

Innovative Approaches to Working with Ex-offenders

Introduction

Funded between 2001 and 2008 the Equal programme, a European Social Fund (ESF) initiative which operates across all European Union countries, has developed and tested new ways of challenging discrimination and inequalities in the labour market, both for those in work and for those seeking work. Equal has acted as a learning platform, developing innovative ways of tackling existing labour market problems. It has presented evidence-based outcomes which could be adopted by policy makers and delivery agents at local, regional, national and European levels.

This paper provides an overview of current UK and EU policies in relation to working with ex-offenders and highlights how messages and approaches developed by the Equal Programme link into UK and EU policy.

Policy Context

UK Policy Context

The UK 'Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan' (2004) outlines seven pathways including one that focuses on education, training and employment. This action plan sets the context for subsequent work. It was followed by the Green Paper 'Reducing Re-Offending through Skills and Employment' (2005).

The, 'Reducing Re-offending through Skills and Employment: Next steps' (2006) identified three key areas:

- *Into work and away from crime* (i.e. engaging employees through the Reducing Re offending Corporate Alliance). The National Offender Management Service (NOMS, <http://www.noms.justice.gov.uk>) Corporate Alliance focuses on helping offenders into work via engaging with stakeholders and supporting employer needs (i.e. where there is a significant demand for labour and equipping offenders with skills such as CV writing/interview skills). The alliance also considers how employers may be supported. The Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Offender Management team have produced a guidance document called 'The step change initiative – Yorkshire and Humberside' on the approach taken in the region, http://noms.justice.gov.uk/news-publications-events/publications/guidance/step_change_initiative_YH/?view=Standard&pubID=481679
- Gaining skills and improving employability (i.e. building on the new Offender

Learning and Skills Service (OLASS, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/offenderlearning>) through the development of a campus model). Managed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), OLASS provides access to education and training for offenders through a series of links with relevant providers and will help prepare offenders (including young offenders) for the job market.

- *Motivated to work, skilled for employment* (i.e. reinforcing the emphasis on skills and jobs in prisons and probation). A renewed focus on the provision of customised training, offender accountability and buy-in to training programmes should help to improve offenders 'fit-to-work' post release prospects and will also benefit employers.

Two reports have also been published which promote an offender-centred approach. Lord Carter of Coles' review, *'Securing the Future: proposals for the efficient and sustainable use of custody in England and Wales'* (December 2007, <http://www.justice.gov.uk>) makes recommendations around key themes including the operational efficiency and financial control of the prison system. Within this, the provision of opportunities for meaningful activities including training and employment is also noted.

'The Corston Report: A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system' (March 2007 <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk>), makes recommendations in relation to female offenders and future employment. This includes promoting the use of individually tailored plans through women-only centres and the holistic approach that these can provide around identified needs including employment, education and training and financial advice.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is committed to helping the most socially disadvantaged unemployed in finding employment, as stated in *'In Work, better off: Next steps to full employment'* (July 2007). This is planned through partnership with employers to provide a demand-led approach to employment support.

The 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review sets out a number of Public Service Agreements (PSAs, <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk>) that are relevant to supporting offenders in finding employment. 'Make Communities Safer' (PSA 23) includes a priority action to reduce re-offending through the improved management of offenders. 'Increasing the proportion of socially excluded adults in settled accommodation and employment, education or training' (PSA 16), refers to improving provision for socially excluded adults and 'reduce the harm caused by alcohol and drugs'(PSA 25), aims to reduce the harm caused by alcohol and drugs including provision of treatment in prison.

Stakeholder engagement has been extensive with four separate consultation exercises taking place. Viewed together they provide an indicator of the holistic approach to reduce re-offending: 'Working in partnership to reduce re-offending and make communities safer' will provide a strategic level approach to guide policies and practice over the period of the current spending review (2008-2011) (November 2007 – February 2008).

NOMS Third Sector Action Plan (*'Securing effective partnerships to reduce re-offending and protect the public'*) aims to provide strengthened opportunities for Third Sector involvement in reducing re-offending and providing services for offenders (November 2007 – February 2008).

- *'Believing we can'* explores how faith-based organisations can effectively support reductions in offending through the provision of support for employment (November 2007 – February 2008).
- *'Improving health, supporting justice'* considers how the Health Service can support offenders into employment as part of its cross-government responsibilities (November 2007 – March 2008).

The Prolific and Priority Offender scheme www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/ppo requires all agencies to consider provision for women, young people and ethnic minorities in offering employment advice to offenders, as evidenced in the updated guidance from the London PPO Steering Group.

