



HOUSE OF COMMONS

## Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Prison Education, HC 86](#)

Tuesday 14 December 2021

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Apsana Begum; Miriam Cates; Brendan Clarke-Smith; Tom Hunt; Kim Johnson; Ian Mearns; Nicola Richards.

Questions 353 - 394

### Witnesses

**I:** Darren Burns, National Recruitment Manager, Timpson; Ted Rosner, Founder, Redemption Roasters; Sasha Simmonds, Head of Social Value, O'Neill & Brennan; and Tony Hughes, Commercial Director, Williams Homes.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Darren Burns, Ted Rosner, Sasha Simmonds and Tony Hughes.

Q353 **Chair:** Good morning. Thank you very much for coming today. For the benefit of those on Parliament TV and the internet, can you introduce yourselves and your organisations, please? Thank you. Are you okay with first names? Thank you. I will start with Ted.

**Ted Rosner:** I am co-founder of Redemption Roasters.

**Darren Burns:** I am the head of recruitment for the Timpson Group and I also manage the Timpson Foundation.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I am the head of social value at O'Neill & Brennan Recruitment and Logistics Contracting.

**Tony Hughes:** I am the commercial director of Williams Homes, Bala.

Q354 **Chair:** Thank you all for coming today and, Darren, it is good to see you again. It was very nice to sit next to you at the FE college.

Can I start by asking the witnesses why it is that you have decided to employ former prisoners?

**Ted Rosner:** For us, the answer is severalfold. First, we think it is the right thing to do and people in our organisation feel very strongly about the social mission that we have. It helps us to attract a higher quality of person in terms of the free people that we employ, but it also provides us with a very interesting workforce in our cafes for people from the inside. The final reason is a commercial one, which is that it is a highly differentiating brand factor for us. Our customers find it to be an interesting thing and that helps us to maintain their custom.

Q355 **Chair:** What was the original decision by the company chiefs—which is most welcome—when you decided that you would make this decision to employ former prisoners? I understand when you say it is part of the company mission, but there must have been a trigger or a particular value that your company holds that made you decide to do this.

**Ted Rosner:** The values came after the introduction to the prison service, so for us it was perhaps the other way round. It was a fortuitous moment when we were introduced to the prison service. We were asked if we would like to carry out education services in coffee for the prison service. We said, "Well, this sounds interesting", but we did not really know what we were going to do with it. We went away, had a think, and it was like, "Hang on a minute, there is a possibility here to build a coffee brand around the idea of coffee from a prison—the idea of the provenance of goods from a prison, and making that premium," which we thought was an interesting idea and one that had some legs, both commercial and social. That led us in turn to doing what the prison service asked us to do initially, which was to start providing education services to prisons and recruit from there.

Q356 **Chair:** Tony, what was the reason that you decided to employ former prisoners?

**Tony Hughes:** We find that the construction industry can attract people who have been in prison, because of the type of work involved. We are heavily involved in low-carbon construction, specialising in modern methods of construction with timber frames, and that is something that we are pushing heavily forward. We find that giving opportunities to former prisoners can bring added value to their lives. There is a multiplicity of skills available on construction sites. Working with the prison service, we look to offer opportunities when people come out of prison, to give employment, and the skills can be transferred anywhere across the country. Construction is very big in the UK at the moment—it is one of the big pushes—and we find that we are able to give people a better chance at succeeding when they come out of prison, a chance to not reoffend and go back into the prison service.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I very much stumbled into this. For construction, there is a huge corporate responsibility. When we bid for work from clients, we are expected to give back into disadvantaged communities, and we work heavily with ex-offenders. I am here representing the Wates Group. I work closely with them and have done for five years. Their targets are based on helping ex-offenders, ex-armed forces and so on. The industry is facing a major skills gap. Kids are not coming out of school wanting to get stuck in the mud and to get dirty and cold every day. They want to work in offices. Having this untapped workforce available to us every day—people we can work with closely and upskill into the skills that we need them to have and that are required to be successful in the industry—is very valuable.

**Darren Burns:** I can reinforce something that Ted said. There are two main groups of reasons why the Timpson Group engages in employing ex-offenders. In the first one, broadly, are the societal and social benefits; the second are business reasons.

Essentially, employing ex-offenders is proving to be very good for our business. We stumbled upon this 20 years ago when our CEO, James Timpson, went to a local prison in the north-west with a number of local business leaders. James was shown round by a young, serving inmate, a chap named Matt. James liked him immediately. Matt had a great personality. He was very intelligent, very articulate, and James thought that Matt would be a great addition to the Timpson business. From that moment on, James gave Matt a job and I am very pleased to say that Matt is still with us today and is one of our longest-serving colleagues.

We thought if there is one great person like Matt in one small prison in the north-west, surely there will be hundreds, if not thousands, of people who just need that opportunity, that second chance. We began to proactively recruit ex-offenders into the Timpson business and I am very proud to say that we are one of the largest, if not the largest, employer of ex-offenders in the UK.

Q357 **Ian Mearns:** Good morning, everyone. What concerns, if any, do you have from your experience of working with people within the prison estate that prisoners are not being taught the correct skills in prison that will allow them to find employment once they are released? Is there an adequate system in place to allow prisoners to acquire soft skills that will allow them to do well at an interview and find employment? Can I start with you, Tony, please?

**Tony Hughes:** Yes. It is worth noting that we are in our infancy in working with the prison service in HMP Berwyn. It is something that is relatively new. Although we have been working on the scheme for coming up to two years, unfortunately Covid put a big block in the progress of working with the service. We have only been actively working operationally now for, I think, about eight weeks.

The education part of it is very much in its infancy. I know the prison service works with Novus Cambria and they will be providing the education for the inmates for us. It is not something that I can comment on at this moment, I am afraid. We are very new to this. All the discussions we have been having have been very positive. Providing that upskilling for the prisoners when they come out is something we are pushing hard on. You mentioned soft skills and I think they are very important. As part of the recruitment process within the facility, we have gone through an interview process. We are helping the prisoners to understand how to conduct themselves in those interviews to gain the position within the facility. Hopefully, that feedback will help them to gain the skill to take forward.

