

# **INSPIRE** **INFORM** **CONNECT**



**250 Success Stories Later**  
The **EX**CEPTIONALS Legacy Report



**“It hasn’t just been life-changing;  
it’s been life-saving.”**

**Ri  
Programme Participant, The Glasshouse**



# INTRODUCTION

- # INTRODUCTION

## THE BUSINESS CASE

- ## THE BUSINESS CASE

## THE CAMPAIGN

- ## THE CAMPAIGN

## EXCEPTIONAL STORIES

- ## EXCEPTIONAL STORIES

## THE FUTURE

- ## THE FUTURE

## CONCLUSION

- ## CONCLUSION

BE EXCEPTIONAL  
EMPLOY AN  
EXCEPTIONAL

## THE **EX**CEPTIONALS

### A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

When we launched the campaign ten years ago, we chose a name that reflected the unique experience and potential of people with convictions, whilst also connecting with the widely used term at the time of “ex-offenders”.

Since 2016 language and terms have evolved. The term “ex-offenders” is no longer as commonly used by the sector, and in this report, we predominantly use the terms “people with convictions” and “people with lived experience of the criminal justice system”. Some historical quotes, however, retain the language that was in common use when they were originally spoken.

As language continues to change, some of the terms used in this report may one day also feel outdated. What will remain constant is our ambition: to help inform, inspire and connect employers to consider hiring an exceptional individual.







# FOREWORD

For almost two decades I have worked with employers, government departments, regulators and charities to help organisations make informed decisions about recruiting people with criminal records. When I entered this field, there were around 9.7 million people in the UK with a criminal record; today that figure is 13 million. Yet despite the scale of the issue, the landscape then was far less forgiving than it is now. A fine remained disclosable for five years, while any custodial sentence of more than two and a half years could never become spent. More than three-quarters of employers openly admitted that they would reject an applicant who disclosed a conviction, however minor.

Most of the people I advocated for in those years had already done everything right. They had been through a genuinely rigorous recruitment process. They could do the job, wanted to do the job, and had been assessed as the strongest candidate for it. Then, at the final hurdle, all of that fell away the moment they ticked a box. Some weren't even new applicants – they were existing, trusted employees, asked to disclose years into their employment because a contract had changed hands under TUPE, or because an organisation had simply decided to recheck its whole workforce.

Advocacy mattered enormously in that period. But it also taught me something I hadn't expected: most employers weren't looking for reasons to exclude people. They wanted to do the right thing. They just lacked the confidence, the practical knowledge, and the trusted support to navigate what felt like a minefield of law, safeguarding and risk mitigation. That realisation changed the direction of my own work,

and reform followed too – the 2014 amendments to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, the first meaningful change to that legislation in over forty years, alongside a growing number of employer-facing initiatives, my own included, aimed at showing organisations how to recruit both safely and fairly.

For a long time, however, much of this work remained fragmented. Excellent organisations were achieving remarkable things, often in isolation. Employers who wanted to engage rarely knew where to start, who to ask or how to learn from others who had already done it.

That is where The Exceptionals made such a difference—and it is worth pausing to consider why. Governments can reform legislation. Charities can support individuals. Employers can create opportunities. But none of those groups can, on their own, change a culture. Campaigns can bring those worlds together around a shared purpose and make the case in a way that no single department, charity or employer could make alone.

Its founding principles – Inspire, Inform and Connect – captured exactly what employers needed. Following the campaign over the years, I'd add a fourth, unofficially: Engage. It treated this as a human issue, not a policy one.

One thing that impressed me about The Exceptionals was its practical approach. It did not shy away from difficult conversations. Risk assessment and disclosure were tackled head-on and made accessible to a wider audience rather than being left solely to specialists like me. Rather than asking employers to ignore risk, it encouraged them to understand it. Rather than relying on slogans, it showcased organisations that had successfully recruited people with

convictions and demonstrated that safe, fair and robust recruitment could coexist with meaningful social impact.

That distinction matters. Safe recruitment and fair recruitment have never been competing objectives. The Exceptionals repeatedly showed that they are complementary. Employers need confidence, information and trusted partners—not simply encouragement—and the campaign helped provide all three.

The landscape today is barely recognisable from the one I entered nearly twenty years ago. There are dedicated government employment schemes for prison leavers, a specialist part of the prison service brokering relationships with employers, social value contracts that now stipulate recruitment of prison leavers, and an ecosystem of guidance and support that simply didn't exist before. Employers increasingly aren't asking why they should consider this talent pool, but how to recruit and support people from this talent pool.

The Exceptionals may be drawing this chapter to a close, but for me its legacy isn't confined to the work it delivered or the engaging content and resources it produced. It's the employers who learned to see individuals rather than labels, the partnerships it helped to build, and the opportunities it helped open up for people with convictions, in custody and in the community alike.

That's a legacy worth celebrating – and the next chapter belongs to the employers, charities and individuals who carry it forward.

**When I first encountered The Exceptionals more than ten years ago, I hoped the campaign would help change the conversation. Looking back through this report, it is clear that it has helped change the landscape.**



**Dominic Headley**  
Director, Dominic Headley &  
Associates (DHA)





# ABOUT US

This legacy report marks a decade of The Exceptionals Campaign and celebrates 250 Employer Success Stories, showing the extraordinary difference that meaningful employment can make for people leaving prison.

This mission sits at the heart of The Woven Foundation's work: supporting people to broaden their horizons and build new paths for the future.

For me, it began thirty years ago, when I met Shelagh Williams, an incredible woman who transformed my life. She was working in prisons at the time, teaching vital literacy skills to people inside. Her quiet dedication to social justice and unwavering belief in people's potential left a lasting mark on me, and it became clear how much impact one person can have in helping others reintegrate into society. The campaign is dedicated to Shelagh's memory, guided by her spirit and her conviction that people can change for the better.



I shared this inspiration with my father, Richard, and together it became a cause we felt compelled to carry forward. When we encountered Joe Baden's fantastic initiative, Open Book, at Goldsmith's University we were inspired to support their community of students, many of whom had lived experience of the criminal justice system. For three years we provided funding for their community and it further cemented our belief in the importance of supporting rehabilitation initiatives.

The impact of this experience was compounded by an incredible visit to Willowdene Farm in Shropshire, where lives are transformed through education and skills, as well as kindness and the belief that people can emerge from challenging, chaotic lives, into ones driven by purpose. Following these encounters, we were determined to commit our time, energy and resources to help these initiatives thrive.

After a significant period of research, led by GW&Co, The Woven Foundation discovered a gap between the brilliant work of rehabilitation organisations who prepare and train people in prison for the working world, and businesses with open vacancies. The Exceptionals was created to bridge this gap, opening doors for employers to hire people with convictions and advocating for positive change in the workplace.

When we launched The Exceptionals in 2016 employers were reluctant to consider the idea of opening their recruitment to include people with criminal convictions – 75% of employers surveyed by Working Links at the time stated that they would discriminate against a candidate with a criminal conviction, with a further 10% declaring that they would never hire from this talent pool.

Much has changed over the last ten years of this campaign. Now, the number of employers who see the advantage in hiring someone with a conviction has doubled from 12% in 2016 to 24% in 2026. More employers understand that fair recruitment can transform lives, strengthen teams and benefit society as a whole.

Since its inception, the campaign has grown into an award-winning movement for social change and is one of The Foundation's longest-standing initiatives. At its heart sit three guiding principles—Inspire, Inform and Connect—which shape every part of the campaign.

Over the years, we've celebrated outstanding examples of best practice – powerful stories of transformation, resilience, and value-led leadership. These stories show that when people are given a fair chance, extraordinary things can happen, both in the workplace and in the wider community.

Throughout the project, we have also employed people with lived experience of the criminal justice system and worked with contributors whose curiosity and insight have inspired us. My father, Richard, brought his commercial expertise and energy to the campaign, mentoring, connecting, and supporting the people involved to build new opportunities and succeed in work and life. We're so grateful to everyone who has been part of this journey – employers, partners, and our fantastic collaborators.

This report celebrates the campaign's impact, brings to life inspiring stories and insights, and offers recommendations to support a more equitable employment landscape. We believe that this moment of reflection is the right time for The Woven Foundation to draw this campaign to a close, but the principles it upholds will continue through our other initiatives.

Whilst our campaign may be ending, the momentum it created deserves to be taken forward by others in the sector to scale.

**We now pass on the baton and encourage employers across the UK, in partnership with the third sector and the Government – to carry forward this vital work, building richer, fairer, and more inclusive workplaces for all.**



**Adriana Paice Kent**  
Director, The Woven Foundation













**“At COOK, diversity and inclusion is about turning up to work, being part of something and being accepted just as you are. Whoever you are, whatever your past, whatever your background, whatever you believe. Turning up and being welcome.”**

**Annie Gale**  
**Head of Social Impact**  
**COOK**



# THE OPPORTUNITY

## KEY STATISTICS



**13m**

people in the UK have a criminal record. This equates to over a quarter of the working population in England and Wales.



**£65K**

It costs the UK taxpayer £65K to keep one person in prison per year.



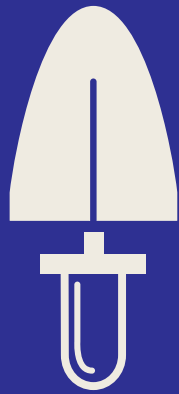
**35%**

Only 35% of prison leavers are in employment six months after release.

