RESEARCH INTO EMPLOYMENT DIVERSION INITIATIVES

How Indirect Employment Support Contributes to Rehabilitation and Reduces Reoffending

Executive Summary

While preventing crime is the Criminal Justice System's primary goal, re-offending remains a significant issue, demonstrating that punishment alone is often insufficient to reduce criminality.

Re-offending has profound negative effects on society and prisons in England and Wales. The continued commission of crime by previous offenders creates an estimated economic and social cost of approximately **£22.7 billion per year.**

£22.7bn
Estimated annual economic and social cost of re-offending in England and Wales

£13.7 pts
Higher re-offending rate among unemployed prison leavers than among those who find work shortly after release

13.0%
Of prison leavers in work at six weeks in the North-East, the lowest of any probation region

According to Gov.uk, proven offences are measured over a one-year follow-up period and a further six-month waiting period to allow for offences to be proven in court.

Recent studies have shown that the re-offending rates among unemployed offenders released from custody are **13.7** percentage points higher than those who secure employment shortly after release. This demonstrates why addressing the barriers to employment faced by ex-offenders remains a key priority for the Criminal Justice System. Individuals may return to criminal behaviour for a variety of interconnected reasons, including inadequate support on release, limited employment opportunities, social exclusion, unstable accommodation, and low levels of education and literacy; all of which can hinder successful reintegration into society and increase the likelihood of further reoffending.

This report sets out to evaluate the effectiveness of establishing organisations that offer, facilitate, and directly support employment opportunities in custody and upon prison release. To inform this evaluation, a combination of qualitative interviews and open-source research was undertaken, focusing on a variety of education providers and organisations that support offender rehabilitation and employment. By bringing together insights from programme facilitators, ex-offenders and volunteers in organisations who support and mentor offenders, the research will capture whether such programmes have an impact on reducing re-offending rates.

4 Key Findings

The research outlined **four main themes** that are essential to an individual's rehabilitation journey:

1 Confidence and Identity

Successful rehabilitation is closely linked to an individual's ability to develop a positive identity beyond their offending history.

Programmes discussed in this report help participants build confidence, self-esteem, and a renewed sense of purpose through achievement, creativity and personal development. By encouraging individuals to view themselves as employees, learners, artists or professionals rather than offenders, these initiatives support long-term behavioural change and desistance to crime.

2 Routine and Structure

Many people leaving prison face uncertainty and instability during their transition back into the community, and this can have a significant negative effect on an individual's rehabilitation journey.

Upon release, many individuals must simultaneously navigate a range of challenges, including securing accommodation, finding employment, complying with probation requirements, and rebuilding relationships. Without access to routine, structure, and support, this period can be charasterised by social isolation and a lack of purpose, increasing the risk of an individual re-offending.

3 Employability Skills

Employment remains one of the most important protective factors against re-offending, but many prison leavers face barriers including low confidence, limited qualifications, and gaps in employment history. The organisations examined support participants to develop practical workplace skills alongside confidence, motivation and aspirations for the future. Through accredited qualifications, vocational training and personalised development plans, participants can gain both the skills and mindset needed to pursue sustainable employment and long-term rehabilitation.

4 Support and Relationships

Consistent support and positive relationships were identified as essential components of successful rehabilitation. Participants benefited from mentoring and one-to-one guidance that provided encouragement during the challenges of reintegration. The research demonstrated that personalised support helped individuals feel valued and understood, while simultaneously improving confidence and optimism for the future. For many participants, these relationships played a cruicial role in helping them move forward and maintain positive change.

Recommendations at a Glance

1

Expand Access to Employment Diversion Initiatives: Nationally
Employment diversion programmes remain relatively limited outside London and the Southeast. Expanding similar models across the North-East could improve access to employment support and rehabilitation for prison leavers.

2

Provide Immediate Access to Diversion Programmes Following Release:
Many prison leavers experience a significant gap between release and securing employment, during which they face uncertainty, declining confidence, a lack of routine and social isolation, all of which can increase the likelihood of returning to offending. This period must be addressed through targeted support programmes that provide guidance, structure, and practical assistance, reducing the risk that these compounding factors will undermine an individual's reintegration into society and lead them to re-engage in criminal behaviour.

