

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Support for ex-offenders, HC 58-i

Wednesday 7 Sep 2016

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Frank Field (Chair); Heidi Allen; Mhairi Black; Ms Karen Buck; Craig Mackinlay; Steve McCabe; Jeremy Quin.

Questions 1-60

Witnesses

[I](#): Darren Burns, National Recruitment Ambassador, Timpson, Kathryn Wildman, Lead Recruiter, Virgin Trains, and Tammy Moreton, Apprentice, Virgin Trains.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Darren Burns, Kathryn Wildman and Tammy Moreton.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome. Thank you for coming in. Might you begin the session by identifying who you are?

Tammy Moreton: I am Tammy Moreton. I am 23 years old and I work for Virgin Trains.

Kathryn Wildman: I am Kathryn Wildman, lead recruiter for Virgin Trains.

Darren Burns: My name is Darren Burns. I am the national recruitment ambassador for the Timpson Group.

Q2 **Chair:** Brilliant. Tammy, might I begin with you? Might you tell us what your experience was of trying to find work after leaving prison? That is the very nature of our inquiry.

Tammy Moreton: Once I got released from prison it was really hard for me to find employment. To start it all off, I was going on college courses, sport courses and things like that. Obviously, I was applying for jobs. Once you have mentioned that you have a criminal background, they don't want to know and don't want to give you the opportunity or to help you.

I was on a programme with the Prince's Trust to get into transport services and that's how I got on to my apprenticeship with Virgin Trains. From day one with the Prince's Trust and the beginning of my application with Virgin, I was honest and upfront with them about all of my background history, all the crimes I did and everything about that.

Q3 **Chair:** How did you hear about Virgin, Tammy?

Tammy Moreton: It was through the Prince's Trust. It was a Prince's Trust five-week long course, "Get into Transport". You did a week's work experience with Virgin Trains, London Midland Trains, Centro House and National Express, all in Birmingham. That's how I got on to getting an apprenticeship with them. I received a phone call one day asking me if I would like to attend the assessment day, where we did a little role play and team-building activities, and we obviously had our interview. I was up front, and a couple of months later, I had a phone call to say that I was given a placement, so I really appreciate Virgin for giving me that opportunity.

Q4 **Chair:** But the Prince's Trust was the gateway.

Tammy Moreton: Yes, it was.

Chair: Brilliant.

Q5 **Craig Mackinlay:** Tammy, you said it was difficult to find work after leaving prison, so you did some courses, and the Prince's Trust was key



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to that. Did you go up any of the traditional routes through DWP and Jobcentre Plus?

Tammy Moreton: Yes. I was on jobseekers' allowance, but I didn't feel like I got much help or support with them to help me get into employment. When it came to building my CV and my cover letters, I did all that through the Prince's Trust and other programmes like Sports 4 Life. They helped me build my CV up to the state I have got it to now. Other than that, I felt that as long as I was looking for jobs, they were happy. They didn't want to give me any extra support. I asked about some courses, but I didn't get anywhere with them.

Q6 **Craig Mackinlay:** So they didn't offer you any courses.

Tammy Moreton: I asked for them, but once I'd signed, that was it; they let me go.

Q7 **Craig Mackinlay:** So you were in the usual cycle of turn up, do your CV and leave.

Tammy Moreton: Yes, and half the time with the jobcentres, when I was going, they just called me up, sat me down, made me sign the piece of paper and let me on my way. They didn't even speak to me.

Q8 **Craig Mackinlay:** Were they aware that you are an ex-offender?

Tammy Moreton: Yes, I made them aware of that. I was also with another Work group called PeoplePlus. They helped me a bit more, and they gave me a grant to get an outfit for my interview, shoes and things like that. They were helpful, but when it came to the jobcentre, I didn't feel like I got anything from them.

Q9 **Craig Mackinlay:** The jobcentre, I suppose, did signpost you to PeoplePlus.

Tammy Moreton: Yes, but once they did that, they just took a back step and didn't want to know. They just let me go there, sign and be on my way.

Q10 **Craig Mackinlay:** What part of the country are you from, Tammy?

Tammy Moreton: From Birmingham.

Q11 **Ms Buck:** Just a very factual question: who referred you on to the Prince's Trust?

Tammy Moreton: I was assigned a mentor when I got out of prison. At first, she started with a programme called Spurgeons, under the Sisters Project. She has now got her own company called the New Leaf Initiative in the West Midlands area. Her name's Marie-Claire, and she got me in contact with the Prince's Trust. Before I got on to this course, there was another programme that I did, so she's been a massive help to me.

Q12 **Ms Buck:** Do you mind me asking this? Your experience is very important to us, without wanting to go too much into the details. Is she a professional mentor or is she just someone who is a volunteer and has



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some experience?

Tammy Moreton: She's made her own company, and it's all ex-offender based. Even she is an ex-offender. It's an ex-offender company, and she has set up with a college so other people can get their mentoring degree and start helping out and volunteering.

Q13 **Ms Buck:** Who assigned you to her?

Tammy Moreton: I was put to her through Spurgeons—the Sisters Project. She was my mentor when I got released from prison. Every time she's moved on, I've stayed with her because she was a good support and a good friend to have at the time. I am still in connection with her now.

Q14 **Ms Buck:** So would you say that having a single person who you stayed connected with over the whole period has been very important to you?

Tammy Moreton: That's been a massive help to me.

Ms Buck: Thank you.