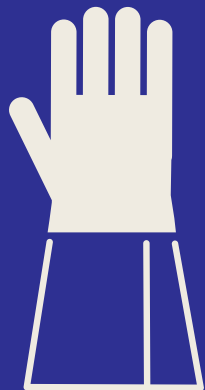




**Stable employment is one of the key factors in reducing reoffending. Nearly 80% of offenders are reoffenders.**



**Employment cuts reoffending rates in half - from 35% to just 19% when employed 6 weeks after release.**



**The number of employers who see the advantage in hiring someone with a conviction has doubled in the last ten years (24% in 2026 companies to 12% in 2016).**





# THE BUSINESS CASE



## AN EXCEPTIONAL WORKFORCE

**Given the enormous obstacles they face in trying to secure employment, people with convictions really value the opportunity to work.**

**Polling commissioned by the Ministry of Justice found that over 90% of businesses who employ people with lived experience of the criminal justice system said they are reliable, good at their job, punctual and trustworthy.**



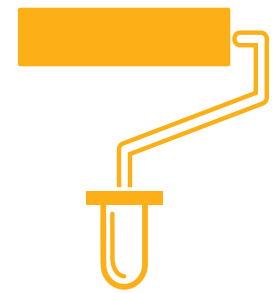
## FRESH PERSPECTIVES & INCREASED DIVERSITY

**92% of employers say diverse recruitment has enhanced their reputation, helping them win contracts and even awards. We know that more diverse teams can close skills gaps and perform better overall.**



## THE WHOLE COMPANY CAN BENEFIT

**65% of organisations that chose to promote inclusive recruitment in the media reported a positive effect on their corporate reputation.**



## GOOD FOR SOCIETY

**According to Social Value Portal, a company could create £24,269 in social value by hiring just one person with a conviction.**

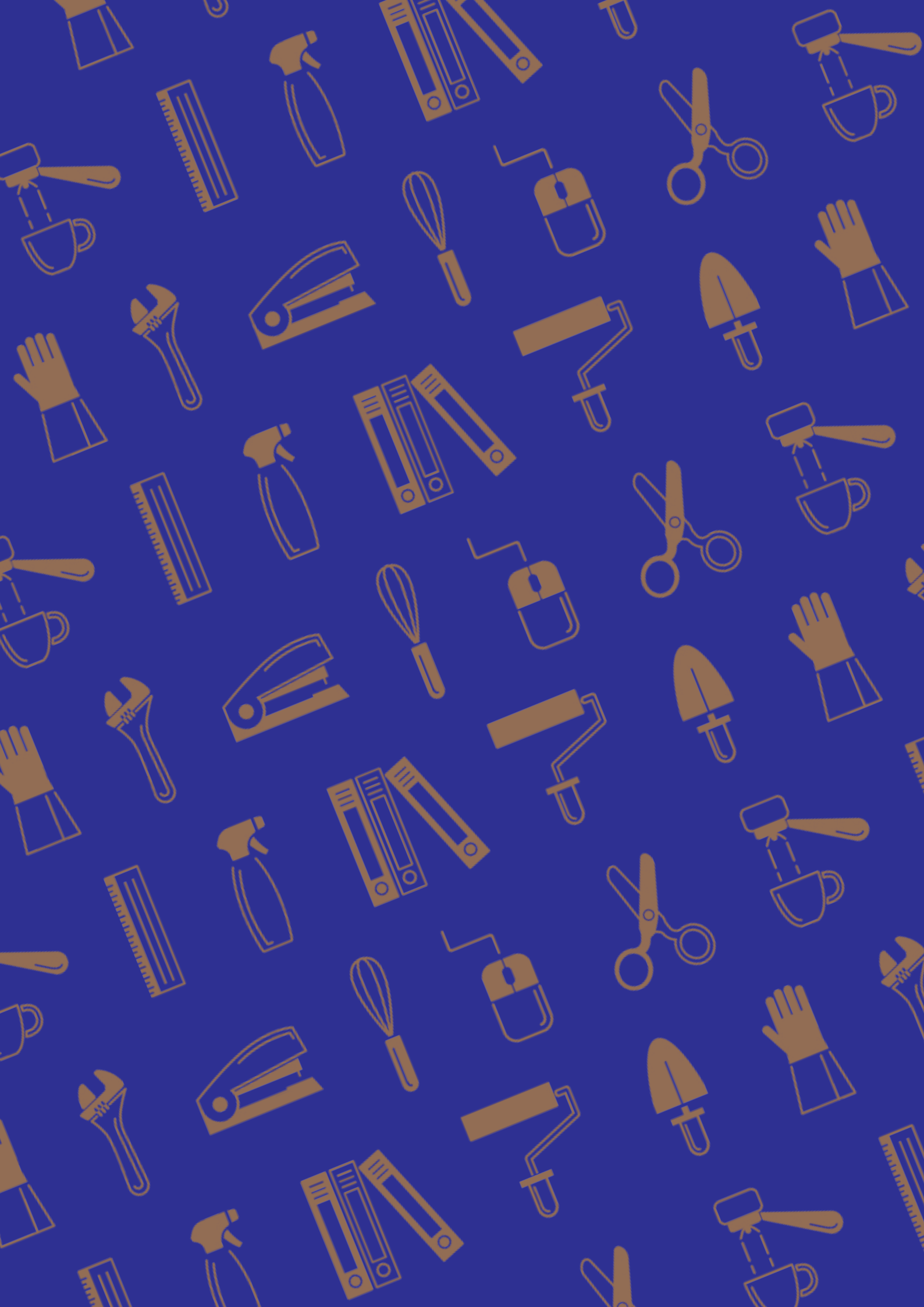
**81% of consumers believe businesses employing people with convictions are making a positive contribution to society.**

**Despite notable progress over the past decade, changing employer attitudes remains a major challenge. Research by Reed in Partnership, published in 2025, reveals that one in five UK employers still automatically reject candidates who disclose a criminal conviction.**









# THE CAMPAIGN





**“We’re proud to be working with ex-offenders and want to share the benefits to other employers to support more people into employment. Thank you to The Exceptionals for celebrating the work we have done.”**

**Lisa Crawford**  
**Former Head of HR, HSS Hire**



# CELEBRATING A DECADE OF IMPACT IN THE SECTOR

The Exceptionals envisions a world where employers see hiring people with a conviction as a commercial imperative to the success of their business. Where most people leaving prison go straight into purposeful employment and are less likely to reoffend. This transforms their lives and adds value to our communities.

Throughout the campaign, we delivered impact across three key areas.



## INSPIRE

employers to see the opportunity of working with this overlooked and high-potential community.



## INFORM

employers about the process of hiring people with convictions.



## CONNECT

employers with leading organisations who provide training, recruitment and ongoing support.



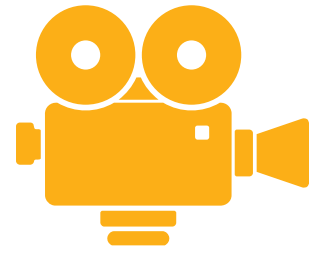




**250+**

## EMPLOYER SUCCESS STORIES

Celebrated throughout  
the campaign.



**7**

### CORPORATE FILMS PRODUCED

Featuring forward-thinking  
employers including HSS Hire,  
Freshfields, Landsec, Virgin  
and Specsavers.



**3**

### MAJOR NATIONAL MEDIA FEATURES

Covered by: Sky News, The Guardian  
and NatWest Business Insights.



**6**

### EPISODES OF OUR IN-HOUSE PODCAST

Placing a spotlight on inclusive  
recruitment with LinkedIn, KPMG,  
Pret, COOK and Fat Beehive.



**2K+**

### FOLLOWERS

Active online community of  
engaged employers and third  
sector partners on Instagram,  
X and LinkedIn.



**2**

### PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

directly employed on the project.



**1**

### GOLD AWARD

Best identity & naming strategy in  
the Not-For-Profit category at the  
Transform Awards in 2017.





200+

### EMPLOYERS INSPIRED

The campaign exceeded its original goal, encouraging over 200 employers to consider hiring people with convictions.



150+

### DIRECTORY PARTNERS

Over the past 10 years, we have developed a trusted network of leading third sector organisations working with people with convictions, supporting employers with the hiring process and connecting them with work-ready candidates.



10

### NATIONAL PROJECTS CONSULTED ON

Partners include Ministry of Justice, NHS Employers, Country Land and Business Association (CLA) and Leicester City Council.



9

### HANDY EMPLOYER FACTSHEETS

Providing a clear overview of the hiring process, with signposts to further information.



10

### TRAINING EVENTS DELIVERED

Our employer resources have been used by several partner organisations across England & Wales.



6

### NETWORKING EVENTS HOSTED

Between industry specialists and prospective employers, including a special panel event for National Inclusion Week at The Conduit Club in central London in 2023.



1

### PRESENTATION

Delivered by our team at an employability summit hosted by PwC and Unlocked Graduates on ways to increase the employment of prison leavers on release in 2020.





# INSPIRE

**We have exceeded our goal of inspiring 50 employers to consider hiring people with convictions.**

**The campaign has celebrated over 250 success stories, produced seven corporate films and a podcast series featuring forward-thinking businesses who have successfully recruited from this talent pool. Exceptional employers include: HSS Hire, Landsec, Specsavers, KPMG and Pret.**

**The Exceptionals has been featured in several high-profile publications such as Sky News, The Guardian and NatWest Business Insights.**

**The campaign was formally recognised by the Transform Awards 2017, earning gold for best identity and naming strategy in the not-for-profit category.**



# FILMS AND MEDIA



## THE BUSINESS CASE

 As part of our campaign, we created a series of inspiring and informative films with industry leaders working in this field. This series showcases the benefits a whole range of businesses can gain from training and employing people with convictions, from painting and decorating, to the restaurant trade and corporate law.

Featuring:

**bounce  
back.**



**ROAST**



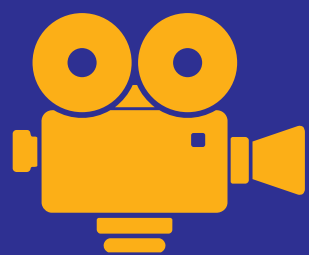
## AN EXCEPTIONAL'S STORY

 This film shows how an MP Assistant at the House of Commons, Jenny Martín (not her real name) turned her life around after leaving prison, with the support and training provided by Working Chance.

Featuring:







# EXCEPTIONAL EMPLOYERS

We asked a number of forward thinking employers, across a wide range of sectors to share their stories of successful recruitment and employment to inspire more companies to do the same.



To visit our film page, scan the QR code.



## THE RIGHT COURSE:

**The right skills and attitude go a long way**

The Right Course is a charity training provider that offers a pathway to employment for people in prison through industry-recognised qualifications and relevant work experience. In this video, Founder and Trustee Fred Sirieix discussed the vision and ethos of the charity, which has gone on to successfully help many of their graduates to secure hospitality jobs on release.



## HSS HIRE:

**Attracting and retaining great colleagues**

Attracting and retaining great colleagues from all backgrounds is a key priority for HSS Hire. Lisa Crawford, former Head of HR, shares her experience of hiring in custody and in the community as part of inclusive recruitment programme New Futures.



## VIRGIN:

**Building healthy societies and communities**

Virgin's employment programme for prison leavers is one way in which they champion diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Matthias Stausberg, Group Advocacy Director at Virgin, gives his top tips for tapping into this talent pool.

## Specsavers

## SPECSAVERS:

**A vision to do more for the community**

Sanjay Patel, Ophthalmic Director at Specsavers in Maidstone Kent, shares the business benefits of hiring trained optical assistants and lab technicians upon release from prison through successful partnership with The Prisons Opticians Trust (formally Pen Optical).



## LANDSEC:

**Landsec A skills workforce for the future**

To continue to build as well as their peers, Landsec need a skilled construction workforce. Debbie Akehurst, former Head of Economy and Communities at Landsec, shares her experience of supporting people furthest from the job market into employment through partnership with the prison estate and specialist charities like Bounce Back.