3

Increase Provision of Structured Post-Release Support:
Organisations supporting ex-offenders should aim to provide regular mentoring and structured engagement during the months immediately following release. This will help reduce instability by providing individuals with consistent guidance, a sense of purpose, and positive support networks at a critical stage of their reintegration, thereby decreasing the risk of social isolation, unemployment, and a return to offending.

4

Prioritise Confidence and Identity Building:
Programmes should continue to incorporate activities that build confidence, encourage achievement and help individuals recognise their strengths. Police and partners should recognise confidence-building as an important rehabilitative outcome.

Introduction:

Understanding Employment Diversion Initiatives

Employment diversion initiatives refer to programmes and interventions designed to support individuals after their release from prison. For many, this stage is one of the most difficult throughout their conviction journey. These initiatives operate on the principle that stable employment is a key factor in reducing reoffending.

Individuals leaving prison encounter multiple barriers to employment. Criminal convictions can limit access to job opportunities, while gaps in employment history, low educational attainment, lack of real-world experience, and reduced confidence can further disadvantage those seeking work post-release. Additionally, many individuals experience other challenges, including finding stable housing, managing finances, mental health and a lack of relationships and support; all of these are major factors that affect their ability to move on to a positive trajectory, which is vital to reduce the chances of an individual reoffending.

The findings in this report mainly focus on the creative programmes that aim to support people on their release; offering them support and guidance whilst facilitating their reintegration into society. The main focus is on two creative, rehabilitative organisations:

Organisations studied

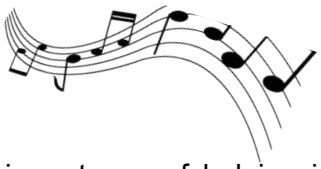
Finding Rhythms - *A voluntary sector organisation that uses music as a tool for rehabilitation among individuals with experience of the criminal justice system*

Fine Cell Work- *An organisation that helps with rehabilitation by providing prison leavers, as well as those serving sentences, with stitching skills.*





Findings: Four Themes of Rehabilitation



1. Confidence and Identity

A key finding from the review of organisations that support rehabilitation is the importance of helping individuals develop a positive self-identity beyond their history of offending. Research indicates that increased confidence and self-esteem are significant factors in supporting desistance from crime, as they enable individuals to view themselves as productive members of society rather than being defined by past behaviour. By fostering a stronger sense of self-worth, purpose, and personal responsibility, rehabilitation programmes can encourage long-term behavioural change and strengthen an individual's commitment to a law-abiding lifestyle.

Interviewees from *Finding Rhythms* explained that the primary objective of their programme is to support personal development and character building, ultimately reducing the likelihood of re-offending. Participants are encouraged to build confidence and self-belief through creative expression, with opportunities to perform at showcases and publish their own music. Such opportunities can be transformative for individuals leaving custody, providing creative freedom, a sense of ownership, and tangible evidence of personal achievement through the successful completion of their work. Interventions of this nature, although seemingly small in scale, can have a profound impact on an individual's prospects and significantly influence their pathway away from crime.

The programme manager also emphasised the organisation's strong group ethos, whereby participants of varying abilities work together in an environment founded on mutual support and encouragement. This approach helps individuals rebuild confidence, develop a stronger sense of identity, and reconnect with positive aspects of themselves that may have been diminished through previous experiences of imprisonment. Although these outcomes may not represent rehabilitation in its traditional sense, they contribute significantly to the factors associated with successful desistance, enabling individuals to develop the self-worth, resilience, and motivation needed to sustain long-term positive change.

> *"You forget how to speak and interact with other people"-*
>
> Participant, Fine Cell Work



Similarly, *Fine Cell Work* aims to provide people with "the confidence to move forward with their life" through learning textiles and employability skills. An ex-offender participating in the programme at *Fine Cell Work* described how, since leaving prison, the organisation has given him a renewed sense of confidence and the ability to feel part of society once again. He explained that in prison *"you forget how to speak and interact with other people",* suggesting that interpersonal skills, essential for securing employment, can deteriorate during long periods in custody. He also reflected on the difficulties he faced following his release, describing how he had struggled to regain hope that he would find meaningful employment and rebuild his life in the community. As a result, his confidence and self-belief had gradually diminished; however, through his involvement with *Fine Cell Work*, he reported developing a renewed sense of purpose and optimism for the future, describing the experience as transformative.