Q15 **Heidi Allen:** Just a really tiny question. One thing Tammy hasn't told people is that she's a film star—I recognise her from the video that Virgin put out. How long ago was the experience you had with the jobcentre? I'm not sure how long you've been working for Virgin. When was that?

Tammy Moreton: That's been a while because just before I got to Virgin I was with National Express bus but things did not work out. So, it has been about a year.

Q16 **Heidi Allen:** Oh, just a year. Because the jobcentres are changing.

Tammy Moreton: I started with Virgin Trains on 30 November last year.

Heidi Allen: Okay. So it was about a year ago. Thank you.

Q17 **Craig Mackinlay:** Tammy, you have been very helpful. Final question from me: when you were serving the last part of your sentence and had a release date lined up, was it the probation service that put you towards Spurgeons and that route to finding your mentor? Who organised that for you?

Tammy Moreton: The Sisters Project programme. That was stepping into HMP Drake Hall and ready to start just after I was released. It was working with the young offenders and anyone under 21 and so many months was classed as a young offender. I was already released but I mentioned it to my probation officer, so we were able to set it up so they could come and see me at probation to start it up.

Obviously, once I was released I was high risk. The more I kept on the right progress and going in regularly to see my probation officer, the lower my risk got. Then I could start meeting my mentor on my own and outside the office, and just getting on a bit better.

Q18 **Craig Mackinlay:** Thank you. To the employers: we are very grateful for the work that you do. What is the structure of your plans before people



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come out of prison? Do you get into the prisons and advertise yourselves, so that you have an employment programme advertised within the prison for people to take an interest in? How active are you and what do you do?

Kathryn Wildman: Yes. From Virgin Trains' point of view we do have links with a number of prisons up and down our routes: Forest Bank, Thorn Cross, HMP Addiewell. We are visiting a young offenders institute in a couple of weeks' time as well.

We talk to the prisons beforehand about the types of role we have available, the kind of people that we think would be best suited to those roles. Then we go into the prisons and run a recruitment event, in a similar way to the way that we would recruit normally, so the standards and criteria are exactly the same.

Based on that, we have a chat and ask the people in there to disclose, so we are aware of their background and the crimes and what they have done since to take responsibility and to ensure that it does not happen again. Then we take a decision on whether we think they are going to be good for us as a business.

Q19 **Craig Mackinlay:** Darren, what is your experience?

Darren Burns: Our ex-offender programme is referred to as the Timpson Foundation. I am extremely proud to say that we are one of the largest employers of ex-offenders in the UK. Currently, approximately 10% of our workforce are either people who have been to prison or have convictions. That is roughly 450 people.

We see the Timpson Foundation as a stream of recruitment that is threefold. The first stream of recruitment are people on ROTL—release on temporary licence—where we will go into the prison and interview suitable candidates. Those we deem suitable for work in our business we will give jobs on release from prison. The prisoners will leave prison every day, complete a full day's work in one of our high street branches before returning to prison in the evening. We find that extremely useful.

The second thing we do is go into prisons and interview serving prisoners for positions upon release. Some prisoners are not eligible for ROTL because of the establishments that they are in. However, we still go in, interview them, identify suitable candidates, meet them at the gate and provide them with opportunities as soon as they get released.

The second stream of recruitment, with regard to our foundation colleague, is our prison training academies. Timpson have five—soon to be six—prison training academies. Think of it like one of our high street stores that we have picked up and just dropped into a prison. Rather than prisoners working on the wing, serving tea and coffee to the officers, working on the servery—things that aren't very vocational—we get them to put on a Timpson uniform. These guys—and girls, because we work in the female estates—turn up to our training academies and we give them full training in all the services that we provide to the public.

Q20 Chair: Is that in prison that you do that?

Darren Burns: That's inside prison, yes. Once the guys are fully skilled, we meet them at the gate, give them a uniform, introduce them to colleagues and put them to work straightaway. Incidentally, the only thing that we can't teach in prison is key cutting, for obvious reasons *[Laughter.]* That is mainly for security, but everything else we teach.

The other stream of recruitment with our foundation colleagues on ex-offenders are people who just come to us either from a jobcentre or walk into our branches with an application form. Again, anybody who ticks that box that they have a criminal conviction, we will discuss it at the point of interview and have full disclosure. If it is something we are comfortable with and feel we can work with, we will give them opportunities.

Q21 Craig Mackinlay: I suppose the big question to both of your organisations is "Why?" Why have you chosen to go down this very laudable route?

Kathryn Wildman: There are 65,000 offenders in prison at any one time in the UK, with very few businesses actively recruiting those people. It gives us access to a talent pool that we would not get access to otherwise—people with some great skills and experience who can add value to the business. Also, we know that if people have work when they are released from prison or shortly after, it greatly reduces the reoffending rate. In terms of building safer communities, we are helping with that as well.

Q22 Craig Mackinlay: Do you do it because you get that talent pool, because recruitment is becoming difficult in the normal market, or is it because there is a degree of social responsibility within the company? Is it a bit of both, maybe?

Kathryn Wildman: I guess it is a bit of both. From our point of view, we have no problem filling our vacancies in the usual kind of way, but it is great to give people a second chance and not to judge them on the past, but on how they have behaved since. We allow them to take responsibility and to add value. The people we have taken add value to our business.