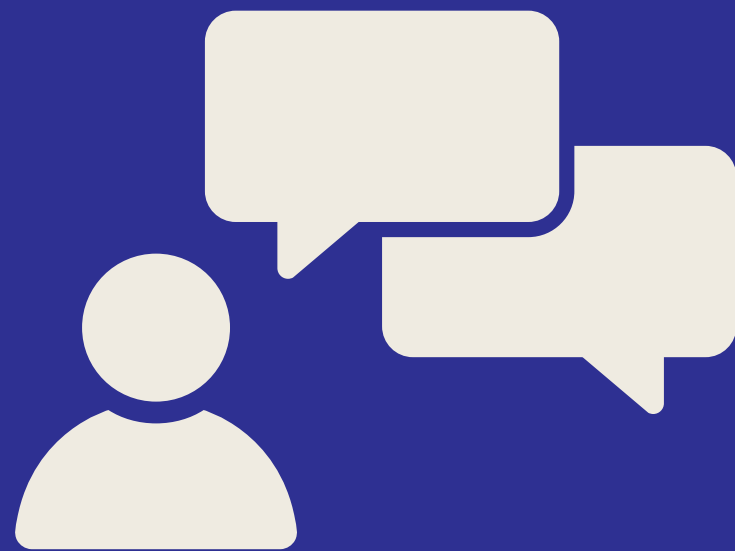




**"I started hiring ex-offenders ten years ago. They don't want to fall back into what they were doing before. They feel loyal to the person that gave them that opportunity. Rather than cause trouble, they are climbing the ladder here. More and more, we've got to find new ways to recruit in order to keep our business growing... They want a job and you need them."**

**Iqbal Wahhab OBE**  
**Founder, Roast Restaurants**





# INFORM

**Over the last ten years, we have consulted on ten national projects, working in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, Leicester City Council and the Country, Land and Business Association.**

**In 2020, we presented at an employability summit hosted by PwC and Unlocked Graduates, delivering a speech on prison leaver employment.**

**Our employer resources have been used by several external partner organisations at training events across England and Wales.**

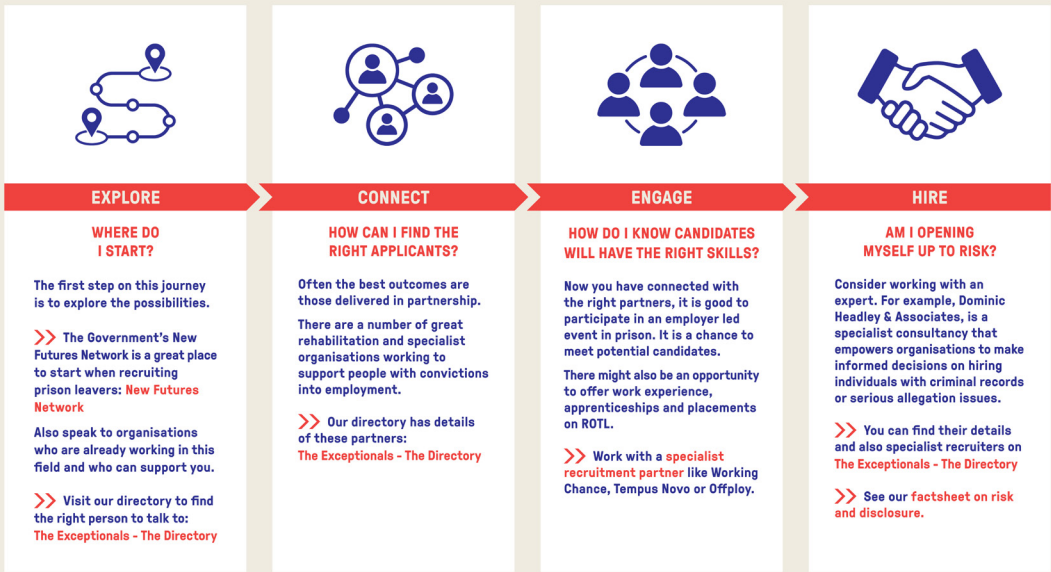


# EMPLOYER RESOURCES



To visit our knowledge hub, scan the QR code.

## THE EMPLOYER'S JOURNEY



THEEXCEPTIONALS.ORG

## THE CANDIDATE'S JOURNEY



As an employer it is useful to understand the support each potential candidate can receive, both in custody and through the gate, to help them with their successful reintegration into society.

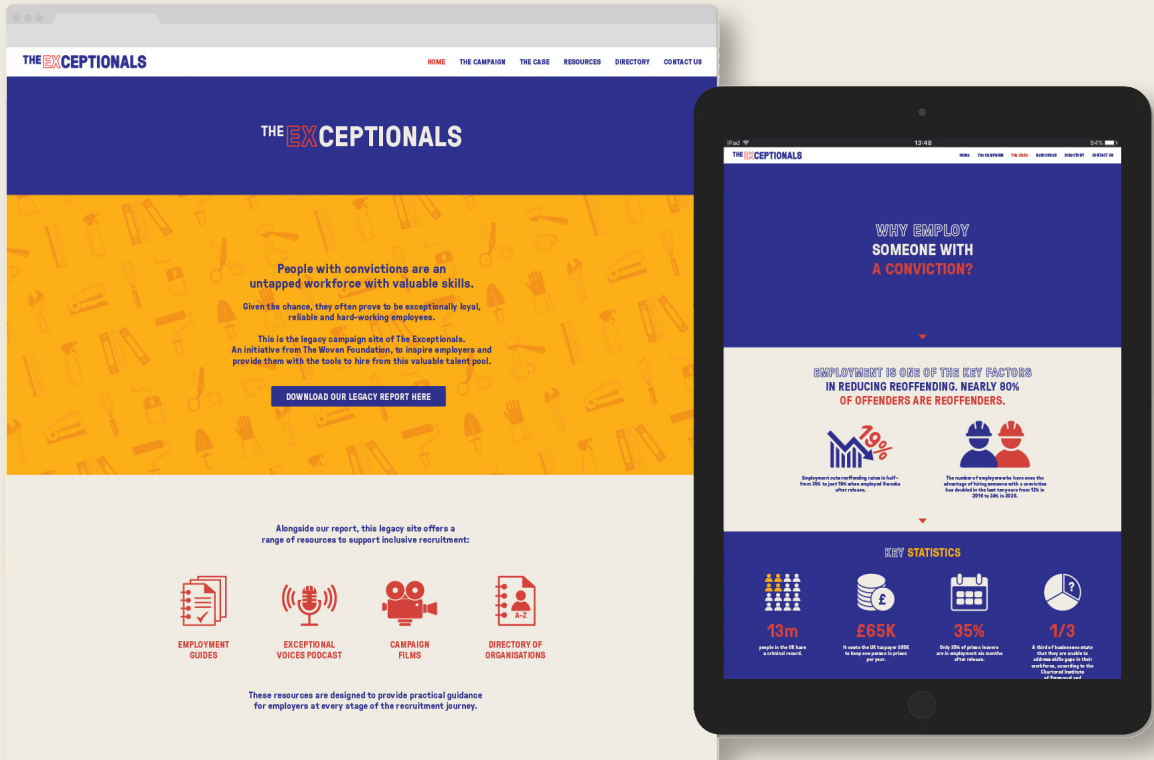


THEEXCEPTIONALS.ORG

## RISK AND DISCLOSURE



THEEXCEPTIONALS.ORG





# PODCAST



The Exceptional Voices Podcast shines a light on businesses that hire people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. It explores employment across a range of commercial sectors, from the established to the unexpected.

Each episode celebrates outstanding examples of best practice, powerful stories of transformation, resilience, and values-led leadership.

**“These stories show that when people are given a fair chance, extraordinary things can happen, both in the workplace and the wider community. Over the last ten years, the number of employers recognising the value of hiring people with convictions has doubled—from 12% to 24%—but there’s still a long way to go.”**

**Adriana Paice Kent**  
**Host, Exceptional Voices**





# SEASON ONE

“My first day came and it was the most overwhelming day of my life. Once I got to Pret, they were amazing. They made me feel at home straight away.”

Pret Team Member from  
The Rising Stars Programme  
Pret and The Pret Foundation

“People with lived experience have excellent skills and experience to offer to Pret and other employers. They tend to stay in jobs longer, support us in filling skills gaps and bring an excellent work ethic.”

Daksha Stancilas  
Learning and Development  
Manager, Pret A Manger

## EXCEPTIONAL VOICES



### EPISODE ONE: DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE



Our first episode, recorded for National Inclusion Week at The Conduit in Covent Garden, was about diversity and inclusion in the workplace from a prison leaver perspective. In it, we hear from three brilliant organisations who have all found opportunities to shift the way they think about recruitment.

The panel included: Zara Easton - Group Head of Brand and Product Marketing EMEA at LinkedIn, Annie Gale – Head of Social Impact at COOK and Shauna Devlin– Diversity and Inclusion Lead at Fat Beehive.

## EXCEPTIONAL VOICES



### EPISODE TWO: DOING THE RIGHT THING



Pret believes that employment is part of the solution to homelessness and reducing reoffending, which is why they developed The Rising Stars Programme, offering jobs and training in local Pret shops.

In this episode, The Exceptionals team went to Pret HQ in London Victoria to learn more about their pioneering approach to diverse recruitment.

## EXCEPTIONAL VOICES



### EPISODE THREE: EXCEPTIONAL WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE



In this episode, we spoke to Working Chance’s Chief Executive Natasha Finlayson OBE.

Working Chance supports women with convictions into education, training and employment whilst inspiring employers to look beyond convictions and embrace inclusive hiring.





# SEASON TWO

## EXCEPTIONAL VOICES



**EPISODE ONE:  
MANAGING RISK, REBUILDING  
LIVES WITH DOMINIC HEADLEY**

## EXCEPTIONAL VOICES



**EPISODE TWO:  
SEEDS OF CHANGE  
WITH THE GLASSHOUSE**

## EXCEPTIONAL VOICES



**EPISODE THREE:  
NEW FUTURES WITH KPMG**



 The first episode of Series Two of Exceptional Voices was an inspiring conversation with Dominic Headley, Director of Dominic Headley & Associates; a specialist consultancy that empowers organisations to make informed decisions on hiring individuals with criminal records or safeguarding-related conduct concerns.

In this episode Dominic discussed that having a criminal record doesn't automatically mean someone poses a risk or is unsuitable for a role. He also shared how his company offers expert advice and operational support to employers across all sectors on safe and fair recruitment.