He explained that the combination of structured work, skills development and ongoing support reassured him that positive change was possible and that his past did not have to define his future. Most notably, he proudly stated that *Fine Cell Work* has given him something positive to discuss with friends and family beyond his history of offending. This enabled him to construct an identity rooted in achievement, skills and personal growth rather than previous criminal behaviour.

2. Routine and Structure

The importance of routine and structure was consistently highlighted across both initiatives. Research has found that reducing instability during the transition from prison to the community is critical to supporting rehabilitation and reducing reoffending, with routine and structure identified as key factors in successful reintegration. Many people leaving prison face uncertainty regarding what their next day will look like. Both programmes sought to address this challenge by providing participants with much-needed routine and structure, both of which can play a vital role in supporting successful reintegration and reducing the instability often experienced during the transition back into the community.

Both *Finding Rhythms* and *Fine Cell Work* highlighted the importance of structure during the transition from custody to the community. Sessions at *Finding Rhythms* take place weekly over a period of approximately ten weeks, helping participants establish a regular routine and a sense of stability. For many individuals leaving prison, there can be significant uncertainty about what each day or week will bring; however, having a commitment to attend a specific place at a set time provides a degree of predictability and purpose.

The research demonstrates that programmes such as these promote consistency, accountability, and personal responsibility, all of which are important factors in supporting successful rehabilitation. Establishing a routine is particularly valuable during reintegration, as it helps individuals adapt to the expectations of life in society, including employment, time management, and maintaining positive commitments. Furthermore, the consistency offered by these programmes can provide a sense of security during a period often characterised by instability and uncertainty. By providing regular engagement, clear expectations, and ongoing support, these initiatives help to create a stable framework within which participants can begin to rebuild their lives. Such initiatives mitigate the risk factors associated with re-offending and encourage individuals to remain focused on building a positive and sustainable future.

3. Employability Skills

Employability remains a significant factor in reducing the likelihood of re-offending. However, the evidence suggests that it is the integration of personal development, confidence building and employment readiness that is most effective in supporting long-term desistance from crime. While access to employment is widely recognised as a key protective factor against re-offending, many individuals leaving custody face substantial barriers to securing work, including limited qualifications, gaps in employment history, low confidence and the stigma associated with a criminal record. Consequently, programmes that help individuals develop workplace skills, self-belief and aspirations for the future are well placed to support successful rehabilitation and reduce the risk of further offending. By addressing both practical employability needs and the personal factors that underpin sustained engagement in employment, such initiatives are well placed to support successful reintegration.

Finding Rhythms combines creative engagement with accredited learning opportunities. Participants can achieve King's Trust qualifications that can enhance future employment prospects. These qualifications focus on key areas such as goal setting, self- reflection and workplace readiness. While the organisation's contribution to employment outcomes is largely indirect, its primary focus on building motivation and personal resilience can significantly strengthen an individual's readiness for work. In addition, *Finding Rhythms* is developing dedicated employability and work-readiness sessions to further enhance participants' prospects of securing sustainable employment.

FROM WORKSHOP TO UNIVERSITY

Interviewees shared a particularly positive example of a former participant at *Finding Rhythms* who discovered a passion for music production whilst attending post-release workshops. Having developed both confidence and ambition through the programme, he is now pursuing higher education at university. The organisation hopes that he will eventually return as a programme facilitator, enabling him to use his lived experience to inspire and support others facing similar challenges. This example demonstrates how rehabilitative programmes can not only improve employment outcomes but also encourage individuals to develop meaningful ambitions and long-term goals.

A participant involved with *Fine Cell Work* similarly described how his experiences with the organisation had positively shaped his future aspirations. When asked what he envisaged for his future, he explained that he now hopes to establish his own stitching and sewing business, having developed both practical skills and confidence through the programme.