Darren Burns: For us it is twofold. Initially, we think it is the right thing to do. We are all about giving people a second chance. There are 10 million people in the UK with a criminal conviction more serious than a driving offence, and we think it is madness to throw those people on the employment scrapheap and say they are worthless and can never work again. What we do is give these guys an opportunity to put right what they have done wrong. The National Audit Office states that the rate of reoffending is 61% for those who have not got a job within the first two years. That reduces to 19% if people have employment. So again, there is clear evidence that engaging with these people and giving them meaningful employment helps to seriously reduce offending. We also believe that it is our responsibility to run our business ethically and responsibly.



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Secondly, probably the most important reason we do it is because it is good for business. I am pretty confident that if it was not good for business, we would stop doing it tomorrow. By and large, the vast majority of ex-offenders that we employ are a huge asset to our business. They turn out to be very loyal, highly productive colleagues, and that is often because they have been turned down again and again by other employers. By us showing the trust to give them that opportunity, it is paid back in loyalty and highly productive colleagues. They are often very thankful that we have given them this trust and this opportunity, and it works very well for us.

Craig Mackinlay: What are the barriers in the system to other employers doing similar to you? Are there systemic barriers? It sounds like you go into prisons and set up a bit of an apprenticeship programme.

Darren Burns: To be honest, I do not think there are any real barriers. I personally think that it is a perceived lack of education. Basically, employers hide behind the perceived risks of employing ex-offenders. Historically, the majority of employers perceive ex-offenders to be lazy, untrustworthy, problematic and so on. We have found the complete opposite to be true. Many also hide behind defunct HR policies that were written 20 years ago and are not fit for purpose. We often advise businesses that those archaic policies should be torn up and effectively started again to be more inclusive and more reflective of today's society. It always comes back to education. Employers are often scared to employ ex-offenders because they perceive all these risks that are not really true in our opinion.

Q23 **Craig Mackinlay:** Timpson is quite unique—I use them all the time; I think this watch-strap was done by Timpson—in that you have solo workers in high street shops handling cash. It is higher up the risk scale than Virgin Trains, perhaps.

Darren Burns: Interestingly, if we are taking someone out on temporary licence from prison—that is, serving prisoners who leave to come and work in our branches—the first thing we do on the first day is we hand them our banking. We give them a bag containing £4,000 or £5,000 and we ask them to take it to the bank for us. We have been doing that since 2002, and we have never lost any banking. It is about showing that trust. Another interesting statistic is that foundation colleagues or ex-offenders are statistically much less likely to steal from us than colleagues recruited from other streams such as the job centre—

Craig Mackinlay: Less likely?

Darren Burns: Much less likely, yes.

Q24 **Ms Buck:** Starting off with Tammy, if I may, there has apparently been a high success level in terms of reoffending on the Virgin Train scheme in particular. Why do you think that is?

Tammy Moreton: Virgin has given us the chance and the opportunity to prove and show that not everyone is the same and not everyone does



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reoffend. Once someone has shown that they are willing to help and support us, it helps. It is so hard to get into employment. When you are given an opportunity like this, because you have got the help and support there, you know that that is the beginning of a new life and a new future for yourself.

- Q25 **Ms Buck:** In terms of the experience, is the level of reoffending a critical issue? Picking up on your last point about other employers not being willing to give people chances, obviously there is the fear of reoffending, whether it is in the workplace or outside. That will be a key factor for people. That will be a worry. Is it essential that successful schemes brand themselves as having a virtually nil reoffending rate?

Darren Burns: I would not say it is essential, but I think it is important that employers should not tar all ex-offenders with the same brush. For instance, you might have an ex-offender who has got a minor driving conviction, as opposed to somebody who is a prolific offender and has been to prison many times for quite violent offences, so it is important that employers can make that distinction. Our retention rate is extremely impressive: 75% of foundation colleagues or ex-offender colleagues that we employ are still with us after two years. We also estimate that 10% of the people who leave us within that time leave for further employment. So our retention rate is essentially 85%. It could be argued that 15% of people we employ through our foundation scheme reoffend, which I think is pretty impressive.

- Q26 **Chair:** Kathryn, might you answer that same question?

Kathryn Wildman: In terms of the people we have taken on at Virgin Trains, nobody has reoffended. We have offered 30 people employment with us. Not all of them are still with us; 26 are. Some people have left us just because it was not the right role for them in the end and they have moved on to other things, but we have not had anybody reoffend while they have been with us. The first people we took four years ago are still with us now.

- Q27 **Ms Buck:** To what extent do you think your successes as employers are to do with the level of support and intervention that happens with ex-offenders before they get to you? Tammy, you talked about the mentoring and the Prince's Trust and so forth. Are successful schemes based on the fact that people coming to you for work have already had a fair degree of advice and support to get them into the right place? Or is it just employment in itself that is enough to make the difference?

Darren Burns: Personally I think it is twofold. At Timpson's we engage with people while they are still in custody. If we can get people like that on temporary licence, that is an opportunity for us to form a relationship and a rapport with these people—we get to know what they are about and what makes them tick. We have huge success with people who work for us on day release.

The other thing we have is the training academies. Again, this can be sometimes 12 or 18 months of training, and all this time these people are



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being assessed. We know what makes them tick and we know if there are any indicators that suggest they are going to reoffend. So from that point of view, it is essential that we engage with them while they are still in custody.

However, our colleagues and our field team will embrace any ex-offender who comes through any route, and we provide the guidance and support as soon as they are with us.

- Q28 **Ms Buck:** Is this model that you two have adopted something that you go out and sell to other employers, either in partnership with DWP or in your own right?