 The Glasshouse is a social enterprise specialising in indoor plantscaping, dedicated to empowering women through meaningful horticultural training and employment.

Co-founded by Kali Hamerton-Stove and Melissa Murdoch in 2020, the project is based at East Sutton Park Prison and provides training, paid employment and resettlement support to women approaching the end of their sentences. In this episode, the Exceptional Voices Team explored the work of The Glasshouse, joined by Founder Kali and Ri, whose journey illustrates the transformative impact of the programme.

 KPMG believes in creating opportunities and building a more inclusive workforce, so they developed The New Futures Programme to support prison leavers with skills development, mentoring and access to sustainable employment.

In this special episode, the Exceptional Voices Team were live from KPMG's Canary Wharf headquarters, speaking with the team behind the New Futures initiative, including Thea Tomison and Francesca Hall. They were joined by a participant currently taking part in the programme.

**"We're trying to provide meaningful, long-lasting, inspiring careers for people. That's really the heart of what we're doing."**

**Thea Tomison  
Director, Advisory KPMG**





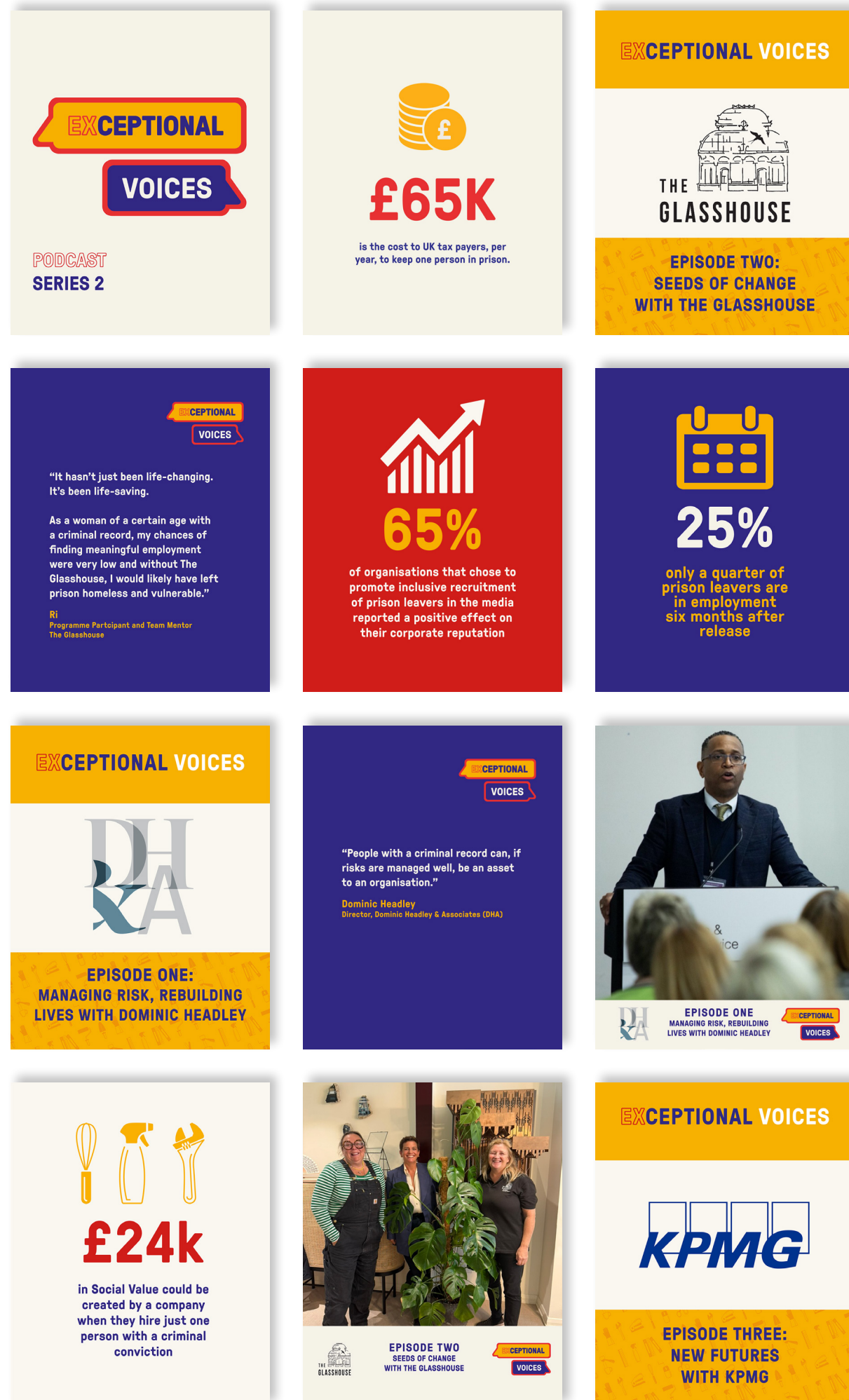
# CONNECT

**Over the years we've worked in partnership with many people in the sector to champion and drive sustainable employment - from recruitment specialists, further education and skills providers; to Government bodies and networks of rehabilitation organisations. We have forged connections between these groups and employers which has directly led to new employment opportunities.**

**We hosted six events to facilitate networking between industry specialists and prospective employers, including a live panel discussion with LinkedIn for National Inclusion Week 2022 at The Conduit in Covent Garden, London.**

**We have hired two people with convictions to run the campaign, who used this opportunity as a stepping stone into further employment.**





# SOCIAL MEDIA

We have an active online community of engaged employers, with over 2,000 followers across LinkedIn, Instagram and X.

From the outset of the campaign, we have used social media to build a diverse community of engaged followers. Initially, our community lived on X, but we have since created a dynamic feed on both LinkedIn and Instagram which has attracted great interest.

We continued to evolve our communication to respond to new platforms. The launch of the Exceptional Voices podcast secured new audiences and provided excellent content for us to share and drive engagement.

Our social media feeds celebrate success stories in the sector, promote debate and respond to the key issues in and around employment. They have been critical tools to connect with our diverse audience.

**#BE EXCEPTIONAL  
EMPLOY AN  
EXCEPTIONAL**



# BREAKING BARRIERS

## The Woven Foundation's Panel On Workplace Diversity From A Prison Leaver Perspective

For National Inclusion Week 2022, The Woven Foundation hosted a live panel discussion at The Conduit in Covent Garden, London. The discussion looked at workplace diversity from a prison leaver perspective, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities surrounding employment for individuals with convictions.

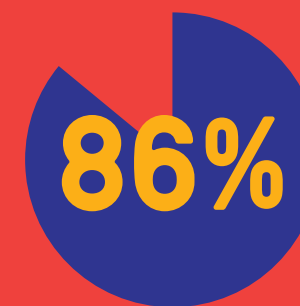
This event also marked the launch of The Exceptional Voices Podcast, exploring prison leaver employment across various industries.

The discussion featured industry leaders who are actively working to create inclusive workplaces:

- **ZARA EASTON** Group Head of Brand and Product Marketing EMEA at LinkedIn. In 2022, LinkedIn worked in partnership with social enterprise Inside Out, which saw the launch of the UK's first ever clothing brand created, designed and hand produced by young prison leavers.
- **ANNIE GALE** Head of Social Impact at COOK. RAW (Ready and Working) supports people from underrepresented groups in securing sustainable employment.
- **SHAUNA DEVLIN** Diversity and Inclusion Lead at digital agency Fat Beehive, championing inclusive hiring practices.

## The Value of Hiring Prison Leavers

Despite facing significant barriers to employment, people with convictions often prove to be some of the most dedicated and hardworking employees. Research shows:



of employers who have hired people with lived experience of the criminal justice system say they perform just as well as, if not better than, other employees.



of companies report that diverse recruitment practices have enhanced their brand reputation.

While many forward-thinking employers are willing to give people with convictions a chance, they often don't know where to start. That's why initiatives like RAW Talent, LinkedIn's fashion label, and Fat Beehive's inclusive hiring approach are so crucial. These organisations are leading the way in reshaping inclusive recruitment. We hope their stories inspire more businesses to consider hiring people with convictions.





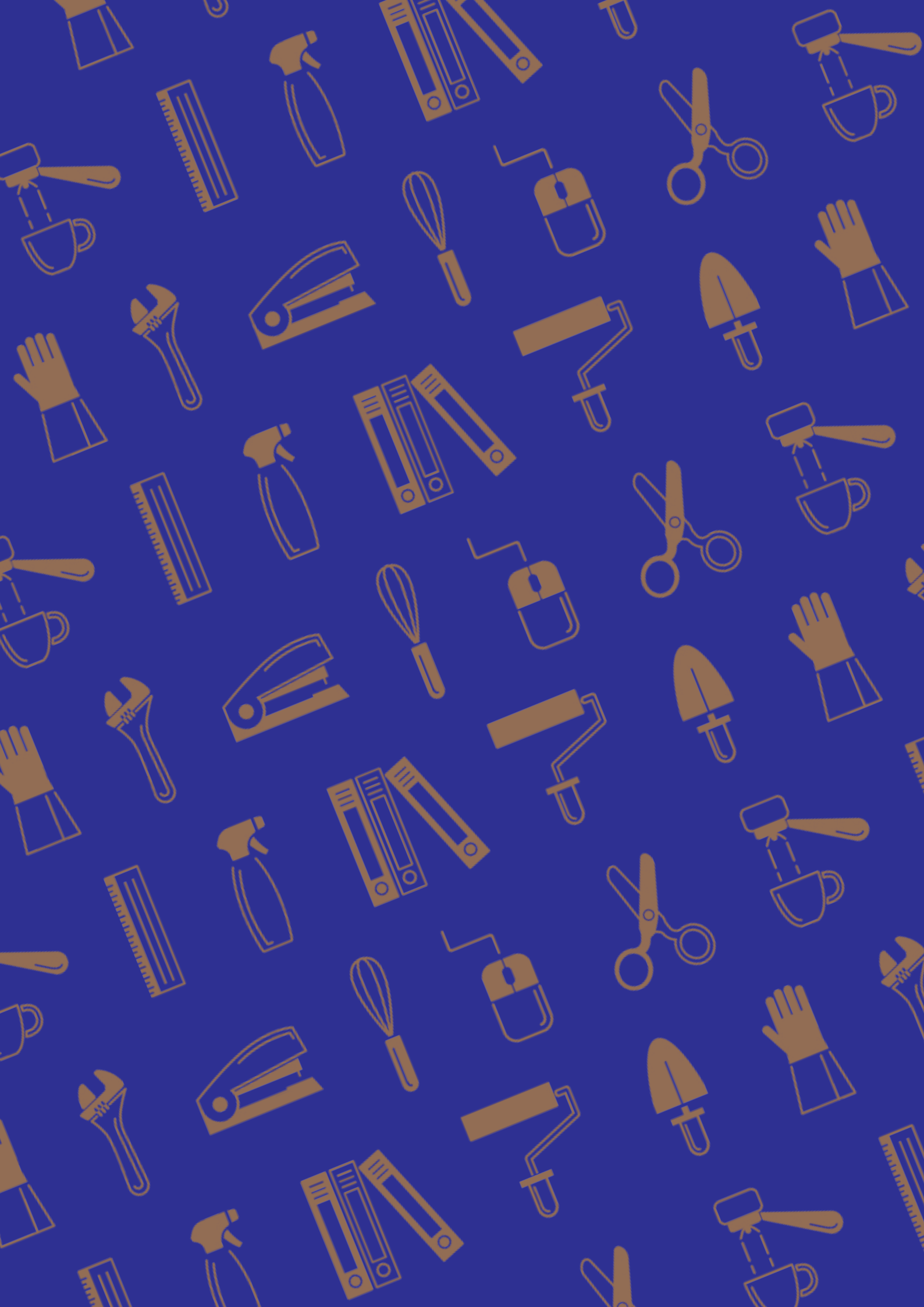
**“As a global platform leading the way we’re having conversations as professionals, we encourage businesses to be open: to talk about diversity and inclusion from a prison leaver perspective and to inspire other companies to do the same.”**