**Darren Burns:** The way we recruit in Timpson is slightly different. We recruit on personality. While admittedly that can be very subjective, what it means for us is that we like all of our successful candidates to be great communicators, to be very engaging, to be very charismatic, to be outgoing, to be confident and, ultimately, to be able to provide our customers with fantastic, first-class customer service. We are very confident that we can train anybody in all our skills and services. We can train anybody in how to cut keys, to repair shoes, or to take a photograph, but the soft skills, the communication skills, the customer engagement skills are, arguably for our business anyway, a lot more important.

Q358 **Ian Mearns:** Obviously, Timpson is a bigger organisation and you are probably working in conjunction with a number of prisoners across the country. Is your experience of what is happening with this programme in the prisons very different in different places?

**Darren Burns:** Yes. Unfortunately, the prison service lacks consistency generally. Prisons work in silos and the service can be quite fragmented. There are lots of pockets of very good practice, but we find that it can be hit and miss. Some prisons will put an onus on the soft skills and put the men and women through some sort of employability input. If they do that, it works out very well for us, but other prisons do not put much stock into it.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I would say something similar. I interview the guys and I go mainly on personality. All we need in the construction industry is someone with a certain attitude to work, who wants to get stuck in. I have had some great experiences with some guys with a phenomenal amount of experience. They have left with qualifications beyond those of most other people on site. I have had other experiences such as where we have booked and paid for someone to sit a test and it is only at that point, when they fail, that we realise that they are dyslexic, which we did not know, and they could not answer the questions. I would say the service has its good and bad sides and, similar to what Darren said, every prison operates differently. Some have amazing courses and access to CSCS cards, which you need to have to work in construction; some do not.

Q359 **Ian Mearns:** Therefore, from that perspective, Sasha—and you said you recruit mainly on personality—is it not important, in order to prevent former prisoners from going through a failure process, to establish what their basic skills are when you start the process?

**Sasha Simmonds:** Yes. When I interview people, I do ask them what they have done and what qualifications they have taken up and I go through their CVs, but for the guys, a lot of it comes down to embarrassment. If I ask them can they do these tasks, they will say yes. I often meet them on their first day, when they start on site, and I do ask them again, “Can you complete this induction form? Would you like me to help you? Do you need help?” but yes, it would be better if I knew in the first place and some sort of questionnaire was done with them so we could figure out what level they are at, if they are able to complete a form or if they need help.

**Ted Rosner:** It is telling that we use a different standard when assessing ex-offenders compared with other people, both in terms of recruitment and how we treat them when they are in the business, for HR reasons.

While I do not have enough experience to give you an overview as to whether the skill delivery in the estate is good enough or not, I can tell you what we are forced to do. For instance, the other day I had a meeting with our head of education and our head of retail, who is the person who has the most ex-offenders in their department. We had to set out a group of principles in how we would deal with ex-offenders. The fact that we are having to do this shows that we are having to derogate from our normal principles in dealing with free people in this instance. I think that is telling. We cannot engage with the ex-offenders on the same level, otherwise we would have very few successful outcomes. I would love to say that we could, but we can't. I don't know if that answers your question.

Q360 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you. What role can businesses play in providing the correct skills for prisoners while they are still serving their sentences? How much do you think businesses can be involved in that process?

**Chair:** Could I ask you to answer concisely? Sasha first.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I would say heavily. We have the opportunity to help as many people as we would like to. We do have the funds, and especially in construction, a lot of financial value is put into corporate responsibility and social values. We offer the option of a kind of hire purchase scheme. If a guy comes out with all the skills to be a handyman but no tools, we offer them a 16-week payback course. We buy the toolkit. If they stay with us for 16 weeks, at the end they have the tools to complete their job. Also, prisons not being able to offer CSCS cards should not hinder ex-offenders from getting the opportunity and we would do the same, with a hire purchase plan. We will support anything they feel ready to do or are passionate about and I believe that every business could do that.

**Darren Burns:** I agree. Skills and training should be industry-led. I think prisons should spend more time identifying where there are vacancies, both locally, in terms of ROTL, and also for where prisoners are going to be resettled. Once these vacancies are identified, employers should liaise with the prison to give them the requisite skills for the men and women being released from custody.

**Ted Rosner:** There are not nearly enough opportunities for the Government to be the only sponsors of prisoner employment, so it is absolutely essential that businesses support this sort of thing.

**Tony Hughes:** Yes, a big part of why we got involved with the prison service is to provide these skills that are not readily available outside. We see MMC timber construction as the future for construction and feel that giving ex-offenders the opportunity to develop the MMC panelised system within the prison puts them in good stead for when they come out to be able to secure work with us or across the industry.

Q361 **Ian Mearns:** The important supplementary to this question is: what challenges do you all see to enhancing the provision in future? What are the main barriers?

**Chair:** Again, if you could answer concisely, please, because we have a lot to get through.

**Darren Burns:** We are in a pretty good position in that we have a number of training academies where we can go in and train prisoners, male and female, in all our requisite skills and enable them to come out and start work immediately. Certainly, according to a lot of other sectors I speak to regularly, a lot more could be done to prepare men and women who are leaving custody and make them job-ready.

**Sasha Simmonds:** Communication: I would say that prisons need to be more open with us when we are ready to employ and have a process in place to help these guys with the steps they need to take.

**Ted Rosner:** The prison system is asking us to take more prisoners as employees, and I find it concerning that the prison service is not willing to sponsor that by allowing us to have ex-offender employees working within prisons in our programmes there.

Q362 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. Men have been the focus of the discussion this morning but some of you have just mentioned women. What needs to happen to have parity for men and women? I know that education is available for women in prisons. What work is available for women coming out of prison?

**Sasha Simmonds:** The range of construction skills available to females serving sentences is highly disappointing. It is unacceptable, in the world we live in today, to only be offering skills such as cleaning, sewing and hairdressing. I will be holding courses myself, which my company has agreed to fund, in local female prisons and we will get females into construction. It is not just a male-led industry and females deserve the right to work in any industry.

Q363 **Chair:** What you are saying is that in terms of employing women in businesses, the system and the training that goes on in prisons is antiquated.

