earlier you were talking about some of the distinctive qualities that prisoners bring to the business, including being entrepreneurial and having interesting backgrounds. Is there a lot of work that needs to get done at a foundation employee level to bring their skills up? Typically, how work ready are they? Or can you just throw them in the deep end and they can crack on with customers?

Darren Burns: It depends. For us, we very much see prisons as a real cross-section of society. The sad thing is that in our estimation probably only a third of the prison population we would consider to be work ready, able to turn up every day, do a hard day's work, be there on time and so on. The other two-thirds, very sadly, have lots of complex needs and issues surrounding mental health, addiction, physical ailments, homelessness or a combination of all four. While we don't want to throw this cohort on the scrapheap, it is clear that there needs to be lots more work done with these people. It would be wrong of us to offer somebody in the midst of an addiction employment, because obviously it is going to be very chaotic. A job is not what some people need, unfortunately. What we have become very good at over the years is selecting the right people who are work ready.

Interestingly, one of the other panel members mentioned before that being released from prison is often more traumatic than being sent there



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in the first place. What we do is we build in flexibility and support for people who are joining us from prison. Again, all the anecdotes are true. People who have been locked away for a long time need space and they need a safe environment to get back up to speed with the pace of life. We are able to give them that safe environment. Interestingly, with our academies we not only provide full training in all our skills and services, but continually assess people for attitudes and behaviours.

Anecdotally, the feedback we get from our academy graduates is that because we go to such great lengths to replicate the high street environment, albeit within a prison, when people eventually get released and get resettled and they find themselves in a Timpson branch or a Max Spielmann branch everything is the same—the POS, the merchandise and the till. People like that kind of familiarity and that consistency.

Q181 Chair: On what you said in response to Virginia, is the reason you don't have a training academy in Wales purely because the size of the Timpson footprint in Wales is obviously smaller?

Darren Burns: Yes.

Q182 Ben Lake: Thank you for giving evidence, gentlemen. Mr Abraham and Mr Hughes, you have both mentioned in answer to some of my colleagues quite a bit about the work you are doing in prisons in Wales and some of the courses you have established. I am keen to understand what role, if any, the New Futures Network played in encouraging or supporting the establishment of those courses. If I could start with Mr Hughes and then Mr Abraham, please.

Tony Hughes: We worked with the New Futures Network to create a new qualification as part of the work we do in HMP Berwyn, so they currently get joinery level 2 within the prison setting, and we have worked with the network to deliver a modular housing MMC—a modern methods of construction education qualification. Unfortunately it is only at level 1, but we are looking to move that up to level 2. That is to address the shift in the Welsh Government's affordable housing process, where they are pushing for modern methods of construction to be delivered. That is something we are advocating across all our sites with our clients and the partnerships we have with various housing associations.

The New Futures Network has been instrumental in setting that up. We built a classroom within our workshop that can have 12 inmates in there at any one time. That is on top of the 30 prisoners we have within the factory. That has worked very well and is something we are looking to develop further.

Q183 Ben Lake: Would the network also provide any support in linking up or connecting potential skills needed in various parts of Wales? For example, you mentioned that many housing authorities now have to shift over to these modern methods; does the network have any role in connecting, I suppose, the new skills with the gaps in certain areas?



Tony Hughes: No, I don't think so.

Ben Lake: It's just about getting more focus on the prison provision.

Tony Hughes: Yes. It is something that we are pushing because of the work we are doing with our housing association partners. ClwydAlyn and Grŵp Cynefin are keen to see the modern methods of construction delivered onsite, and they are very supportive of the initiative that we are doing at HMP Berwyn—supportive of release on temporary licence on the sites and that circular economy. By reinvesting in these people when they are released and offered employment, they will be reinvesting into the community.

David Abraham: New Futures has been very helpful to us because it helped us to set up the two workshops, one in Cardiff and one in Berwyn. It also purchased the material for the workshops as well and the tools for the people to do the five-day course we deliver in the two prisons. The prisoners get a level 1 health and safety, but they also get a CISRS card, which is from the Construction Industry Scaffolders Record Scheme. They get the labourers' cards, but that is where they get two qualifications that help them when they come out for employment.

There are two options. They can go into a scaffolding labourer or any construction labouring role. The course we do, as I said, is a five-day course. We try to break it up because obviously they are spending a lot of time behind the door anyway, so when they come out of their cell they want to be more active. We split it up where we do a lot of hands-on practical exercises, building small scaffold structures so they get used to the manual handling. They get used to how components work and how they go together. They get those sorts of functional skills—the skills they need to go into employment.