**Zara Easton**  
**Head of Brand Marketing UK,**  
**LinkedIn**



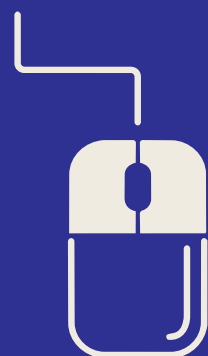




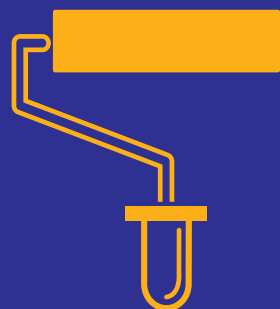
The background of the slide features a repeating pattern of various tools and objects. The items include wrenches, screwdrivers, hammers, scissors, paint rollers, whisks, computer mice, staplers, binders, gloves, mugs, and spray bottles. These icons are rendered in white and yellow outlines, creating a dense, textured effect on the blue background.

# EXCEPTIONAL STORIES





ADMIN



DECORATING



CLEANING



MANUFACTURING



CATERING



FOOD SERVICE



CARPENTRY



WASTE  
MANAGEMENT

## EXCEPTIONAL STORIES

Throughout the years, The Exceptionals campaign has explored the employment of people with convictions across a range of commercial sectors, from the established to the unexpected.

Each story follows a company or social enterprise's experience from initial interest all the way to successful hires and rewarding connections.





# THE GLASSHOUSE

**SUPPORTER OF THE CAMPAIGN SINCE 2025**

The Glasshouse is an award-winning social enterprise that provides beautiful indoor plants for offices, retail and hospitality spaces nurtured by women in prison.

Established in 2020 in the glasshouses of East Sutton Park women's prison, they employ women who are in prison or recently released and their mission is to reduce reoffending through horticultural training and employment.

The Glasshouse took part in Series Two of our Exceptional Voices podcast where Co-Founder, Kali and programme participant, Ri share how growing and nurturing plants can be life transforming.



SOCIAL ENTERPRISE



SOCIAL ENTERPRISE



SOCIAL ENTERPRISE







**“It hasn’t just been life-changing.  
It’s been life-saving.**

**As a woman of a certain age with a  
criminal record, my chance of finding  
meaningful employment were very  
low. Without The Glasshouse, I would  
likely have left prison homeless and  
extremely vulnerable.**

**Working with plants gave me dignity  
and privacy – a safe space to think  
and heal. It reminded me that I had  
skills, strengths, and value. It made  
me feel like I belonged again.”**

**Ri**

**Programme Participant,  
The Glasshouse**



**“Thank you for the introduction to the LSE. Paul at the LSE had been battling to change the mindset of HR. I spoke with the candidates last week, who are still loving it at the LSE. They have been there 2 years. One is now running the Student Union reception.”**

**Janine Adeleke**

**Former Employer Engagement  
Consultant, Pecan**

**“We completed a recruitment round with Pecan and have taken on board three of their candidates. All have fitted in well to our teams.”**

**Paul Thornbury**

**Head of Security, LSE**

# LSE

## SUPPORTER OF THE CAMPAIGN SINCE 2019

The London School of Economics (LSE) got in touch with The Exceptionals back in 2019. The security team at the LSE maintain an in-house guard force at the school. Having reviewed the regulatory requirements for these specialist roles, they discovered that they could open up their recruitment to include a wider talent pool.

The team subsequently developed a recruitment scheme that provided employment for people involved in rough-sleeping and were interested in developing this programme to include people with convictions. The Exceptionals connected the LSE to recruitment specialist Pecan who put forward suitable candidates for roles in the security department. This programme had great success, resulting in long-term employment outcomes.







# TIDEWAY

The Thames Tideway Tunnel demonstrates how inclusive employment can deliver both social and economic value. From the outset, Tideway set itself a target of employing one person with a conviction for every 100 employees in sustained employment, embedding this within all three of its main works contracts.

It partnered with charities such as Bounce Back and Key4Life to recruit and support candidates, while adopting “Ban the Box” to remove stigma from applications. In addition, Tideway staff helped to run workshops in prisons designed to grow the confidence of inmates, challenge perceptions around employment prospects post-release and teach skills needed to apply for jobs, such as interviewing and CV writing.

By 2023, 37 individuals with convictions had been employed, generating £2.3 million in social value. Tideway continue to support through volunteering opportunities with various organisations and through support for the Hardman Trust, which works with charities to provide skills and opportunities in construction to people with convictions.



CONSTRUCTION



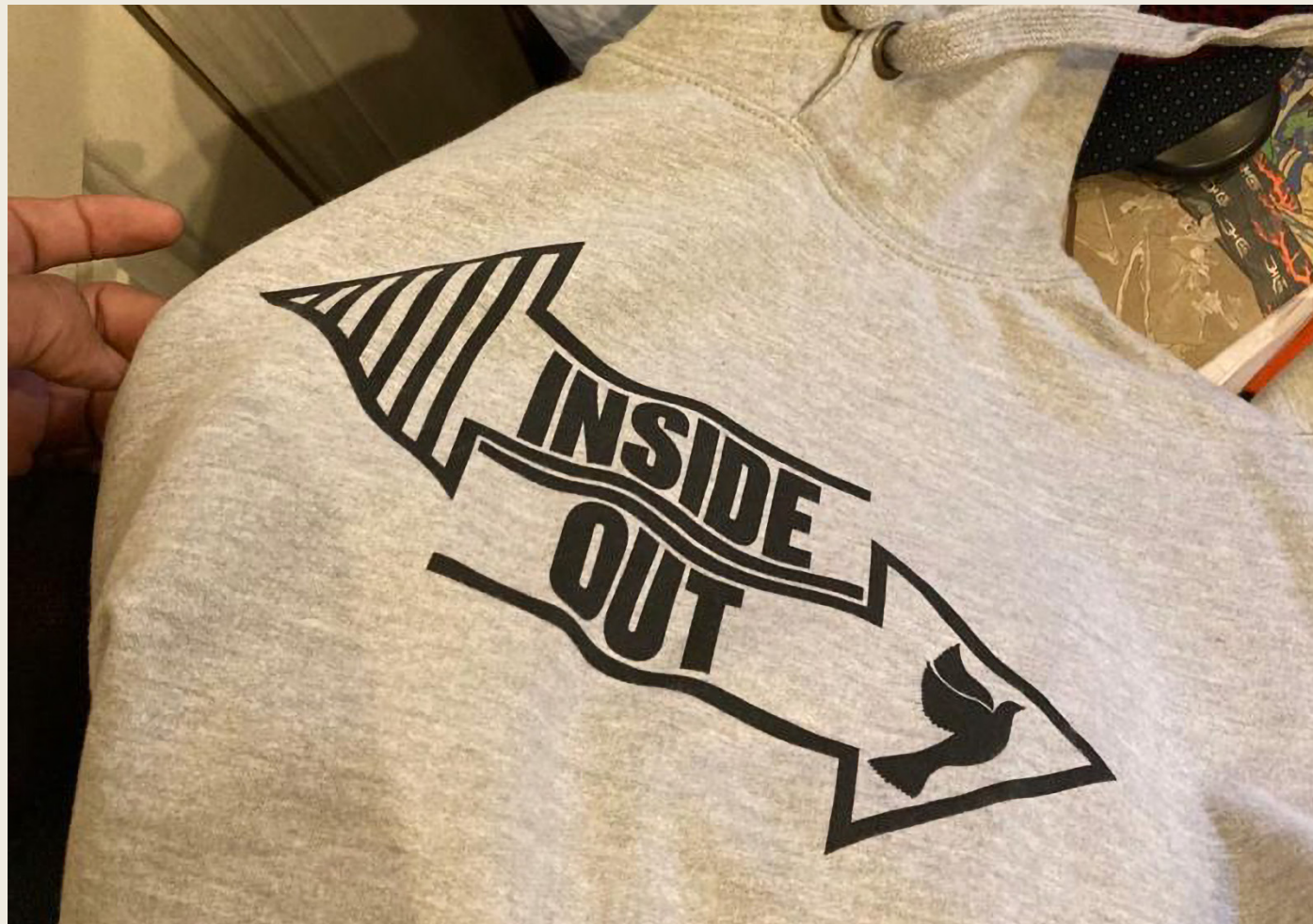
CONSTRUCTION



CONSTRUCTION







# LINKEDIN

**SUPPORTER OF THE CAMPAIGN SINCE 2022**

**BLANK CANVAS  
LINKEDIN X INSIDE OUT**

LinkedIn worked in partnership with social enterprise Inside Out on a pioneering rehabilitation initiative which saw the launch of the UK's first ever clothing brand created by young prison leavers, with a pop-up store in Westfield Stratford.

The project, Blank Canvas, supported young prison leavers into employment. The group were taught technical skills like screen printing and design as well as business skills including sales and marketing.

Zara Easton, Head of Brand Marketing at LinkedIn, shared her experience on the project at our panel discussion for National Inclusion Week in 2022.







“I already had a huge interest in fashion, as I started my own clothing line before I went to prison. I feel like Blank Canvas is really symbolic of second chances, which is what the project aims to do and has certainly given me that. Seeing the progress we’ve made as a team over the last couple months has given me a real sense of achievement.”