**Sasha Simmonds:** Yes. I have struggled to get females into construction. I know of a couple of females working out on ROTL in construction, but it is not within our reach unless the opportunities to train in the likes of bricklaying and carpentry available in the male estate are also made available to females.

Q364 **Tom Hunt:** This is a question to Sasha Simmonds on the point about dyslexia. My understanding is that almost 50% of people in prison are dyslexic. In previous sessions we have spoken about some improvements that have been made in screening prisoners when they enter the system to see whether or not they have learning disabilities. I am somewhat concerned, therefore, about what you said earlier: that it was only when you started to engage with prisoners from a re-employment perspective that you found out they were dyslexic. Clearly, the screening is not working very well if it is getting to the stage where you are the one finding it out. Do you think there could be improvements made in early diagnosis in the prison system?

**Sasha Simmonds:** This is something that Darren and I were discussing earlier. I think information is lost when offenders move from prison to prison, from cat B down to cat C to cat D. There needs to be some kind of measurement on CRM where we can discover immediately that this person has this difficulty so that when I say, "I would like to employ this person. Can you give me their background?", that information comes with it so I can make allowances, help them and work with them. There is a lot of room for improvement.

Q365 **Tom Hunt:** In essence, you are engaging with individuals who you end up finding out have learning disabilities, but that is not made clear when you first start to engage with them.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I believe the quote, once I got the call to say that person had failed his test, was, "This is just coming to light now". That guy had been in the service for the previous four years. It is nothing against him. There is some speaking that can be done over the test. It

was the reading he could not do and we did not know that, so we paid £180 for a guy who effectively had no chance of passing this test with the aids he was given.

Q366 **Chair:** What differences do you find between prison categories?

**Ted Rosner:** I do not have the knowledge to answer that question properly.

**Darren Burns:** I will be happy to take this one on. Our opinion, in Timpson, is that category B prisons are not focused on resettlement or employment, nowhere near as much as they should be, and that is why the majority of our focus is now on category D—open male and female estates—because we find they are much more geared up to rehabilitation and employment and much more serious about it. It is much easier for us, as employers, to go in and engage with these people in custody. We believe that the main priority of category B prisons is to stop people from escaping and reduce violence and the use of drugs, and that proper rehabilitation and preparation for the world of work is an afterthought.

**Tony Hughes:** Unfortunately, I do not have the experience to be able to comment, sorry.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I would say the same as Darren. As I mentioned earlier, a CSCS card is a must to start working on site. As a company, we are partnered with a training provider that can offer that training for free once the guys are on release. The funding is there for that but we have no funding nor the communications and connections to get this done for guys before they leave. Statistics say that you have three weeks to get someone before their mentality goes back to their easier way of life, a life of crime, so I agree that they are not ready to come out and it is very much about keeping them in and letting them go when their time is served.

Q367 **Kim Johnson:** This question is for Tony Hughes. You have recently set up a workshop in HMP Berwyn. What positives and negatives have you experienced in the New Futures Network?

**Tony Hughes:** The facility has been operational for about eight weeks. Working with New Futures has been interesting. It has been quite a drawn-out process because of the Covid restrictions. We were geared up to fit out the workshop when lockdown happened and that held things up drastically.

Communications with the prison and the service have been excellent. They have been keen to engage and keen to provide staff for our facility in Bala. The intention was for the workshop in the prison to mimic our production base in Bala, where our head office is, so we organised a number of visits for the staff who would be working within the prison workshop. The staff came and shadowed the men in our facility to understand the processes required to produce the MMC panels, which was excellent. The time that we had was used well to better the understanding of how the operation would work.



As for difficulties, being the first time we have worked inside a prison environment, understanding the process of vetting and having materials brought in and out of the prison was all very new to us and could be challenging. For instance, if something happened with the prison and the prison had to become secure, that could impact our production timescales. Other than that, the experience has been very positive.

Q368 **Kim Johnson:** My next question is for the whole panel. The Government have recently set up and established local employment boards in resettlement prisons. How would you like to see these working to ensure links with businesses are successfully made?

**Darren Burns:** They are an absolutely fantastic idea. Getting external business people who know what the industry needs and what qualifications prisoners need to come out and get jobs can only be a huge benefit.

Anecdotally, some of the early feedback we are receiving is that some of these employment boards are already finding it quite frustrating to work within the constraints of the prison establishment. Things happen very slowly. But, yes, if it works well, and if things improve, I think it will be a great opportunity to get more men and women qualified, get them work-ready, and ultimately to be able to get them jobs either on ROTL or post release. I think it is a very good idea to get external business people, who will be very clued up about vacancies and what people need to be able to do to fill them successfully. I think it is a good idea.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I agree. I think they are a great idea. The only downside is that they only get the guys in their last 12 weeks. You have guys serving long sentences and we have a lot longer than 12 weeks to work with them, to know where they are being released to, what is sustainable, if they can keep their employment upon release, if they can continue to work for that company. I think they are brilliant and I have met some incredible people in these roles inside a lot of facilities, but I do think they need longer with the guys; 12 weeks is not long enough.

**Ted Rosner:** I can only speak from my experience but yes, our experience is that one of the main barriers we have to getting the right people out into jobs in our company is that we have the wrong people in, inside. That is because the prisons find it very difficult, for reasons unknown, to match us with the profile of people that we want. We want people who are going to be released within 24 months, who are going to be released into the London area, and who do not pose a significant security threat to us. We have found the numbers of people in the Mount who meet that profile to be almost zero and I have not received an adequate explanation for that. If the employment boards can be used to ameliorate that problem, I would be delighted.

**Kim Johnson:** Tony Hughes, do you have anything further to add?

**Tony Hughes:** No, nothing further, thank you.

Q369 **Kim Johnson:** The employment boards are generally run by Chambers

of Commerce. Would you agree that the right people and the right businesses have been included in these organisations?

**Darren Burns:** I think so, yes. From my experience with the employment boards that I have spoken with and had a hand in getting established within prisons, I would say yes, we have the right people in place.

Q370 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** I am looking at the labour market in particular. A lot of witnesses have asked about having regular reviews of local labour markets and how we can be more effective with that. The Government have announced that they are going to introduce dedicated employment advisers into prisons, particularly resettlement prisons. What do you think they need to do to make sure that their roles are successful?