Kathryn Wildman: We do it off our own bat at the moment, but we are really passionate about pushing this agenda forward, so we would be happy to work with any other businesses, the Government or DWP to make sure that businesses out there can take that first step and can employ offenders.

- Q29 **Ms Buck:** And do you think of yourselves as doing it as part of your social investment role, or do you see yourselves as doing it as a hard-nosed business model that makes use of potential employees to your mutual benefit?

Darren Burns: I think it's both. It is part of our CSR agenda, which we are very proud of, but, to convince other businesses to engage with ex-offenders, you have got to sell them the fact that it is beneficial to do business and engage with ex-offenders, so we engage with an organisation called the Employers' Forum for Reducing Re-offending. There are a lot of forward-thinking employers on that. Again, Timpson's is a key player and we give our examples of where it has gone right and where it has gone wrong. Essentially, it is a platform for any other forward-thinking businesses to ask questions about things they should avoid and things they should look out for, and how things should be run properly.

- Q30 **Ms Buck:** Can I ask about your HR functions? Do you have a special HR approach to supporting ex-offenders and assisting managers to deal with any issues that arise? I don't necessarily mean offending behaviour, but some of the factors that can lead people into offending in the first place—educational problems, mental health problems and so on—do not necessarily just disappear. How do you work with HR to ensure that people are supported effectively?

Kathryn Wildman: One of the worries for ex-offenders is that when they come into the workplace they are worried about people finding out about their background, so confidentiality is really important to allow them to show what they can do on a level playing field. We ensure that our HR business partners know when we have employed an ex-offender, just so that they can be that first point of contact to give them support if they are having any problems or issues—anything that they want to talk about—so that they know they have somebody to talk to. I would have been involved in the recruitment as well, and they can always come and talk to me if they have any problems or issues or just need support with something.



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Q31 **Ms Buck:** My last question is slightly different. I think I am right in saying that Virgin don't ask for disclosure.

Kathryn Wildman: We do ask for disclosure.

Q32 **Ms Buck:** You do. And Timpson?

Darren Burns: The same with Timpson, yes.

Q33 **Ms Buck:** This is a sort of general comment, taking on board your point about the number of people with criminal records. Do you feel it is helpful to seek disclosure when in fact the system is going to be automatically generating disclosure of what can be very minor and not relevant offences?

Darren Burns: A large part of our business is photography, so it is important for us that we know exactly what people have done, particularly the people we are taking on from prison—we know everything about them.

Ms Buck: I think that's a different point.

Darren Burns: But yes, it is essential for us that we have full disclosure. We need to be comfortable with the offence that you have committed. For example, if somebody has committed an assault, we need to know whether it is racially aggravated or homophobic—anything we are not comfortable with. We obviously have to respect our existing colleagues and our customers and need to ensure that their safety is paramount, so we will have full disclosure with candidates. If it is something that we feel we can move on with and are comfortable and happy with, we will give them an opportunity, but we do come across ex-offenders who have committed offences that are not really suitable and are not a good match for working with Timpson.

Q34 **Heidi Allen:** From listening to Kathryn and Darren, it sounds like you have different models. Darren, Timpson seems much more about going in there and interviewing and training people in prisons, whereas, if I have understood it correctly, it feels like your role and the apprenticeship you offer, Kathryn, is more for once you are out—support on the outside. Do I have that right?

Kathryn Wildman: Not quite. We do go into prisons to interview people, and, if at all possible, we try to offer them employment on release. We also work with charities and social enterprises, such as New Leaf, where Tammy had a mentor, and Working Chance. There are various different routes by which people can come to us. We still go into prisons and interview people there. If people are not quite job-ready, we offer interview support to allow them to be job-ready when they come out, and we give them feedback on their interview technique as well.

Q35 **Heidi Allen:** That must be when you have spotted a candidate who you think is potentially great but just not quite ready.

Kathryn Wildman: Not quite ready, yes.

Q36 **Heidi Allen:** In all our work looking at job support for people from very



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different backgrounds, it is very clear that one size doesn't fit all. I am keen to understand what the pros and cons are of the investment. Darren, you put an awful lot of investment into prisons. Is that the magic ingredient? Kathryn, having heard what you just said, is that the magic ingredient—that you will give the top-up training if that's what somebody needs? What is it that makes it work so well, with these people working for you and the reoffending levels being so low afterwards?

Darren Burns: Because we have been doing this for such a long time now, we have come to be able to spot people who are going to be successful in our business. It is fair to say that you shouldn't tar all offenders with the same brush. Some of them are not work-ready. Some of them have come from four generations of unemployment. Some of them are not presentable—bear in mind that all our roles are customer-facing. Some of them do not have the requisite communication skills. Because of that, we do discriminate. We will say, "No, you aren't right for us," but we do have a list of other employers that we can refer people to. If I identify somebody who is a great guy or girl but not really suitable for Timpson, I can pass them on to a role that is more suitable for them at one of our other businesses. However, we do discriminate. We only take people who are right for our business.

Q37 **Heidi Allen:** The business edge has to still be there, doesn't it?

Darren Burns: Yes.

Q38 **Heidi Allen:** Tammy, from your point of view, when you think about any of your mates that you made in prison and what has happened to them since they have come out—some will have had better or worse experiences than you, I am sure—what do you think is the magic ingredient that companies like this, and Virgin I guess is your closest experience, offer that make it really successful to help people get back on their feet and not reoffend?