Tashan  
Project Participant



# RAW WORKSHOP

**SUPPORTER OF THE CAMPAIGN SINCE 2019**



## **BUSINESS AS A FORCE FOR GOOD RAW X GAILS**

RAW Social Enterprise is a long-term partner of GAIL's, supplying socially impactful commercial furniture to their bakeries across the UK. This shows the power of business as a force for good. Even if you are not quite ready to hire people with who've overcome complex challenges in your organisation, you can still make a huge difference by choosing suppliers like RAW that do through your purchasing decisions, supply chain or other partnerships. At RAW, every client order creates meaningful impact.

RAW shared their story on our digital platform back in 2019. Today, they are still delivering phenomenal work in this space, having become Europe's largest supplier of furniture that has social value built-in, and still championing the message 'be Exceptional, not the Exception.'

RAW is a commercial furniture manufacturer and provider of circular economy services, based in Oxford. RAW weaves positive social impact into every product they create not only via their workforce who have overcome significant challenges but also via their own youth charity, RAW Potential.

## **PURPOSEFUL EMPLOYMENT**

The business trains and hires people with non-traditional life paths. In fact, 75% of their workforce represent hard to reach groups who have faced and overcome challenges. To date, RAW have created over 50,000 hours of social impact through this work.



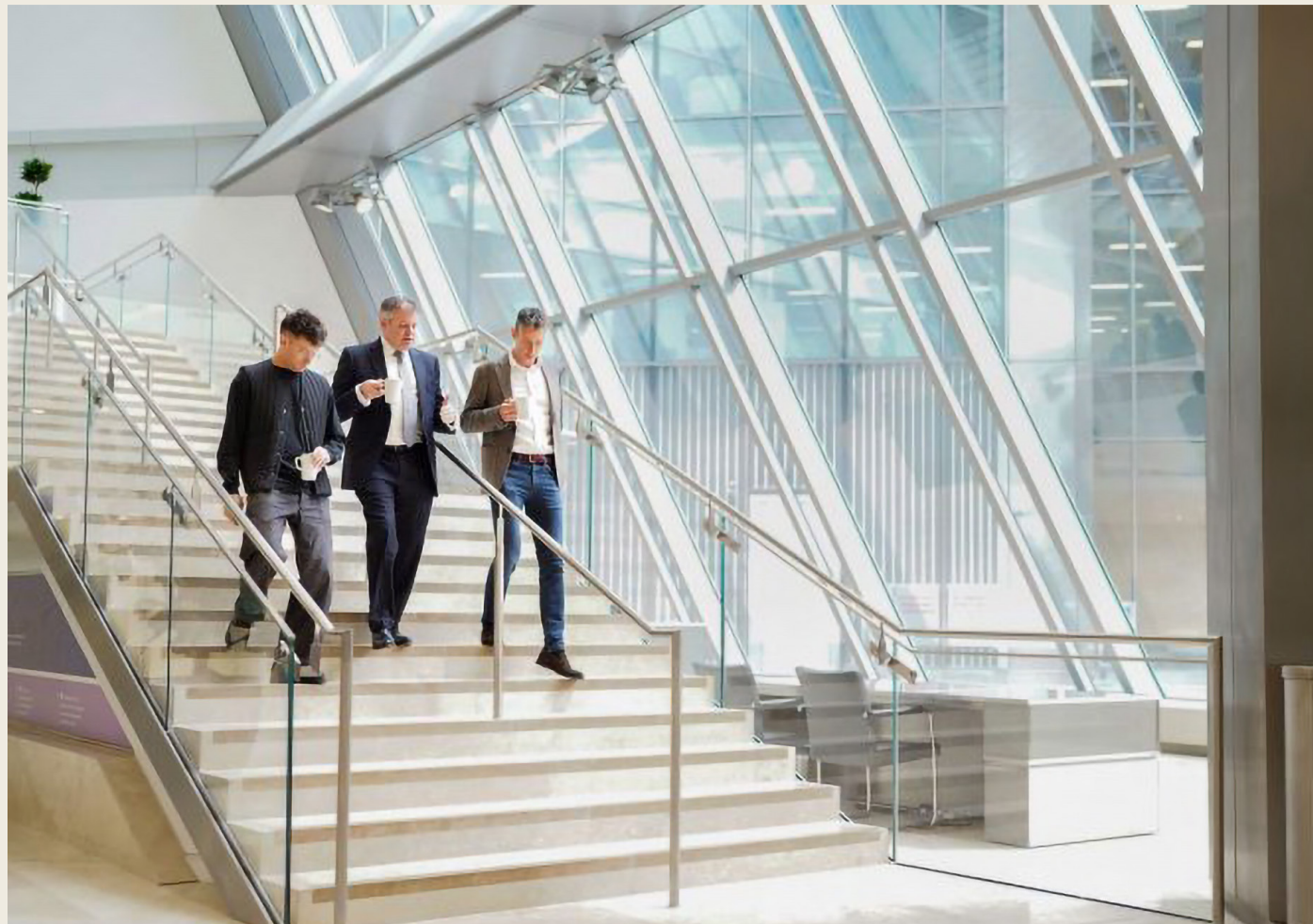


**“If you want loyalty, resilience, the hardest working people, hire those who have faced and overcome challenges in life. They are survivors and doers. The best employees you can have.”**

**Rick Mower**

**Managing Director, RAW Workshop**





# KPMG

## SUPPORTER OF THE CAMPAIGN SINCE 2016

KPMG, a global Big Four firm, have supported prison leaver employment in a variety of ways for a number of years.

Since 2017, the business has delivered a successful partnership with charity Key4Life. This impact work includes mentoring and work taster sessions.

This scheme has proven to be remarkably effective, achieving a reoffending rate of just 14%, significantly lower than the national average of over 55% for adults on short term sentences. Currently, an impressive 71% of programme participants are in employment.

Key4Life was one of our earliest partners when the Exceptionals campaign launched in 2016. It's inspiring to see the positive impact of their work in collaboration with KPMG.

Inside KPMG's London office is a Redemption Roasters café, a specialty coffee company that trains people in prison in barista, coffee production, and roasting skills.

KPMG UK also took part in Series Two of our Exceptional Voices podcast, where we met the team behind their New Futures programme.

Since launching in 2022, New Futures has supported more than 50 people living in prison, helping them develop new skills and access meaningful work, with several going on to secure permanent roles at KPMG.



PROFESSIONAL SERVICES



PROFESSIONAL SERVICES



PROFESSIONAL S





**“Our longstanding focus on social mobility is about giving everyone – regardless of their background – the chance to succeed. I believe reformed prison leavers should be no exception. We want to play our part in helping prison leavers turn their lives around.”**

**Jon Holt**  
**Chief Executive, KPMG UK**





# PRET

## SUPPORTER OF THE CAMPAIGN SINCE 2022

Doing the right thing has been part of Pret A Manger's approach since the business opened its first shop.

Through The Pret Foundation, Pret A Manger's charitable foundation, the Rising Stars Programme offers paid training and employment placements to people facing barriers to employment, including those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, refugees, care leavers and prison leavers. The programme helps participants build the skills and confidence needed to move into sustainable work.

Pret welcomed us to the HQ in London Victoria and shared their approach to inclusive recruitment. This was recorded as part of the Exceptional Voices podcast series, which was released in April 2023.





**“Our Rising Stars programme is about creating opportunities and recognising the potential in people. We have seen individuals overcome significant challenges to become valued colleagues, bringing resilience, commitment, and fresh perspectives to their roles. Several participants have gone on to secure permanent roles at Pret, demonstrating what can be achieved when people are given the opportunity and support to succeed.”**

**Tanja Mrnjaus**  
**Employment & Training Manager,**  
**The Pret Foundation**

**“You can’t hire someone who can make sandwiches and teach them to be passionate. So, we hire passionate people and teach them to make sandwiches.”**

**Pano Christou**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Pret A Manger**

**“If I could send a message to myself in prison, I’d say stay focused, keep your head down, and reach for the moon and the stars, because nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it.”**

**Tanvir**  
**Rising Star Graduate**





THE GLASSHOUSE  
HELPING PEOPLE GROW









## THE FUTURE

**The Exceptionals campaign has achieved great momentum over the last ten years - informing, connecting and inspiring potential employers to hire from this untapped talent pool.**

**This report celebrates the legacy of the campaign and serves as a call to arms to encourage employers across the UK – in partnership with the third sector and the Government – to carry forward this vital work, building richer, fairer, and more inclusive workplaces for all.**



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the impact of the campaign, we recommend the following actions to support and empower more employers to hire from this talent pool.

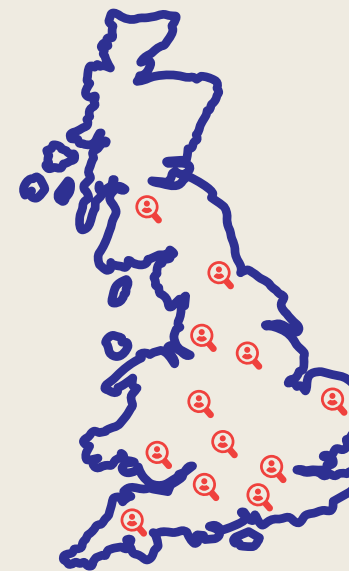
## INSPIRE



### WHEN BUSINESSES SEE SUCCESS, THEY FOLLOW

An annual programme of compelling Ted Talk style events to change employer's perspectives and short circuit their expectation of what is possible. These can be filmed and shared online.

## CONNECT



### EMPLOYMENT IN THIS SECTOR IS BEST DELIVERED IN PARTNERSHIP

A joined-up map of organisations in England and Wales that are operating both inside prisons and after release. To support employers to create the right team of partners to support them in engaging and hiring from this talent pool.

## INFORM



### EMPOWERING EMPLOYERS LEADS TO SUSTAINED RECRUITMENT

A peer-to-peer mentoring programme, where potential employers can speak directly to companies who have already employed someone with a conviction.



**MOST BUSINESSES WILL HIRE PEOPLE WITH CONVICTIONS IF THEY ARE SUPPORTED TO DO SO.**





## INSPIRE

**We recommend an annual programme of compelling Ted Talk style events to change employers' perspectives and short circuit their expectation of what is possible. These could include motivational speakers from the sector, as well as other employers who have a long standing commitment to hiring from this community. These can be filmed and shared widely to ensure reach beyond the room.**

**There also needs to be online platform that continues to share success stories - featuring employers of all sizes and industries who have successfully recruited people with convictions, worked with a social enterprise or volunteered their time to work in prisons.**





## INFORM

Our work has shown that employers can be empowered by the opportunity to share good practice and learn from the experiences of others. When it comes to employing people with convictions, there is rarely a single starting point or a one-size-fits-all model that works for every organisation. Each employer faces different challenges, responsibilities and levels of understanding, which can make the process feel complex and uncertain.