**Darren Burns:** They need to be monitored in terms of their success and sustainable employment outcomes. There is a very good setup in HMP Thorn Cross. They have an employment hub and I have seen that in action on several occasions. It is effectively a one-stop-shop for the men to go in and view local vacancies, which they can either apply for on ROTL, if the employer is prepared to take people on ROTL, or post-release, again depending on qualifications.

The only issue we have is the timeline. For us as a business, things move very quickly. I have found when I go in and interview people in custody for vacancies that we have now, there can often be a nine-week delay in getting the people out of prison and, in some cases, the vacancies no longer exist by then. As a business, we cannot hold vacancies open for people while the prison gets the paperwork sorted. It is a very good idea in theory. I think they can work but I think they need to be closely monitored.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I agree. First, at the end of the day, yes, the people are offenders but they are human beings. They have emotions just like all of ours and we need to look after these guys. We need to make sure they are mentally ready and I would say that is very important. I work with guys every day, big burly people you would cross the road from in fear, but inside they are panicking and scared because they have caught the wrong tube or the wrong train or are worried about their payments or do not want to be frank and honest. Mentality, emotions and empathy are important, but yes, timescales are a big problem. We could put someone in to cover their role but then we are taking someone else's job to place this guy, so as much as we do work to the prison timescales, I think we need to look at the prisons working to the timescales of the companies who are employing these people.

**Ted Rosner:** I have nothing insightful to add to what has been said.

**Tony Hughes:** It is a bit different for us. Because we have the workshop, we are able to work with the prisoners to better their skills and for them to understand the opportunities we can offer them when they are released.

People have mentioned ROTL a couple of times. That is something we are currently discussing with the prison service to see if we take on prisoners at our active construction sites where we can further their knowledge of construction opportunities. Because of the nature of construction, being ever-moving, timescales do not affect us too much in the long term.

Q371 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Following on from that, do you have any views about assessment and planning? What can be done to make sure that is improved and make sure that when people are coming out, they have the necessary skills and qualifications?

**Tony Hughes:** It is a difficult question to answer because of the lack of experience we have with the process. Communication has to be key. We have set parameters in terms of requirements to be able to work on our sites, such as CSCS cards. We are pushing for NVQ level 3 training, which is not being offered currently within the prison service. We feel that if it was obtained, it would give prisoners so many more options in the long term. We are working closely with the prison service to see how we can bridge that gap between what is offered at the moment and what we would like.

Q372 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Does anybody else have any views on skills and qualifications and how we can match them up? Has it been an issue for anybody else on the panel?

**Sasha Simmonds:** Again, having everything in a system where we can check and confirm is important. I have had people being sent to work with promised qualifications, but when the poor guy gets there he has to get back on the train and go back to where he came from because he cannot start work because he does not have the necessary qualification.

Q373 **Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Finally, a question for Darren Burns. I am looking at employment hubs and see that you have one at HMP Thorn Cross with your workshop. What do you think the hub has added to supporting prisoners to find employment?

**Darren Burns:** We have two separate things. Our workshops effectively provide vocational training for the men in Thorn Cross. The idea behind that is that not only are we competing commercially as a business; we are also training them for employment upon release. The employment hub is separate and I think other industries will benefit more from that, whereby they can come in, choose men with the requisite skills, and hopefully give them jobs upon release. Where it can potentially fall down is at the through-the-gate process. Often information can be lost. Men will apply for a job but there is no real follow-up when they get through the gate because, anecdotally, when men leave prison, all the prison staff cease any communication with them and lots of promising opportunities can be lost when they are released.

**Ted Rosner:** We have the same issue. We initially thought that it would not be a problem. We are a very small business. Of over 100 people, we employ three full-time people whose sole job is to keep the link with the prisoners when they leave prison and transition into our business. We

have to be on the phone to them every single day to try to make that happen. We feel that there ought to be a bit more support with that from the service.

Q374 **Chair:** Currently, prisoners are not able to take up apprenticeships due to existing legislation that prevents prisoners from holding contracts of employment or earning the minimum wage. It is my intention, and I have the support of Committee members, to table an amendment to the skills Bill that would allow prison apprenticeships, both as a mechanism to support prison education and to develop prisoners' skills. As employers of former offenders, would you be supportive of that? Can you offer us an opinion as to how prisoners might be able to hold an employment contract in light of the Prison Act 1952 or what mechanisms could be put in place to enable them to earn a minimum wage through an apprenticeship? Can I start with Darren Burns?

**Darren Burns:** It is quite difficult for us because we do not believe that apprenticeships are a good fit for our business due to the inflexibility. We have been training people to provide our skills and services for over 150 years. We find that lots of the educational bolt-ons are not a good fit with the very practical skills we teach.

While that is us as a business, and I am only qualified to speak on behalf of Timpson, I can see a huge benefit for other industries and businesses and I think that prisoners should be able to take up apprenticeships.

**Tony Hughes:** I think having apprenticeships would be very beneficial. As part of Williams Homes we have a construction academy that specialises in joinery and groundworks and we take on apprentices—year 2 and year 3—and pair them up with time-served tradesmen so that they can understand the skills that are available. I think it is wrong that prisoners are not offered the opportunity to get on to that apprenticeship system and gain those skills. It is something that we would do outside of the CITB network anyway and I think it would be a big plus if it could be supported.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I agree. It would be a great benefit. As an agency, I work with many national builders—Wates, Willmott Dixon, Morgan Sindall, the Berkeley Group—and their first question is always, "Can we engage them on an apprenticeship?" Of course, they currently cannot but what is more frustrating is that that stops ex-offenders from getting better roles. We can start someone on site as a labourer—minimum wage, living wage or whatever it might be—but there are guys who are brilliant mathematicians who could enter an apprenticeship and be a commercial manager in 10 years' time. Technical, design, anything like that could be available to these guys and they could start at the bottom and push through, so I do think access to apprenticeships would be a great benefit to the men and women in prison.

**Chair:** Kim Johnson you wanted to come in on this.

Q375 **Kim Johnson:** I did, with a supplementary question on the issue that

was raised briefly about looking at prisoners once they leave prison. Prison education is delivered by four main providers. How important is it for you all to establish links with local FE colleges to continue with the education work?