In some cases we find some prisoners will come to us and go, "Scaffolding is not for me, but I have an engineering qualification," or, "I have a bricklaying qualification." We are a great believer that we don't leave anyone behind, so we try to look for employment in another sector for them based on what they are saying to us. We get a lot of heavy goods drivers, and in scaffolding the materials logistics-wise have to get to a site, so we look for that role for the person. From that side New Futures has helped massively.

Q184 **Ben Lake:** That is very useful. Without the New Futures Network and support, would the course that you have established have come to pass?

David Abraham: We had funding previously anyway, but we did not get funding for Cardiff.

Ben Lake: I see—the expansion of it.

David Abraham: Yes, so from the Cardiff point it has helped massively.

Q185 **Ben Lake:** The same question to you, Mr Hughes. How instrumental was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the support of the network in terms of expanding the courses?

Tony Hughes: I think it was instrumental. I don't think we would have been given the opportunity without it. It was something we had not done before. The opportunity was given to us and yes, we took it forward as a partnership, so it has worked very well.

Q186 **Ben Lake:** Obviously, Mr Burns, I know that your work long predates the network, but from your experience is there anything that could be improved by the network to help?

Darren Burns: Our experience has been exceptionally positive. We work in partnership with NFN, so essentially I spend a lot of my time now helping other businesses to recruit ex-offenders, because what they don't have is any understanding of even the terminology—of the language. They have never been into a prison; they have no concept of risk. I help them to put processes in place and successfully employ ex-offenders and bring them to their business. NFN do that professionally.

What we find is that a lot of businesses will now go to the NFN. It will broker those introductions with local prisons. It will help businesses to successfully establish workshops. What businesses often want is the real stories from the businesses, so NFN will refer people to us so we can chat with them and tell them what it is really like, and we work with NFN quite closely.

Q187 **Chair:** Is there a category of prisoner that you won't work with as a matter of policy, either because there is too much risk around them or because history tells you that they make difficult employees?

Darren Burns: Yes. In terms of a category of prisoner we have three offences that we will not employ, so anybody convicted of sexual offences, anybody convicted of arson—particularly arson with endangerment—and anybody convicted of terrorism offences. Obviously we have very good reasons why. We are a customer-facing business. We have concerns over reputational damage and also the reaction of our existing colleagues and, quite frankly, we are a shoe repair business. We are not qualified to manage that sort of risk, but anybody else we will certainly assess and we will give them an opportunity.

For example, we have 60 lifers working for us, so these are people who have committed murder. We don't shy away from people who have committed very serious offences. What we do focus on are aggravating factors to an offence. If somebody discloses to us that they have committed an assault, if it transpires that that assault was racially motivated or homophobic, it is not going to be supported by us.

Q188 **Chair:** Obviously you have been talking about the longstanding piece of work that Timpson has been doing on this, and I think you have said that you have guys who have been in prison but have been working for you for 17 years. Presumably they are as able to go on to senior levels in the business as anybody else. Do you have people that are directors, or in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

senior management?

Darren Burns: We do. We have people at director level. We have regional managers, area managers and area development managers. I am a director for the business and I have also spent time in custody. I have lived experience, so I am an example of somebody who has managed to be promoted up through the ranks.

Chair: Fantastic. We have slightly run over our time. I am sure we would love to carry on talking to you, but unfortunately we all have to get downstairs. Beth, did you want to jump in with a quick question?

Q189 **Beth Winter:** You are all primarily employers and from listening to you this morning I know you would do a lot more. You mentioned the housing support. Prisoners are there to rehabilitate; that is the stated purpose. Does prison work, from your experience?

Darren Burns: I would say no, quite sadly. I think prison should be the place when people's lives start to improve from the minute they set foot in there, and quite often it is not. We often see people coming out in a worse state, often with nowhere to live, no skills, education provision or rehabilitation in terms of drugs or mental health. So no, prisons don't work, in my opinion.

Tony Hughes: The statistics we have been given is that for people who have gone through our workshop generally reoffending is very low, so it is difficult to say. We have only been operational for two and a half years, so our experience is quite limited, but we see the benefit of providing skills and training and opportunities. Beyond that, it is a little bit outside of our experience.

David Abraham: Does it work? For me, it is about how you define work, because obviously these are programmes to help people who want to come out of prison. I personally think that if the prison worked, why do people have to go to an approved premises on release from prison? It tells you that it doesn't work. I personally don't think it does work. If I am being honest, I think the prison service is broken and it could be more helpful for those people coming back into society. I think it lacks that.

Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you to all three of you for giving your time, being here with us, sharing your insights and your experiences. It means a lot to us. It is very useful, as we are thinking about how prisons are run in Wales and how things can be improved, so we are grateful for you being here. I will bring the meeting to an end.