Participants progress through increasingly advanced levels of stitching while developing broader workplace competencies, including communication, responsibility, reliability, and professional conduct. Support is tailored to individual needs through personalised action plans and one-to-one guidance, ensuring participants receive the assistance and encouragement required to achieve their goals. This combination of technical training, personal development, and individualised support strengthens participants' employment prospects while fostering greater self-belief. Together, these outcomes can support successful reintegration into society and contribute to longer-term personal and professional development.

4. Support and Relationships

One of the most significant findings across both organisations is the value of wraparound support in promoting successful rehabilitation. In addition to developing practical and employability skills, participants benefit from ongoing encouragement, guidance, and personalised assistance throughout their involvement.

At *Finding Rhythms,* participants work closely with facilitators and musicians over extended periods, enabling trusting relationships to develop. Staff explained that the organisation functions as much as a support network as a music programme, providing a safe environment where individuals can build confidence and develop positive aspirations for the future. The organisation also operates a mentoring scheme that offers ongoing guidance to participants, helping them navigate the challenges associated with life after release. Interviewees highlighted that *Finding Rhythms* actively seeks to create a strong sense of belonging, ensuring participants feel valued, included, and supported throughout their rehabilitation journey.

Similarly, each participant at *Fine Cell Work* begins with a one-to-one assessment and continues to receive tailored advice and guidance throughout their involvement with the organisation. Staff maintain regular discussions with participants covering a wide range of issues, including housing, probation requirements, mental health, criminal record disclosure, personal challenges, future goals, individual strengths and areas for development. This approach enables support to be adapted to the needs of each individual, recognising that the barriers to rehabilitation often differ from person to person.

One interviewee explained that this level of engagement provided a sense of security and reassurance, knowing that he doesn't have to face life's challenges alone. He reflected feeling let down by both the probation service and the wider system following his release but stated that his experience with *Fine Cell Work* restored his faith that others are willing to invest in his success.

> *"I now look forward instead of backwards"* -
> Participant, Fine Cell Work

This powerful comment illustrates how sustained support can transform an individual's outlook, enabling them to move beyond past mistakes and focus on future opportunities. Such findings suggest that successful rehabilitation depends not only on the development of skills and employment prospects, but also on individuals to feel valued, supported, and capable of positive change.

Other Organisations

Redemption Roasters

Redemption Roasters aims to reduce re-offending rates in the UK by equipping prison leavers and individuals at risk of offending with specialist barista and hospitality skills. The organisation operates eleven coffee shops across London and delivers professional coffee industry training both within prisons and in the community, creating direct pathways into sustainable employment. *Redemption Roasters* addresses a recognised limitation of many prison work programmes, which can often involve repetitive tasks such as waste and recycling sorting, mail processing, or call handling activities. While these roles may provide valuable work experience, they do not always cultivate ambition, motivation, or a long-term commitment to a particular career pathway.

By contrast, *Redemption Roasters* seeks to provide employment opportunities that are both **meaningful and aspirational**, enabling participants to develop industry-recognised skills within a professional and customer-facing environment. In doing so, the organisation not only improves employment prospects but also fosters confidence, ambition, and a sense of personal achievement.

11	Custody + Community	Direct Employment
Coffee shops across London	barista and hospitality training delivered in prisons and the community	offered on release





The organisation also provides direct employment opportunities following release, helping to bridge the often-challenging gap between leaving custody and securing work. By reducing this period of uncertainty, participants are less likely to experience the loss of confidence, stability, and purpose that can hinder successful reintegration. Furthermore, *Redemption Roasters* enables participants to develop a professional identity that extends beyond their criminal conviction. Rather than being defined primarily by their offending history, participants are recognised as employees, trainees and hospitality professionals. This positive shift in identity can play a significant role in rebuilding self-esteem, strengthening a sense of purpose, and supporting successful transition back into the community as productive and valued members of society.

SPCK and the Diffusion Books Programme

80%

Providing literature to approx 80% of UK prisons

32,000 +

books distributed to prisons since 2010

The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) runs the Diffusion Books programme, which continues to provide free, easy-to-read books to prisons in approximately **80% of UK prisons**, making literature more accessible to those in custody. Through its involvement with the Diffusion project, launched in 2010, *SPCK* has distributed more than **32,000 books** to prisons.