**Sasha Simmonds:** It is very much down to the guy who is completing the course, whether he wants to. I will be honest. I have come across many guys who have only engaged in the course because it is better than looking at four walls all day. I have engaged with incredible guys who have gone through many, many courses, but I would say that the guys are more likely to stay in education within the prison rather than on the outside. I think a lot of funding would go to waste as they would not keep up with it.

Q376 **Chair:** Let me ask about the apprenticeship levy and start with you, Darren. James Timpson wrote in *The Guardian* not so long ago that the levy "is a really good idea but it needs to be more flexible so we can use it and target it in ways that we think are right... If I could wave a magic wand that would be really helpful for people leaving prison who want to learn new skills." What changes would you like to see made to the apprenticeship levy so that more companies engage in education, and rather than four we would have 400 sitting before us in the Select Committee that would be able to employ more former prisoners? Can I start with you, Ted?

**Ted Rosner:** I do not have an opinion on that.

**Chair:** Do you use the levy in your firm?

**Ted Rosner:** No.

**Chair:** Darren?

**Darren Burns:** Currently, we pay £40,000 a month in apprenticeship levy. We believe there needs to be a lot more flexibility and a lot more scope for us to direct these funds much more appropriately. At the moment, we spend a small percentage of it in giving our colleagues who might work in finance accountancy qualifications, but most of it gets sent on to Government, unfortunately. We would like to see some of the rules relaxed or at least the scope broadened whereby we can provide prison leavers with opportunities to learn all our skills and services, because we believe the ultimate outcome and goal is to provide sustainable employment. If we could direct some of our levy into doing that, we think it would be worthwhile.

**Tony Hughes:** We work closely with the CITB so we do see the benefit of the levy through our apprenticeships, upskilling and training. Because of the industry we are in, there are numerous opportunities available to us as a company that we are happy to pass on to the ex-offenders if that is possible. I cannot see that there are any changes to the scheme that would change the way we do things.

**Sasha Simmonds:** Because we work nationally, I would say that the opportunity for apprenticeships and the levy is well-placed within construction. We are able to offer young people the opportunity to come straight through. An example for you: we have a guy, a lifer, who is working for us—a young guy who has been very well received at work and we would like to make him a manager. We want to support him through that. We are going to fund his NVQ. It is not a cheap course. It is going to cost us £1,000, but we are happy to do that because we want to show him that he is worthy of the chance, but if we had the chance of an apprenticeship, we would put him through.

Q377 **Chair:** Why can you not use your levy to pay for his apprenticeship?

**Sasha Simmonds:** We can pay some of it from the levy but not all of it, due to the volume of the course and everyone else we have to cover, such as other people on site.

Q378 **Miriam Cates:** In May 2019, the Government expanded Release on Temporary Licence to allow more prisoners to potentially gain employment and a relationship with employers while still inside. According to the Prison Reform Trust, this has not had a positive impact yet. Do you agree with that? What changes do you think need to be made to allow employers to take up more contracts with prisoners while on ROTL? Shall we go to Tony Hughes first?

**Tony Hughes:** We have no experience of ROTL at the moment so it is not something that I can comment on.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I have worked with ROTL for the past five years. I think it has a positive impact. Something we touched on earlier is the issue of timescales, which does put a lot of businesses off, and that has a lot to do with the number of staff in the prison. A lot of employers are interested. I work closely with the head of reducing re-offending. They have so many employers who start off interested and have loads of opportunities but they cannot wait so we lose opportunities there, unfortunately.

**Darren Burns:** Yes, I completely agree with Sasha. We have been using ROTL for the last 20 years. The vast majority of people who start their Timpson careers with ROTL stay with us for two years post release, or even longer in some cases. We believe it is the safest way to integrate prisoners back into society. Also, selfishly, as a business we get to build a rapport with these people. We know what makes them tick, we know if we need to offer them more support or more guidance when they are released, but ultimately it is about that continuity of working for us while they are in custody, teaching them all the skills and services, and offering them employment upon release.

The issues we do have are exactly as Sasha said. It can take far too long. For example, I was in a prison in the south-west two weeks ago. I interviewed 13 men. Five of them were offered positions on ROTL. The vacancies were live. We were told at the time that the men would be out in our branches within two weeks. I received an e-mail yesterday saying

that due to problems with paperwork it is not going to happen until mid to late January. The issue that we are going to have there is whether these vacancies will still exist. It can be difficult.

Another important factor is that in this amendment to the ROTL procedure in 2019 that you mentioned, it was said that prisons were going to be able to do away with this three-month lie-down. When somebody comes from a category B or category C prison, historically they would have to do a three-month lie-down in a category D prison before they were eligible for ROTL and could go out. In our experience, while the rules may have changed, these rules are not being enacted. The men and women who are able to go out on ROTL are still having to wait three months, and even longer in some cases, before they can go out.

**Ted Rosner:** I agree with everything that both the guys have said. Our experience with ROTL has been very poor. We have made several requests for it at different prisons that we have operated in over the years and we have had zero success in getting it so far. The response from our staff has usually been yes, we have asked for it and we have said we are prepared to do it and we just have not received any comeback from the prison, so there is a bit of a lack of willingness there.

A side point: if you look at the most successful prison systems in the world in terms of outcomes, they are the ones that make the fewest possible curtailments of prisoners' rights as social people. The Norwegian system, for example, allows prisoners to gain employment outside the prison while serving their sentences. You do not need me to tell you how much more successful their outcomes are than ours.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I will just add that I have only been at O'Neill & Brennan for six months but I have set this scheme up in two other companies. I have nearly 30 people working on ROTL and that is because I am so persistent that I am probably annoying. I am determined to get placements for these guys and I will move dates and do whatever I can, but there are many companies that just do not have that bend or that fold. I will push it to the absolute must, but I would say there would be a lot more failures if I did not keep prodding the prisons when I need a response.

**Darren Burns:** I agree with Sasha. It is okay for us. We have been doing this for a long time now so we are used to these sorts of delays, which are often inevitable due to staff shortages or permissions not being granted in time. When we work with other businesses to help them recruit from this cohort and help them set up processes, we tell them how great it is to work with the prisons and how great it is to employ ex-offenders. Often when it comes to it, when we introduce them to a prison, they are just faced with these unnecessary delays and it can be off-putting for them.