Tammy Moreton: I think it is about helping while they are still in prison because there is a lot of it—the majority of the time—where you are just sitting around and you have not got anything to do. Some prisons are a working jail to get you ready for when you are released, but that is not necessarily working like Virgin and Timpson do. That is just little jobs within the prison itself. In my personal experience, I think what Virgin and Timpson do is a great idea. It does help and it starts getting more skills and better skills than just what the prison itself can offer.

Q39 **Heidi Allen:** Because it means something—it is a proper company, isn't it?—to train and work for that business.

Tammy Moreton: It does.

Q40 **Heidi Allen:** I am not doing down at all the work that prisons do. When we went to Featherstone, they were making woodwork and all sorts—you name it—but it is still not quite the same, I guess, as a proper employer training you.



Tammy Moreton: I never thought I would be where I am today, especially working with Virgin and especially sitting where I am today and seeing the people that I have seen—I saw Richard Branson himself. I never thought I would have got this far in as little time as I have. I never expected to be here. It makes a difference, but you have got to be ready yourself. You have got to be willing to make the effort, once you know you want a fresh start and a new life and you don't want to live the life of a criminal. Obviously, you know I am an ex-offender; I don't like living that life, I'm not like that, I'm not about that life any more. I have changed myself to make myself a better person and it is all down to being given the help and the opportunity and the support that Virgin has given me. It is just onwards and upwards for me now.

Q41 **Heidi Allen:** Quite right. Pause: I'm going to cry.

Kathryn and Darren, are there are differences you have seen? Not necessarily naming names, but in the different prisons that you have worked with, can you see a difference? Is it, "Oh, we are going to go into prison X, oh they are hopeless in there, they don't do anything to get the guys ready to come out"? Are there variations in the readiness of prisoners that you see across the board, depending on how different prisons have dealt with them?

Kathryn Wildman: From our point of view, no. I think it is about making sure that you have that good relationship and that good rapport with the prison so that they are clear on what it is you are looking for. There is really no point in putting forward people who are not ready. They could be nearly ready, but if they are not ready there is no point in having those people put in front of you, so they work really hard to make sure that the people we see are ready when they come out and they are ready to be employed and have got something to give.

Darren Burns: From our experience at Timpson, there is huge inconsistency across the board. Some prisons are extremely forward-thinking, which is often a result of a prison governor who is prepared to work with resettlement and is really serious about rehabilitation. Often other prisons have other agendas, such as security and this, that and the other, and they aren't really resettlement-focused. For us, we try to target and identify the prisons that we feel we can work with best to get the best outcomes. There are huge inconsistencies. Some prisons are not the best, some prisons are.

Heidi Allen: I don't know whether that is something we want to explore a little bit more, perhaps.

Chair: If we could move forward.

Q42 **Heidi Allen:** Thank you. I have another question I am supposed to ask. The DWP has a campaign and I will be interested to know if any of you have heard of it and what your views are on how successful it is. It is called See Potential. It is aimed at helping and giving support to people from a whole range of backgrounds who are struggling to find



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employment, ex-offenders being one of those groups. Tammy, have you ever heard of it? Do you know anything about it?

Tammy Moreton: I haven't, no, sorry.

Heidi Allen: Kathryn?

Kathryn Wildman: I can't comment on a specific campaign but we would be willing to work more with DWP and other businesses to make sure that the agenda is out there.

Heidi Allen: Darren?

Darren Burns: Timpson was part of the See Potential campaign. We think any positive exposure to encourage employers to engage with ex-offenders is worthwhile. However, it was limited to social media, particularly LinkedIn, and, while it was useful in some respects—without wanting to generalise—maybe some of the older population aren't really au fait with social media or LinkedIn in particular, and some of these people are going to be ex-offenders, so they will be left by the wayside essentially, because they are not using these platforms.

Personally, I feel that it would have been better if it had been a TV campaign, which would have been able to reach a lot more people. With that being said, some large, high-profile employers were involved. We have certainly seen the benefit in it, but we think it could have been improved. If anything similar is going to be run in the future, we would like to see more engagement from more employers and, again, perhaps with a TV campaign to back it up.

Q43 **Heidi Allen:** If we accept that the advertising was not as great as it might have been, was the infrastructure within the DWP okay, the machinery to connect employers and to network?

Darren Burns: Absolutely. We have a fantastic relationship with the DWP—

Heidi Allen: I bet you have.

Darren Burns: We have produced a number of tweets and we posted on LinkedIn, but we think that a lot more could have been done to reach more people. That would have been more effective. But yes, the infrastructure was in place and the organisation was there, but I think it was fairly limited in the amount of people it reached.

Q44 **Steve McCabe:** We are getting quite a mixed picture here. We hear about some of the good things that your companies are doing, and we have heard about Ban the Box, the employers' forum and See Potential, but we are also hearing that there are 21 different community rehabilitation companies, all apparently doing their own thing. I am interested in knowing what really works and what is missing. If you, with your good relationship with the DWP, Darren, could say, "Look, this is what is missing, these are the things that would really make the difference", what are they? What is the extra support on the initiatives about which



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you think, “Why aren’t we doing that?”, or “Why aren’t we helping to do that?”?

Darren Burns: For me, there should be more conformity. The whole thing is inconsistent and is not really joined up, so you have certain areas plugging one particular thing, or championing one particular cause, but for me it should be a holistic approach by all these agencies coming together to get ex-offenders back into employment. The whole thing is very disjointed.