It is important for employers to understand both their own responsibilities and the support that can be provided by external organisations and partners. In many cases, simply being able to speak with someone who has already been through the process can be invaluable. We believe there is a real opportunity for employers to learn directly from one another by sharing experiences, challenges and practical approaches.

One solution would be the introduction of a peer-to-peer mentoring programme, where potential employers can speak directly to companies who have already employed someone with a conviction. Such a programme would help employers recruit in a way that is both robust and sustainable, while also building confidence and understanding across the wider business community.



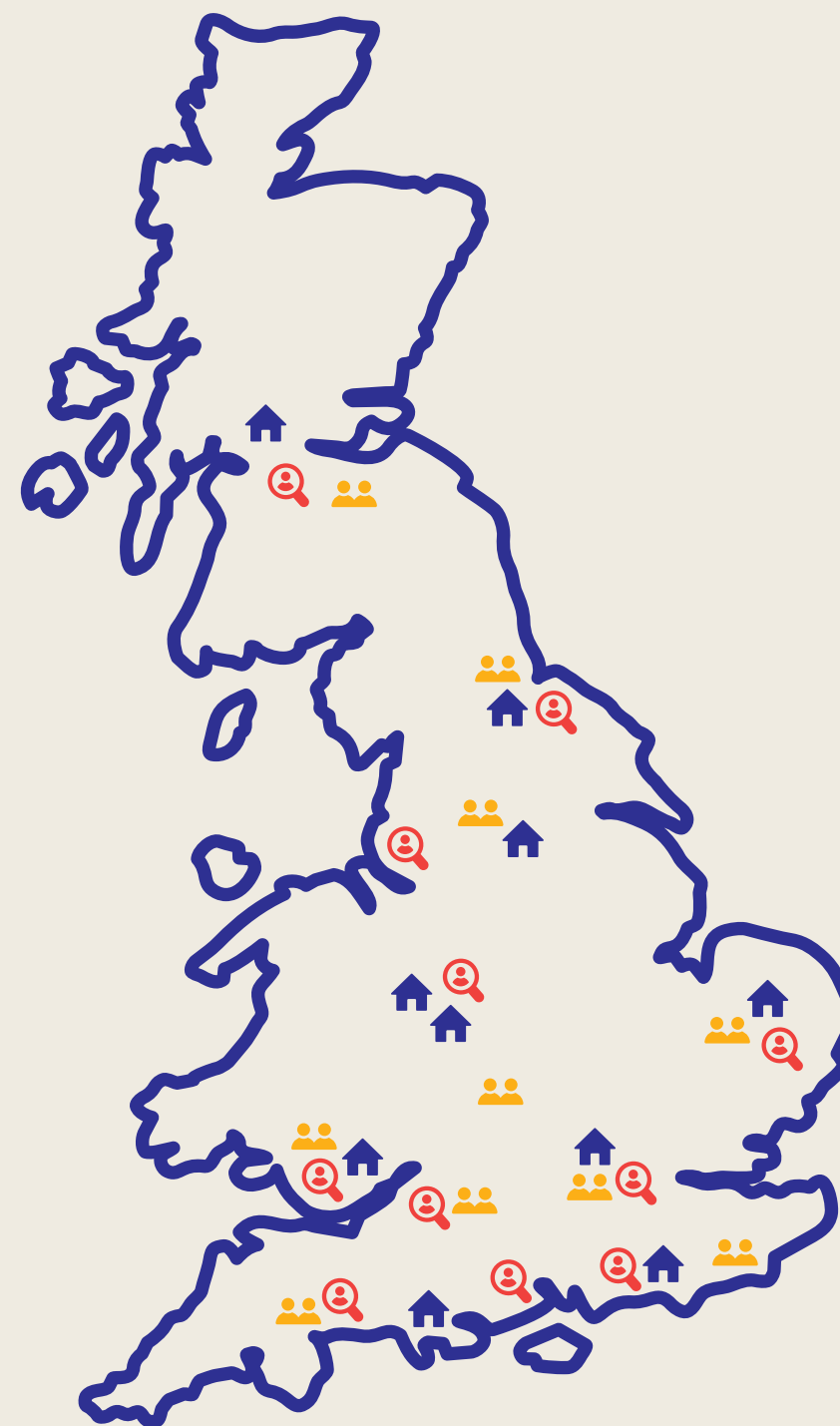




## CONNECT

There are a myriad of amazing third sector organisations and individuals working in this space that offer practical advice, support and resources for both candidates and employers. Most employers would agree that working in partnership is the most effective way to recruit and sustain meaningful employment for people with convictions. Currently, the challenge is unlocking this information to ensure that potential employers know about these organisations and the fantastic support they provide.

We believe that the simplest way to forge meaningful partnerships would be to create a joined-up map of organisations in England and Wales that are operating both inside prisons and after release. This tool would enable employers to explore both local and national networks of rehabilitation partners, to provide them with the tailored support they need. It also could be a vital resource for smaller companies looking to diversify their talent pool and hire people with convictions.



### Key



Recruitment and Employment Consultancy



Housing and Rehabilitation

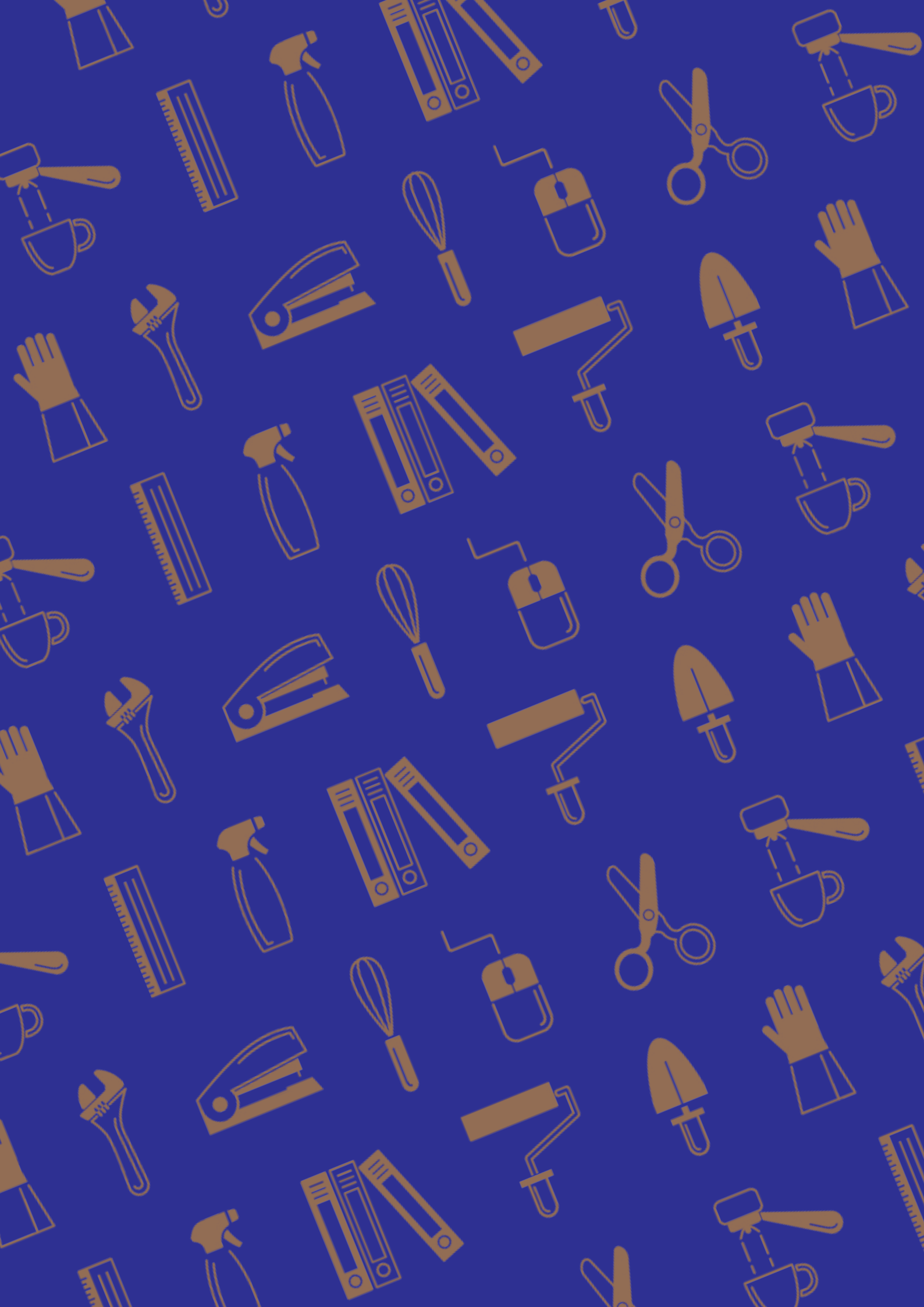


Mentoring and Coaching



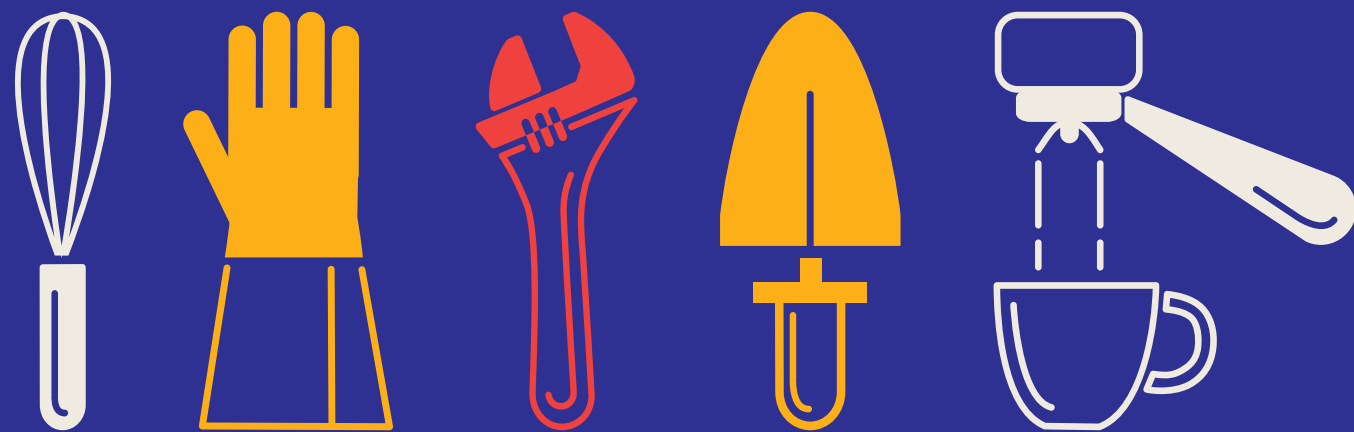




The background of the slide features a repeating pattern of various icons on a blue background. The icons include a hammer, a wrench, a pair of scissors, a computer mouse, a paint roller, a whisk, a stapler, a spray bottle, a ruler, a pair of gloves, a coffee cup, a lightbulb, a comb, and a pair of binder rings. These icons are scattered across the left side of the slide, creating a textured, patterned effect.