**Ted Rosner:** We are exactly what Sasha talked about. It is just that we do not have that level of experience and expertise that is required to get these things through.

**Miriam Cates:** That is helpful. Thank you.

Q379 **Apsana Begum:** Good morning, panel. I had a couple of questions about prison estates and infrastructure. What challenges do you as businesses face in working within a prison estate where the infrastructure is perhaps inadequate, especially in relation to IT services, and what needs to change?

**Ted Rosner:** Huge challenges would be the answer. We have industrial equipment that to function properly requires a connection to the internet. That is impossible. Communication is very difficult with our staff. We require to be giving feedback about quality of goods, orders and so on, and the only way we have to do that is through e-mail. That is very difficult in the modern world.

Finally, on vetting and recruitment, when we put through a request for security vetting it can sometimes take several months to come back. To give you an example of that ridiculous situation, at the Mount currently there is no vetting person, and the reason there is no vetting person is that the vetting person cannot get their vetting through. That is just an example.

**Darren Burns:** Again, we have had positive experiences and experiences that maybe are not so positive. Typically, the kind of buildings that we use within the prison estates are pretty old, pretty antiquated. As Ted said, communication and IT is always an issue. Often what we are faced with is an overzealous, very risk-averse security manager, so any kind of kit that we need to take in, we have to jump through all sorts of hoops. Eventually, we always win and we always get our way and we are able to take in anything we need to take in.

Again, anecdotally, the movement of prisoners from the cells or from certain areas of the prison to the workshops can also be an issue. We have had issues lately whereby we have had prisoners removed from work because they have been mandated to complete education courses that they do not want to do, or certainly do not feel are relevant. Obviously, they are losing out on pay; they are losing out on vocational training. There are pockets of good practice where it can work quite well and our operations are quite slick and do not affect production, but other examples where it does not work so well.

Q380 **Apsana Begum:** We have also seen evidence of the struggles of people in terms of getting out-of-cell time, especially during the pandemic, and the first thing going was education: okay, that is on the backburner. You talked about a slick operation on your end, but in terms of prisoner learners going from one prison estate to another and trying to continue education, have you any thoughts about what that is like? We visited a prison very recently and we got some feedback that suggested that the disruption or the churn in transferring between different estates is something that deeply impacts learning.

**Darren Burns:** Yes, it is hugely disjointed. Again, anecdotally, I have heard of men and women being halfway through a course, a 10-week



course in bricklaying or wherever it might be. You could have an individual who has completed five weeks of that course, then through no fault of their own either gets moved on to a lower category prison or a different prison, for whatever reason, and they lose all that work that they have built up over the last five weeks. Effectively, they have to start again, which is obviously a cost and more time, or often they are not able to get on a course, or the prison that they are going to go to does not even offer that course. That five weeks they have done in bricklaying has been completely useless.

**Sasha Simmonds:** Going back to the first point you mentioned, in construction, massively now main contractors that are building the high-rises in London do something called a “pre-induction”. I have to hope, with my fingers crossed, that the guy has a home leave before that pre-induction where they can access the internet and do their pre-induction, otherwise we are asking them to put their health and safety behind them and it is not going to work.

With a lot of our registration forms—our due diligence that we have to deliver as a company—I am having to print them out and wherever they are in the country that week you will find me, whether it be Manchester, the south, anywhere, because these guys need to complete these forms or they cannot get paid. It is a barrier that they could complete on the phone if they had a phone.

I know that HMP Highpoint currently has some laptops with restricted learning, but the guys are able to complete their own CVs and things like that. They would be of great benefit to many prisons if that was available.

Q381 **Chair:** Tony, just before you answer that, given that Her Majesty’s Prison Berwyn is a new prison, has this made things easier? If you could answer both questions, that would be great.

**Tony Hughes:** Yes, I was going to say we were quite lucky in that the prison that we are working in is new. The facilities there are top standard so communication with the prison has been excellent. The staff that we have put within the workshop have been issued with prison service e-mail addresses, so we have direct access to our staff through e-mails. The phone network direct-dial into the workshop office works very well, so we are able to issue manufacturing information directly to the workshop, which is then printed out and dispersed to the workers within that. We are quite lucky that we have not seen or had any issues that have been mentioned by some of the other parties here.

**Chair:** What about the IT for prisoners?

**Tony Hughes:** Again, because we are still in infancy and because we have not got active education yet with the prisoners, it is not something that we can comment on. As part of the fit-out of the workshop we have a classroom that has been constructed for the Novus Cambria education, which is fully kitted-out with IT points. In the coming weeks or early in

the new year, that will have computers or laptops to aid the learning of the prisoners.

Q382 **Apsana Begum:** Thank you. It is quite interesting to hear what you all said, because when we visited a prison it was mainly prisoners who had been there for 10 or 11 years. To think that digital skills are not necessarily a part of their learning and are not embedded in it, and yet they are expected to come out and everything is online—paying bills and all those simple tasks. It is quite interesting to hear your feedback.

I have one final question. What would you say is the main current challenge for former prisoners in finding employment?

**Sasha Simmonds:** Just support in general. A lot of them come out with half of this or half of that. I have had a guy that did not have a bank account set up, so how on earth was he going to get paid? So, support.

**Tony Hughes:** I would agree with Sasha. It is support and having the backup to help aid them through what is a difficult time of resettlement.

**Darren Burns:** For me, sadly, it is still discrimination. A lot of employers still need educating on the benefits of employing ex-offenders, and the fact that it is not the perceived risk and all these tropes that are constantly perpetuated through the media—they are just not true. Often employers will reach for the most extreme examples and assume that everybody in prison is a dangerous, violent criminal who cannot be trusted. It is simply not the case.

**Ted Rosner:** Yes, being labelled an “ex-offender”. We are not going to change people’s opinions about ex-offenders very quickly, but we can very quickly change the requirement to disclose and the ability for the employer to ask.

Q383 **Nicola Richards:** If there was one thing the Government could do to incentivise businesses to employ former prisoners what would that be, in your opinion?