For us, lots of things could be done by the DWP and lots of other Government agencies with regards to producing a myth-busting piece of literature to dispel some of the rumours and myths about ex-offenders and about the problems of employing ex-offenders. There should be more practical help in terms of assisting employers to recruit ex-offenders, with regards to disclosure, proper risk assessments and some of the problems and issues faced by ex-offenders, some of whom have complex needs and issues. So a lot more information should be provided—almost a guide to best practice on employing ex-offenders. If that was standardised across the board, and given to all employers and certainly the folks at the DWP and some of the other providers—the likes of PeoplePlus or A4e—it would be a lot more successful.

Kathryn Wildman: I think it is really difficult sometimes for businesses to take that first step, because they do not know where to go or who to contact, so in terms of that it would be great if the DWP could link or facilitate that contact between businesses, the different charities and the different prisons, and give people some guidance in that first step and in how to make contact. A couple of months ago, we released our toolkit, which is on our website and which tells a story about how we took our first step in employing ex-offenders. That can maybe be used as some guidance for businesses taking that first step, adapting the model that we used to their own businesses.

Darren Burns: Sorry to interrupt, but Timpson does something similar. We provide consultancy for all the forward-thinking businesses that are interested in getting into the ex-offender-employment side of it. I will turn up and we will discuss how to work through all those things that have gone wrong for us—again, it is about being honest with them, explaining some of the pitfalls. But yes, I agree, there should be something standardised, which is produced and given to employers, potentially through the DWP, about assisting them to engage with ex-offenders.

Q45 **Steve McCabe:** If you are an employer, maybe a small employer, thinking about this, do you need a single point of contact? Is it easy to know who you would ask these questions?

Kathryn Wildman: I think that is probably the issue. Businesses, small or large, don’t always know how to take that first step and make that contact. Having some central point to facilitate that, where people can go and make contact, will be a big help.

Q46 **Steve McCabe:** Tammy, what about your experience? I presume you



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would recommend that mentoring is available to everyone. Is there anything else you've experienced that made you think, "That would really make a difference," or, "If only you we did this, it would make a difference"?

Tammy Moreton: I just think, from my personal experience, once you've been released, at first there's not much help and support that people in prisons are made aware of. Some people have got council workers—certain workers, depending on what their crimes are—so they have that little bit of extra support, but sometimes once they've been released they just get left. They are not aware of the extra help and support that can be there upon release.

Ideally, we should find a way of making prisons aware that prisoners can get help to stay on the straight and narrow route once they've been released, and that there are people and companies out there willing to give them the opportunity to make a change and start a new life so they don't have to go back to reoffending. Once you apply for jobs, it does knock you down when you get declined. With me, I knew that I wasn't going to let myself get put down; it was just something to make me stronger and a better person to myself so I could carry on and get myself to where I need to be today.

Some people, if they are not that strong in themselves or do not believe in themselves, if they have been knocked down once, and they try again and get knocked down again, that's where they turn. They go back to reoffending because they know they've got the prison system to rely on. It's not a good thing, but they know that if they can't get anything out here they've got somewhere. Especially if they've been released and have nowhere to go, they will reoffend just to make sure they've got somewhere to get their head down. There is a slight lack of knowledge for the prisoners about what happens once they've been released and what support and help is out there through companies and other things.

Q47 **Steve McCabe:** Thank you. We are told that the cost of reoffending to the taxpayer is something in the region of £9 billion to £13 billion per year. Would tax incentives to companies that actively recruit ex-offenders make any difference to the strategy?

Darren Burns: I think so. I'm not sure about tax incentives, but you could certainly reduce national insurance contributions for companies that take ex-offenders.

Q48 **Steve McCabe:** Reduce national insurance?

Darren Burns: Yes. I think it would make a huge difference. You can also compel companies that embark on the apprenticeship schemes to take a proportion of ex-offenders, provided that they are suitable for the role. I think it would be a huge mistake to force ex-offenders upon anybody—particularly those who are not work-ready and suitable—but there are lots of ex-offenders out there who are extremely professional and have got lots to offer. Those people should be given a fair chance. I think it is twofold: we should compel businesses to take on apprentices from among ex-



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offenders who are suitable for employment, and we should consider a national insurance reduction for companies that take on ex-offenders. I think that would be a huge incentive.

Kathryn Wildman: I agree with what Darren has just said, to be honest. If you are compelled to take ex-offenders, they still need to be right for your business.

- Q49 **Mhairi Black:** You touched on where there are problems and things that can be helped or fixed, but what would you say the good things are, in terms of prisons engaging with employers? What are the good aspects that are working well?

Kathryn Wildman: From our experience, all the prisons we have worked with have been really open to us going in there and giving the guys and the girls in there a second opportunity. That is the feedback that we get from the people who are in prison—they never thought that someone would come into prison and give them that second opportunity. Even if they are not successful, they are still really grateful, because they then know that there are people out there who are willing to give them a second chance.

Darren Burns: We have pretty much found the same. Again, there are huge inconsistencies across the board but some prisons are very proactive in engaging with businesses to set up programmes of release on temporary licence, which often leads to employment on release.

Lots of other prisons hold regular recruitment fairs, where businesses and agencies are invited into prisons to speak to serving prisoners, give them information and even arrange interviews on release. Some prisons also offer vocational training. Unfortunately, that is often to level 2, which does not enable them to work post-release but, again, it is still very useful.