To better understand the programme's origins and impact, an interview was conducted with a former *SPCK* bookshop manager who played a role in establishing the initiative.

Reflecting on the programme, he described how he and his colleagues sought ways in which the organisation could support prisons, with rehabilitation as the primary objective. Following visits to six prisons, including HMP Belmarsh, the programme successfully expanded the provision of literature across Category A and B establishments. When asked why he pursued the initiative, he explained that it was important to break down the barriers between the outside world and life in custody. In his view, bringing books from wider society into prisons supports rehabilitation by maintaining connections with the community and exposing individuals to new ideas, perspectives, and opportunities.

A recurring theme throughout the interview was the importance of literacy within prisons. *Shannon Trust*, a literacy programme operating across the prison estate, reinforced this point, explaining that literacy skills are essential for everyday activities such as reading correspondence, understanding information relating to legal proceedings, maintaining contact with family members, and communicating effectively with support services. According to the interviewee at *SPCK*, access to books enables individuals to strengthen their literacy skills, maintain a connection with wider society, and engage more effectively with rehabilitative interventions.



Although *SPCK's* programme is not directly designed as an employment initiative, it contributes to employability by supporting literacy development and encouraging lifelong learning.

Research into *SPCK* and *Shannon Trust* demonstrates that improving employment outcomes begins long before an individual leaves custody. By developing literacy, communication skills, confidence, and the ability to engage with education, such initiatives help lay the foundations for future employment and social reintegration. This approach is particularly effective because it addresses some of the root causes of exclusion from the labour market before release, increasing the likelihood that individuals will be able to access training, secure meaningful employment, and sustain a law-abiding lifestyle upon their return to the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING EMPLOYMENT DIVERSION PATHWAYS AND SUPPORTING LONG-TERM REHABILITATION

1. Expand Access to Employment Diversion Initiatives: Nationally

The report demonstrates how organisations such as *Fine Cell Work* and *Finding Rhythms* address re-offending rates through structured support, skill development and pathways into employment.

This approach should be adopted more widely, particularly in areas with persistently high rates of re-offending. Of the twelve probation regions across England and Wales, Wales achieved the highest performance, with **28.7%** of offenders in employment at six weeks after release from custody, compared with the North East, which recorded the lowest rate at **13.0%**.

Employment-focused rehabilitation programmes remain relatively limited outside London and the South East. Expanding similar models across regions such as the North East would increase access to employment pathways, strengthen rehabilitation outcomes, and support long-term desistance from crime.

2. Provide Immediate Access to Rehabilitation Programmes Following Release

The findings of this research suggest that employment-focused initiatives should be made available as soon as possible following release from custody. Many prison leavers experience a significant gap between release and securing employment, during which they may face uncertainty, declining confidence, a lack of routine and social isolation. These challenges can undermine successful reintegration and increase the risk of further offending.

This period should be bridged through programmes that provide immediate support, guidance, and purposeful activity. Ensuring early access to intervention can improve reintegration outcomes, maintain motivation and strengthen an individual's ability to establish a stable and law-abiding lifestyle.

3. Increase the Provsion of Structured Post-Release Support

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of routine, consistency and ongoing guidance during the transition from custody to the community. Organisations supporting ex-offenders should seek to provide regular mentoring, structured engagement and clear development goals throughout the months immediately following release.

Such measures can reduce instability by providing individuals with continuity, accountability, and a sense of purpose during a particularly vulnerable period. Establishing and maintaining routine also helps individuals adapt to the expectations of employment and community life, supporting sustainable rehabilitation and reducing the likelihood of further offending.

4. Prioriitise Confidence and Positive Identity Development

The research demonstrated that successful rehabilitation is often linked to an individual's ability to develop a positive identity beyond their offending history. Programmes should continue to incorporate activities that build confidence, promote achievement and encourage individuals to recognise their strengths, skills and potential. Police and partner agencies should recognise confidence-building and positive identity development as important rehabilitative outcomes. When individuals begin to view themselves as employees, students, parents, mentors, or valued members of their community, they are more likely to engage positively with society, pursue legitimate opportunities, and sustain long-term behavioural change.