**Sasha Simmonds:** In my personal opinion, I have worked with many major contractors but the Ministry of Justice only seemed interested in reporting on them and what they had done. There need to be case studies from all different types of companies and what they do. It is amazing to work with companies like Wates and Willmott Dixon, it is amazing to work with Timpson, but there are a lot of small companies that take most of their workforce from this background, so supporting across the board everyone that does something good.

**Darren Burns:** I agree with Sasha. Case studies are vitally important to enable other employers to see how it can work very well, and how there are a lot of very professional, credible, and very deserving people in custody who need employment. On a more practical level, reduced National Insurance contributions for employers who are prepared to give opportunities to those with convictions would be a good start.

**Chair:** Or even a skills tax credit, which is something I proposed.

**Darren Burns:** Yes.

**Ted Rosner:** Yes, a financial incentive of some sort would be useful. Employing prisoners and doing work in prisons often achieve the same results as with other people but at about three times the effort, which is inefficient for business.

**Tony Hughes:** Yes, I would agree with support and possibly positive reporting. Prisons, unfortunately, get the media's attention when things go wrong. It would be good to have a bit more of a positive spin on it and have media releases on the positive results of working with prisoners and ex-offenders.

Q384 **Nicola Richards:** What would you say is the one benefit from employing ex-offenders?

**Tony Hughes:** For us, it is being able to give people opportunities. What we found when working with ex-offenders is that nine times out of 10 these people are extremely grateful if given the opportunities to have a career. Work in construction is a career and can be sustained. Yes, that is it for us.

**Sasha Simmonds:** From a commercial perspective we are able to staff our sites. Working in recruitment, we will have many people who go to work on Monday and then are not to be seen for the rest of the week. These guys are here six days a week if they can be—can they work more hours—which is brilliant. From my perspective, it is nice to do this. I work with these guys personally and I would say 99% of them are incredible human beings who just needed that next chance.

**Ted Rosner:** For me personally, and for my colleagues, it gives us a great reason to get up in the morning and go to work. Commercially speaking, we work in the specialty coffee industry, which is an industry that has a real interest in social impact and in improving opportunities for people. You have a lot of left-leaning people in the industry, so the fact that we help rehabilitate prisoners gives us better brand loyalty with our consumers.

Q385 **Chair:** What you are saying is it is not just a moral reason, it is also a commercial decision you have made?

**Ted Rosner:** Absolutely, yes. It is both and we are very open about that.

**Chair:** That is with all of you?

**Sasha Simmonds:** Definitely.

**Darren Burns:** Yes. On the commercial reasons, people are very hardworking, very loyal. They stay with us longer than people we recruit from other streams. We find that they bring with them not only lots of life experience but personal resilience; obviously, because they have been

able to navigate their way through that prison sentence. It just enriches our business because we get people from lots of diverse backgrounds.

They are some of the commercial reasons but, again, the societal reasons just very briefly are that we believe that people deserve a second chance. Employment is a key factor to reduce reoffending, and ultimately if people are in gainful employment fewer crimes are being committed, our communities are safer, and there are fewer victims.

Q386 **Chair:** We were talking about IT earlier and it seems to me it is pretty disastrous across the board. Why can prisoners not be given things like Google Chromebooks, which you can have firewalls on and which children are given? There is no need to download expensive software on them. I should say I am not a salesman for Google at all, but I know what they do and I use them. What is the problem? They are very cheap as well. You can buy them for £100 to £200 in some cases. Why would that not be an option for prisoners? Is that the sort of thing that could be given out to prisoners to use in order to be able to have the education that they need?

**Ted Rosner:** There needs to be a fundamental cultural shift in the approach to what constitutes security. What constitutes security at the moment in the prison estates is that people cannot communicate with other people in order to commit a potential crime or compromise the safety of people on the estate. However, it is by restricting somebody's ability to communicate that you make them into an institutionalised, difficult person with no links to their family, with no links to potential employers, and so on. The likelihood of making that person into someone who is going to create problems later is, in my opinion, far higher. Again, I have no data for this other than comparing our system with other systems that work in that way rather than ours.

**Tony Hughes:** Yes, it is a bit different for what we are doing because the skills that we are providing are a lot more hands-on, so they are understanding the techniques for construction. I can see the benefits of having access to methods of communicating and having that education. It could be beneficial, as Ted said, but it is not something I could comment on further.

**Darren Burns:** Yes, I completely agree with everything Ted said. What runs secondary to that is something that was mentioned before. When you consider we have life-sentence prisoners who have been in prison for 10 years plus, technology moves at such a pace now. It is absolutely essential; you cannot survive without it in today's society. For example, you cannot book a GP appointment; you cannot book a dental appointment; people need to scan QR codes to get into places now; there is contactless payment. All these basic IT things should be taught in prison before people are released.

Q387 **Chair:** Would Chromebooks be an answer? They update over eight years; they have eight years' shelf life.

**Darren Burns:** If it is just a case of tutorials, which people can sit in their cells and watch how these things work and how they can set them up, then yes.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I believe Chromebooks are available in HMP Highpoint and I believe they were donated by a charity. They have had great success and guys are able to create their own CVs ready for work.

I would say as well that my guys who are on ROTL and licensed, who have access to smartphones, who are able to contact their parents who are poorly and ill, they have a much better attitude because they have those accessibilities. They can do their training on their phone.

**Chair:** They were able to do a firewall with the Chromebooks, were they?

**Sasha Simmonds:** Yes, I believe so. I believe you can only access what is available to you.

**Chair:** It seems to me a no-brainer.

Q388 **Kim Johnson:** Sasha, you raised the point before about the MOJ wanting to only focus on large national companies that are involved in prison education. I visited HMP Liverpool last week and one of the prisoners was saying to me how it was important to develop stronger links with small independent businesses in and around the prisons. I wanted to know who you thought is responsible for doing that. We talked about the hubs that had been set up and whether they were the ones responsible for doing that in terms of developing those stronger links.

**Sasha Simmonds:** In the five years that I have worked with ROTL, juggling among my other roles—it is now my full-time role—I have probably placed over 50 people on licence and I have introduced them to major contractors. When I approached the MOJ to say I would like to give my opinion, it said I was not a big company.