I can't stress enough the inconsistencies. With the good prisons, it always seems to be dependent on individual governors. We think a lot more could be done, particularly around softer skills. While there is a big focus on vocational skills—maybe plumbing, bricklaying, plastering and that sort of thing, which are very useful—we think it should be industry-led. We think the prisons should speak to industry, find out where the skills shortages are and offer the prisoners appropriate training there and give them a much-improved chance of gaining employment.

Going back to the soft skills element of it, I meet lots of people who are quite skilled because they have been through these courses—they can lay bricks, tile, do electrics, plumbing et cetera—but they are sadly lacking in communication skills for passing an interview including very basic things such as coming into a room, giving eye contact, shaking your hand and introducing themselves. That is something that is missed by prisons and should be championed, to be honest.

- Q50 **Mhairi Black:** My next question is more focused on you, Tammy. Some of the written evidence that we have already received said that there is concern over Jobcentre Plus staff. As you say, there are inconsistencies



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throughout different prisons everywhere. Some evidence suggests that sometimes the Jobcentre Plus staff can focus too much on ensuring that the prisoner gets the right benefits, and are more focused on process than implementing support for employment. Is that something that you have come across or experienced?

Tammy Moreton: I can't really say that I have because there was only one time when I was due for release. I started the claim for jobseeker's allowance while I was inside, the benefit for when I came out. It did not seem to make a difference in anything really.

Q51 **Mhairi Black:** Is that something that you have had any experience or knowledge of, Darren?

Darren Burns: From our point of view, the problem we have is that all ex-offenders seem to be put in the same sort of category. So we have agencies like the DWP, who historically signpost any ex-offender to Timpson.

Our recruitment policy is fairly strict. All of our candidates need to be excellent communicators, to be presentable, confident and able to engage with our customers. Often that is completely ignored and the minute somebody turns up or presents themselves to the jobcentre and ticks that ex-offender box they will be immediately signposted to Timpson, even if they are completely unsuitable.

We have been working closely with the DWP for the past 12 months to resolve that. What we do now is provide some of the senior managers and jobcentre managers with the DWP with our criteria for the sort of candidates that we take.

We have seen a huge improvement so it is now more targeted. Rather than send us any old ex-offender, with probably 40% or 60% of them unsuitable, the majority of people with offending backgrounds being referred now seem to be there or thereabouts for the people that we employ. It does need to be more targeted.

Q52 **Mhairi Black:** When you are trying to tailor different processes with the DWP, do you find that they are responsive and that things can usually get resolved and be better? Or do you have any hurdles with the DWP?

Darren Burns: No. I think it has been really good. Again, it all comes down to education. The majority of jobcentre managers don't really put two and two together. They just think that Timpson is synonymous with ex-offenders and they do not make that link. They just tar everyone with the same brush so, regardless of what offence you have committed, no matter how serious or minor, you will just be signposted to Timpson. Now that we have given them the input of the criteria of the candidates we employ, yes, it is more targeted and we have a lot more success now with the candidates that they send us.

Q53 **Heidi Allen:** I have a really quick question, probably aimed at Darren, maybe Kathryn. Darren, if you could recommend a prison for us to visit to see the textbook version of how to do it—the best possible way to get



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people ready to come out—where would you recommend?

Darren Burns: I've got a few. At HMP Thorn Cross, we have got three prison training academies. It is a very forward-thinking prison with lots of opportunities for the inmates. In addition to that, HMP Ford is very good. It sends a lot of people out on ROTL. It also sends people out to one of our training academies in HMP Blantyre House in the south-east. HMP New Hall, which is a female prison in Wakefield, has a number of academies. We have got a Max Spielmann training academy there.

We have huge success. We are also about to open a brand new training academy in HMP Downview in the south. Again, that will be set up as a Max Spielmann academy. We will have 15 women in there at any one time learning all our skills and services with a view to continuity across the board. We want to train these women in all our skills and services, send them out on ROTL and, when they are released, give them full-time jobs. The staff at HMP Downview—our academy is being built as we speak and up to now everything has gone really well. We are expecting big things from there.

Q54 **Heidi Allen:** I saw you nodding your head at some of those names, Kathryn.

Kathryn Wildman: Yes. We have had some great successes working with HMP Thorn Cross. Also, HMP Onley, which we visited in the past few weeks, is a really forward-thinking prison. They have got Halfords in there doing some training, getting people ready for when they come out. That is another prison we are looking to work with in the future as well.

Darren Burns: Can I quickly mention HMP Sudbury, which is also excellent? We have lots of people out on ROTL from Sudbury. It engages with many organisations, such as Boots. At one point, it had 200 to 250 people working out on ROTL in a big warehouse. That was very good.

Q55 **Jeremy Quin:** Sorry I was late. If I am asking you to repeat yourself, please don't repeat yourself; I can read the minutes. Picking up on Mhairi's first question and your response, Darren, all the written evidence we have had on release on temporary licence is that giving people a real job while still in prison is the most effective way of smoothing their path into employment. I assume it is also the best way of hooking new potential employers into the process. It is a very easy way of getting familiar with the structure. Is there anything that we could be doing to improve the take-up of those options regarding release on temporary licence?

Darren Burns: Yes. Because Timpson has got such a fantastic reputation and because we have got the experience of doing this, it is easier for us. If I was working for a different company that had never been into a prison before, it would be very difficult. Prisons should make it easier for any employers who are interested to come in, speak to the inmates and potentially offer them a placement on ROTL. It should be made a hell of a lot easier.



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Q56 Jeremy Quin: How does it work? Is any salary paid in any direction at all?