# CONCLUSION





## THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POTENTIAL OF EMPLOYMENT IS HUGE.

We hope that these brilliant employers, who kindly shared their exceptional stories with the campaign, will inspire more businesses to consider engaging, supporting and hiring people with lived experience of the justice system.

We believe strongly that people deserve a second chance. When businesses offer these second chances, they don't just change individual lives - they strengthen their workforces, their culture and their communities.

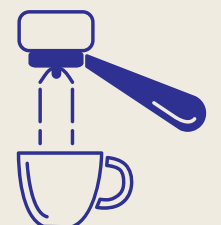


# KEY TAKEAWAYS

Over the past ten years, we have asked employers, experts and recruiters their advice on how best to hire people with convictions. Here are their key thoughts:

- 1 PEOPLE WITH CONVICTIONS ARE AN UNTAPPED WORKFORCE**  
Given the chance, they often prove to be exceptionally loyal, reliable and hard-working employees with valuable skills.
- 2 INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS**  
It strengthens your workforce, enhances your reputation, and delivers real social value.
- 3 SCALE IS NOT CRITICAL FOR IMPACT**  
You don't have to be a large business to make a meaningful impact. Small and medium sized companies also benefit from the loyalty, motivation, and strong work ethic that these employees bring. It is not about scale – it is about giving the right person the right opportunity.
- 4 THERE ARE TOOLS TO BRIDGE THE GAP**  
If it aligns with your company's employment needs, ROTL (Release On Temporary License) can be a highly effective option. It creates one of the strongest pathways to sustainable employment by building confidence, trust, and experience before release.
- 5 RISK IS NOT INSURMOUNTABLE**  
Take a person-centred approach to risk management. Look at the role in question and assess risk in relation to its specific duties and the individual's circumstances.
- 6 SHARING KNOWLEDGE IS ESSENTIAL**  
Talk to employers who have recruited from this talent pool – learn from their experiences, challenges and practical approaches.

- 7 PARTNERSHIP IS KEY TO SUCCESS IN THIS SECTOR**  
You don't need to do this on your own. There are a myriad of amazing organisations and individuals working in this space. They offer practical advice, support and resources for employers as well as helping candidates to manage the challenges they may face.
- 8 EXPERTS EXIST TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS**  
Work in partnership to stay informed and break down barriers. Attend training events and workshops. Consider working with a risk management expert, such as Dominic Headley & Associates.
- 9 THERE IS NO ONE SIZE FITS ALL APPROACH**  
There are many ways to engage with this community, and you don't have to go straight to hiring. You can get involved through mentoring; hosting or supporting training events; offering apprenticeships; or partnering with social enterprises and charities that work in prisons and support people through the gate.
- 10 SHOUT ABOUT YOUR SUCCESS**  
Share your story and inspire others. By doing that you can help demystify the process and break down barriers to recruitment. You can also make a real difference by recommending partner organisations and other experts who supported your journey.





# FURTHER RESOURCES

Building a diverse workforce that is inclusive of people with convictions may be challenging at first, but with specialist guidance and support, it can work well, generating huge benefits for businesses and employees alike.

On our website we have built a hub of information and contacts that you can use as a starting point on your journey to hire people with convictions.



## LINKS TO REPORTS AND GUIDES



Access key information and advice from a range of experts working in the sector.



## DOWNLOAD EMPLOYER FACTSHEETS



Access a handy roadmap to start your journey to inclusive recruitment.



## CONNECT WITH PARTNERS



Access a directory with over 150 potential partners working in rehabilitation and recruitment.

THE **EX**CEPTIONALS.ORG

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Thank you to everyone who has worked with us directly on the campaign and all of our supporters.



## CAMPAIGN MANAGERS:

- |                     |                 |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| ▪ Sophie O'Sullivan | ▪ Claudia Vince |
| ▪ James Gourlay     | ▪ Eleanor De    |
| ▪ Jack Merritt      | ▪ Ellie Price   |
| ▪ Gareth Evans      | ▪ Laura Ford    |



## MEDIA & PRODUCTION:

- |                         |               |
|-------------------------|---------------|
| ▪ The Boy in the Corner | ▪ Roann Ghosh |
| ▪ GW+Co                 | ▪ Jess Smith  |
| ▪ Q1 Interactive        | ▪ Krissy Muir |



**“A brilliant organisation  
really driving companies  
to employ ex-offenders.”**

**Rick Mower**  
**Managing Director,**  
**RAW Workshop**





# REFERENCES

<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/oct/15/exclude-criminal-records-from-job-applications-companies-urged#:~:text=According%20to%20research%20by%20employability,never%20recruit%20an%20ex%2Doffender.>

<https://unlock.org.uk/policy-issues/key-facts/>

<https://www.forwardtrust.org.uk/news-story/unlocking-potential-the-case-for-hiring-ex-offenders-in-the-horticulture-industry/>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/proven-reoffending-statistics-january-to-march-2024/proven-reoffending-statistics-january-to-march-2024>

<https://www.comensura.com/insights/why-reducing-reoffending-through-meaningful-employment-is-more-sustainable-than-building-more-prisons>

<https://www.novus.ac.uk/news/reoffending-rates-in-the-uk-breaking-the-cycle-of-reoffending/>

[https://www.linkedin.com/posts/uk-ministry-of-justice\\_employment-cuts-reoffending-in-half-heres-activity-7419828812433059840-IFQB/](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/uk-ministry-of-justice_employment-cuts-reoffending-in-half-heres-activity-7419828812433059840-IFQB/)

<https://uk.sodexo.com/newsroom/2023/starting-fresh-launch>

<https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/news/most-employers-would-consider-hiring-ex-offenders-in-2023/>

<https://www.bitc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/bitc-report-ban-the-box-one-million-jobs-later-feb21.pdf>

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/66896/html/>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unlock-opportunity-employer-information-pack-and-case-studies/employing-prisoners-and-ex-offenders>

<https://www.fpe.org.uk/the-cost-of-prisons/#:~:text=It%20costs%20£65%2C000%20to,built%2C%20at%20a%20huge%20expense.>

<https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/hiring-ex-offenders/>

[https://workingchance.ams3.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/Hiring\\_With\\_Conviction\\_.pdf](https://workingchance.ams3.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/Hiring_With_Conviction_.pdf)

<https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/news/most-employers-would-consider-hiring-ex-offenders-in-2023/>

# IMAGE CREDITS

|             |                                                                                                                          |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pg. 01      | The Glasshouse (employee holding a tray of Pilea). Image © Diana Yule.                                                   |
| Pg. 06-07   | GOV.UK: Unlocking Opportunity Campaign (ex-offender working on a bike in a Halfords Store). Image © GOV.UK.              |
| Pg. 09      | Dominic Headley & Associates (DHA), (Dominic Headley, Director). Image ©DHA.                                             |
| Pg. 10-11   | Bounceback (still from The Exceptionals Business Case film in 2016, featuring Dabs from Bounceback). Image ©Bounceback.  |
| Pg. 13      | The Woven Foundation (Adriana Paice Kent, Director). Image © Rick Pushinsky.                                             |
| Pg. 14-15   | (A prisoner at HMP Coldingley in Surrey makes prison gates in the steel workshop). Image © Andy Aitchison.               |
| Pg. 18&23   | COOK (ex-offenders preparing food + deliveries). Images © COOK.                                                          |
| Pg. 26-27   | (Chef plating up food on the pass). Image © Sebastian Coman.                                                             |
| Pg. 30      | HSS Hire (ex-offenders working at HSS Hire). Image © HSS Hire.                                                           |
| Pg. 33      | Redemption Roasters (Redemption Roasters coffee). Image © Redemption Roasters.                                           |
| Pg. 40      | Bounceback (still from The Exceptionals Business Case film in 2016, featuring Dabs from Bounceback). Image © Bounceback. |
| Pg. 41      | Working Chance, (still from The Exceptional’s Story film, featuring Jenny Martin). Image © Working Chance.               |
| Pg. 44      | (Chefs in a kitchen). Image © Adobe Stock.                                                                               |
| Pg. 55      | Exceptional Voices (Adriana Paice Kent speaking with Thea Tomison and Francesca Hall). Image © Exceptional Voices.       |
| Pg. 62      | Inside Out (Blank Canvas project by LinkedIn and social enterprise Inside Out). Images © Inside Out.                     |
| Pg. 64-65   | Fine Cell Work (lone stitcher). Photographer Unknown.                                                                    |
| Pg. 70&72   | The Glasshouse (indoor plants for offices). Images © Diana Yule.                                                         |
| Pg. 75      | LSE (students walking across the LSE entrance steps). Image © LSE.                                                       |
| Pg. 76      | Tideway (final tunnel shots). Image © Matthew Joseph.                                                                    |
| Pg. 78&80   | Inside Out (Blank Canvas project by LinkedIn and social enterprise Inside Out). Images © Inside Out.                     |
| Pg. 82&84   | RAW (ex-offenders working at RAW Workshops). Images © RAW.                                                               |
| Pg. 86&88   | KPMG (KPMG and Key4Life employees). Images © KMPG.                                                                       |
| Pg. 90      | PRET (Pret A Manger’s Rising Stars Programme training and an ex-offender stocking shelves). Images © PRET.               |
| Pg. 94-95   | The Glasshouse (employee caring for the plants). Image © Diana Yule.                                                     |
| Pg. 98      | Companions Real Bread (ex-offender making bread). Image © Companions Real Bread.                                         |
| Pg. 92      | TED Talk (Tedx Talks Spotlight). Image © TED Talk.                                                                       |
| Pg. 95      | (Peer-to-peer mentoring programme). Photographer Unknown.                                                                |
| Pg. 98-99   | Tideway (Dormay Street). Image © Matthew Joseph.                                                                         |
| Pg. 108-109 | RAW (ex-offender working at RAW Workshops). Images © RAW.                                                                |







**BE EXCEPTIONAL**  
**EMPLOY AN**  
**EXCEPTIONAL**