

## Top bosses join forces to get thousands of offenders into work

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Bosses from household names including Greggs, Iceland and COOK will be among those to sit on new Employment Councils supporting offenders serving their sentence in the community into work.

They will build on the success of prison Employment Advisory Boards, which were created by Lord Timpson before he became a government minister. These have brought local business leaders into jails to improve education and prisoners' ability to get work when released.

The new regional Employment Councils will expand this model out to the Probation Service and the tens of thousands of offenders serving their sentences in the community.

Each council will also have a representative from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to help improve links with local job centres.

The initiative was a manifesto commitment and will play a crucial role in the Government's mission to make streets safer by tackling reoffending under the Plan for Change.

Around 80% of all crime is reoffending but latest data shows offenders employed six weeks after leaving prison had a reoffending rate around half of those out of work.

Alongside breaking the cycle of crime, getting offenders into work helps employers fill vacancies, build their businesses, plug skill gaps and boost the UK economy.

Minister for Probation, Prisons and Reducing Reoffending, James Timpson, said: "Getting former offenders into stable work is a sure way of cutting crime and making our streets safer. That's why partnering with

businesses to get more former offenders into work is a win-win.

“The Employment Advisory Boards I spear-headed have made huge progress and now these Employment Councils will expand that success to steer even more offenders away from crime as part of our Plan for Change.”

Employment Councils will provide support to frontline probation staff already involved in getting offenders into work. They will provide them with a greater understanding of the local labour market and help build better relationships with suitable employers.

Further support from the DWP will help link offenders with work coaches placed at job centres throughout the country.

These coaches will be on hand to get offenders job-ready through mock interviews, CV advice and by sharing tips on how to secure further training opportunities in the community.

DWP Lords Minister, Baroness Maeve Sherlock, said: “As well as making our streets safer, helping offenders into work will enable employers to fill vacancies and plug our skills gaps.

“This work is vital in our Plan for Change as we begin our task of fixing the fundamentals of the social security system and progress with wider work to reduce poverty, put more money in people’s pockets and keep our streets safe.”

“That’s why I am pleased that DWP staff will also be a part of the new regional Employment Councils to directly connect them with the frontline support delivered every day by Jobcentre staff across the country – offering work experience and access to our employment programmes.

Research from the Ministry of Justice shows that 90% of businesses that employ ex-offenders agreed that they are good attenders, motivated and trustworthy

Rosie Brown, co-CEO of COOK, said: “A job provides a key way to help people restore their lives and relationships following a stretch in prison.

“In return, we get committed, loyal team members to help us build our business. Re-offending is reduced, and families, communities, and society as a whole wins.”

Employment Councils will serve as the successor to regional Employment Advisory Boards and will officially bring together probation, prisons, local employers and DWP under one umbrella for the first time, with a renewed focus on broadening support to offenders in the community.

The Boards will continue at 93 individual prisons but the addition of regional Employment Councils will help prison leavers look for work across an entire region, not just the immediate vicinity of the last prison they were in.

Colin Shute, founder of soft FM provider SBFM, commented: “The launch of Employment Councils is a promising new scheme designed to help break the cycle of repeat offending. Prisons have been **99% full** across England and Wales, leading to early releases and putting immense pressure on the prison structure. This hugely hinders the government’s ability to provide catered support to offenders and guide them out of a cycle of reoffending.

“Without support structures like these in place, many ex-offenders leave prison with nowhere to go, no job opportunities lined up, and face stigmatisation, which prevents them from applying for and securing new opportunities.

“These factors hugely impact reoffending, further incapacitating our overcrowded prison infrastructure. James Timpson and the Timpson Group have tirelessly worked to change this reality for years, especially through the Employment Advisory Boards (EAB) that James helped establish with the Ministry of Justice. I am proud to be a chair of the EAB, which helps ex-offenders develop through skills-based training to ease their transition out of incarceration.

“Many prison leavers are eager to prove their abilities in the workplace and are an underappreciated potential workforce, which is where we come in. SBFM wants to give ex-offenders new, fulfilling career opportunities that help them rehabilitate into the workforce.

“More businesses need to engage with their local communities and prisons to develop support structures for prison leavers. We hope that Employment Councils will bring these groups together to develop stable, much-needed pathways so more people can leave the prison system for good.”