Darren Burns: Absolutely. The way it usually works is that I will form a relationship with a prison governor or a resettlement manager in the prison. We will have a chat. I will give them the criteria of the people we take. It is something I mentioned before, but we are looking for great communicators who are presentable and are able to engage with our customers. We cannot engage with sex offenders or arsonists.

The prison will then do a pre-screen. They will get together 10 or 12 men or women for me to come in and interview. Interviews are very informal. They are five to 10-minute chats. We will give opportunities to the ones who I feel will be suitable for our businesses, and it is as simple as that. The prison staff will then draw up a licence and the people will be released out into the community to work in our branches. While we are doing that, it is an opportunity for us to try before we buy.

We pay national living wage for everyone who works for us on ROTL. Unfortunately, there is a 40% deduction through the Prisoners' Earnings Act 1996, which we have got nothing to do with. That amount is paid to victims' charities. It is an opportunity for us to provide people with all the skills and services that they will need. When these guys eventually get released, we meet them at the gate, we give them their uniform and introduce them to the colleagues who they will be working with, wherever it is they will be released to in the country. We put them to work and we have huge success.

Q57 Jeremy Quin: You're still paying the national living wage, which is good to hear, but there is no financial upside for you in getting a prisoner on licence.

Darren Burns: No. Often the people we take on are above and beyond the quota of staff who are required. We do this purely from an altruistic, philanthropic viewpoint, but the selfish side of us doing that is that we get to retain fantastic colleagues. If we can have those colleagues for a six to 12-month period while they are still in custody, we pretty much know that they will be a safe bet when they get released. For us, it is a stream of recruitment.

Q58 Jeremy Quin: Do you think there is any case for appealing to businesses' more selfish interest by giving them some kind of discount? If 40% is going to victims charities as it is, it is not all going to the prisoners themselves. Would there be a way of making it financially attractive for businesses to employ offenders?

Darren Burns: I personally don't agree with the Prisoners' Earnings Act, but that is a personal view—it is not an opinion of Timpson. Prisoners often need all the money they can get. These guys are often going out to nothing, so they need all the money they can get to perhaps provide a deposit for a flat or accommodation, or maybe to buy a car or pay for some sort of training or college course if they are not going to work with Timpson. Personally, I think it is quite short-sighted to take such a large



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chunk. Individual governors do have discretion to reduce the 40% to as little as 10%, but for me it is a false economy. I think prisoners who work out and do a full day's work should receive a full day's pay. It is about setting them up and giving them the best possible chance when they get released.

- Q59 **Craig Mackinlay:** Darren, you mentioned earlier that 10 million people in the UK have some sort of criminal record—driving offences are obviously lower on the scale. Do you have a limit for types of offences? Do you say, "Yeah, we're comfortable with those, but we're not comfortable with them"? I am thinking about acquisitive crimes, drug-related crimes, or violence. Do you have a level? If you're rehabilitated, you are rehabilitated; that is the purpose of prison, although whether it does that is another matter. Do you have a limit where you say, "We're really not comfortable with someone who has done rape" or something?

Darren Burns: Absolutely we do. In the interests of openness and honesty, I should say that I am a former police officer, but I am also an ex-offender, so I have been through the whole process myself; I have experienced the criminal justice system from every conceivable angle, really. I was a serving police officer with Merseyside police for 10 years. I committed an offence while I was a serving police officer. I was sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

I was fortunate enough to be picked up by Timpson. I worked out on ROTL and was taught to repair shoes, cut keys and so on. When I was released from prison, I was picked up by James Timpson and offered a job with the foundation. My unique experience enables me to cherry-pick the prisoners who are going to be a huge success for our business.

In answer to your question, yes, we do not engage with sex offenders, for obvious reasons. Photography is a large part of our business, so it is not really a good fit—the fact that we could have a sex offender taking photographs of people's children or doing ID photography for babies and so on. We don't engage with sex offenders, full stop.

We cannot engage with arsonists, because we cannot get them through our public liability insurers. The implication there is that because lots of our outlets are in supermarket concessions, if anybody was to start a fire there would be huge potential for loss of life and property. Other than sex offenders and arsonists, we will consider anyone else. We have 14 lifers working for us, people who have committed murder, but I personally will sit in front of every person and have full disclosure, and I alone will make the decision about whether we are comfortable with it.

The example I always give is that I will speak to somebody in prison and ask them what offence they have committed. They might say to me, "I've committed a burglary." There are a huge raft of offences covered by burglary. It could be a commercial burglary, whereby somebody has walked past a shed and stolen a bicycle. That is something we would be comfortable with. I am not condoning it in any way, but it is something we would feel we could work with and give these guys opportunities.



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However, it could be an aggravated burglary of a dwelling, in which somebody has tied the occupant up in their house and tortured them and so on. We are not going to be comfortable with something like that. Likewise with anything racially aggravated or involving extreme violence. We have a duty of care to our existing colleagues and also to our customers, so we do discriminate and we do make a decision at the time.

Q60 **Chair:** Kathryn, the train contracts are lucrative, and Virgin is doing a payback here. Do the other companies who hold these contracts behave similarly to you?

Kathryn Wildman: In what way?

Chair: In having a programme to employ ex-offenders.

Kathryn Wildman: I am not sure what other train operators do; I can speak only about Virgin Trains and what we do.

Chair: It's just that we are going to follow it up.

That was stunning evidence; thank you to all three of you. That was brilliant and has raised my spirits, which takes a bit of doing at the moment. Thank you very much.