It is educating the people who are in charge of the case studies and things like that, and making them aware that these small companies—the ones that go and talk to their friends over dinner who also have a small company—are going to make more of a change than someone that just takes one person to tick a box.

Q389 **Tom Hunt:** This is about the comments made about discrimination against ex-offenders when they enter the job market. I was very interested in what you had to say about the benefits in terms of resilience and so on. This is clearly of huge societal importance if we are going to promote rehabilitation.

In terms of what Ted was saying about the requirement that potential employers cannot ask or find out and that the individuals in question did not have to disclose, I am interested to know how you think this might work in practice. I do see some of the benefits in that approach but also potentially some unintended consequences. Particularly if they were in prison for a particular type of crime, it might be pertinent, in some

circumstances, for employers to know. Would what you suggested operate with some caveats?

**Ted Rosner:** You are asking for my personal opinion?

**Tom Hunt:** Yes, your personal opinion.

**Ted Rosner:** My ideal personal opinion is that the principle behind imprisonment is to restrict someone's liberty during the term of their imprisonment. If we wish their punishment to continue after the restriction of their liberty, then that is a principle that personally I would not get behind. My answer is no, I do not think that there ought to be a restriction on that if this person was in the community not on a licence. If this person has served their time in prison, I believe that that wipes the slate clean for that person.

Q390 **Tom Hunt:** Even if, for example, the individual in question was in prison for child abuse or something like that and they were going for a position in the education sector or working with children—do you think even in that instance it should be completely wiped?

**Ted Rosner:** If it was the opinion of whoever was granting the licence terms that that should not be a term of the licence, yes. However, it may be very unwise for that to be granted as not a condition of the licence.

Q391 **Chair:** You are talking about after the licence, once they get employed. Is that what you are asking about? Once they have left prison and are not on temporary licence or whatever, would you then believe that CV should be disclosed if there was such a circumstance as Tom was describing?

**Ted Rosner:** We have to make a decision. If we truly believe that a prison sentence is not for life, then I believe that we would not be able to derogate from that in those circumstances.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I would just like to add that in construction many companies now have something called Ban the Box. If your offence is not specifically related to the industry, then it is nothing to do with anyone.

I would also say, on the point about the protection of the site and the individual themselves, that I only have one person aware on the site at any one time, and it is down to that project manager or project director whether they are comfortable with that crime and its background. That being said, a lot of the guys have been video interviewed because they have the capacity to and the managers are always happy to take them. I have never had someone go, "Absolutely not".

**Tony Hughes:** Yes, I would agree with Sasha. The stigma behind ex-offenders and what they have done can be kept to a very small number of people on construction sites. As long as everyone is aware of that situation and it can be well managed, I do not think that it should be a reason not to employ.

**Darren Burns:** I think it can be industry dependent but you also have to be realistic and very sensible. There are a lot of people in custody,

unfortunately, who have committed some very serious offences. In the example you gave before about child sex offences, for me it would be far too much of an organisational risk and plain stupid to give somebody who has committed those sorts of offences a position in a school or a crèche.

On that basis, what we do as a business is ask for full and frank disclosure and we will make an informed decision at the point of interview whether we feel that the level of offending is going to be a good fit for our business.

Q392 **Chair:** You are all enlightened businesses and you employ ex-offenders. In that case, why is it a problem if they disclose the fact that they are ex-offenders?

**Ted Rosner:** For us, it is not. In fact, for us, we discriminate positively in favour.

**Chair:** Exactly, so why is there a problem in knowing it in advance then?

**Ted Rosner:** Because I am speaking more on the basis of the rest of society and for a lot of prisoners as a whole.

Q393 **Chair:** But if we can encourage more enlightened employers like you, then it is not a problem to disclose it.

**Ted Rosner:** I do not believe that is realistic.

**Chair:** You do not believe that there could be many more employers like you and the other ones here today?

**Ted Rosner:** I think we will always be in the minority.

**Darren Burns:** I do not think that is the case. I am more positive and hopeful. I can certainly see a time in maybe 10 or 15 years where it could even be illegal to discriminate on the basis of somebody with convictions, but I think it will always be context dependent. Again, if I am a haulage firm and I am going to employ HGV drivers, it would not be right for me to give somebody a job with a string of driving convictions—death by dangerous driving, drunk driving, and so on. There should always be those checks and balances in place.

My main concern is that for lots of employers who do recruit from this cohort, some of the newer ones have not got their tools in the box to be able to interpret the information given to them properly. Often when I speak to employers the first thing they will say is, "We do not want to employ anybody who has committed a violent offence", and they have no real understanding of a violent offence. On a huge spectrum, it could be very lower end.

**Sasha Simmonds:** I would agree. Four years ago I would have said, "I do not want to work with anyone who is violent". It takes time; you have to broaden your mind. You have to meet these people and then you get to know these people and that the offence they committed 20 years ago is not the person they are today. At the same time, Google is a tool that

is readily available to everyone. We need to protect these people. The last thing we want is someone who is in for a violent sexual crime to be googled because they look familiar and then to be at risk of harm.

**Chair:** Tom, did you want to come back?

Q394 **Tom Hunt:** I guess I sympathise with what Ted said. Unfortunately, not every employer is like you and this discrimination will happen. I can see the reason for doing something but then I do think it should be context dependent. I think that you would get a real outcry if you had somebody who had been in prison for 25 years for some horrific child abuse and it was completely wiped from their slate, so it was impossible for a school and people who are legally responsible for protecting vulnerable children to even find out. There must be a way of doing it so we can do a change in this area to address this discrimination but which is sensitive and able to be context dependent.

**Darren Burns:** To be clear, with the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, for anybody sentenced to over four years in custody their offence cannot be spent so it will always be disclosable.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. I mentioned the word "enlightened". You are incredibly enlightened companies and I think you show the best of business. I probably should not say this, but I have Timpson-repaired shoes on this very day. I know your company very well in my constituency and I guess my colleagues do.

Thank you to all of you for what you do. I hope to buy some of your coffee as well. I appreciate it and I hope many more companies do what you do and that you are right, Darren, that in 10 years' time we will see a sea change of companies doing this. It is helpful and invaluable and I wish you all well. Happy Christmas as well.