'Cutting Crime: A New Partnership 2008-2011' (July 2007), outlines the Home Office's strategic plan to reduce crime through the development of strategies to assist offenders. More broadly, support for employers as stakeholders has been enhanced through guidance from the Chartered Institute of Personal Development (CIPD, <http://www.cipd.co.uk>), Business in the Community (BITC, <http://www.bitc.org.uk>) and the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) <http://www.nacro.org.uk/>

The CIPD guidance recommends that employers make objective risk-assessments of individual cases, avoiding blanket policies and highlights the potential benefits of employing ex-offenders. BITC has also produced a guide on employing offenders. This outlines the benefits to business and society (e.g. solving skill shortages, demonstrating diversity, reducing re-offending) as well as providing a checklist for employers. Four key themes are highlighted: communication, partnership, 'job readiness' and selection processes.

NACRO has updated its guidance on the rehabilitation of offenders Act 1974. This highlights the benefits of the act in clarification of time-spans before convictions are considered 'spent' and the necessity to declare convictions to employers.

EU Policy Context

The European Commission has funded the 'European Offender Employment Forum' for two years under the second Transnational Exchange Programme (TEP), designed to promote co-operation and mutual learning on policies and programmes to combat social exclusion.

The project which finished in July 2007 promoted a co-ordinated inter agency approach to tackling the employment needs of offenders, who have a very high rate of exclusion from the labour market. The EOEf undertook the following:

- Promoted links between different employment providers across Europe
- Lobbied and advocated on offender employment issues
- Provided a central information source for policy makers and providers
- Development and maintenance of a website - <http://www.eoef.org/>

One of the main outcomes of the project is a new 'Offender Employment Toolkit' which has now been published by the EOEf on their website. It aims to provide practical advice to anyone working in the offender employment field in any EU member state. The toolkit is expected to be developed and expanded over time.

Matching Messages to Policy

Equal has provided examples of good practice that match current policy and implementation priorities. It is clear from the information below how learning from Equal provides a direct value and match with several aspects of current offender policies.

- **Adopt an offender-centred approach that includes wrap-around services in prison and beyond the prison gate** - The motivated to work, skilled for employment strand of the 'Next Steps' document encourages an offender-led approach in terms of customised training. The Corston Report makes clear that individually tailored interventions are important for female offenders. The report by Lord Carter of Coles highlights the need for the prison system to provide training that is relevant to the labour market. Cross-cutting links with PSA 25 (to reduce the harm caused by alcohol and drugs) are also evident.
- **Ensure services are geared to preparing offenders for the job market by equipping them with work and life skills that start in prison with a focus on vocationally appropriate learning** - OLASS arrangements should help to prepare offenders for the job market by providing basic 'life-skills' along with vocational skills as part of the Offenders Learning Journey (for both adults and young people).
- **Ensure all stakeholders are effectively engaged and supported and provide on-going workplace support to both ex-offenders and employers** - The Corporate Alliance is one example of engaging employers effectively in the process. Guidance from NACRO, BITC, the CIPD and other advice resources (see 'Further Information' below) also provides support and guidance for employers.
- **Design relevant policies to assist offenders into employment (including close alignment of strategies and funding). This also concerns supporting short term**

prisoners and restorative justice models - The continuation of the PPO strategy demonstrates a commitment to an offender-focussed strand of community safety policy. Overarching strategies and targets (e.g. 'Cutting Crime' and the new PSAs 2008-2011) also link here. The promotion of ex-offenders as a group that can fill labour market gaps echoes this key message.

- **Ensure that all agencies consider provision for women, young people and ethnic minorities** - The Corston Report highlights the importance of considering different section of society (i.e. women). The availability of an Offender Learning Journey for young people represents a focus on youth. DCSF should also have a part to play here.

Further Information

<http://www.Offenderlearning.net> - Provides information, advice and guidance to those working in the Offender Learning and Skills sector.

<http://www.eoef.org> - the European Offender Employment Forum (EOEF).

<http://www.epea.org> – the European Prison Education Association.

<http://www.sova.org.uk> - supports others through volunteer action.

<http://www.apextrust.com> - promotes employment opportunities for ex-offenders.

<http://www.howardleague.org> – a penal reform charity in the UK.

<http://unlock.org.uk> – the National Association of Reformed Offenders.

<http://www.barrowcadbury.org.uk> - the Barrow Cadbury Trust is an independent, charitable foundation committed to funding and encouraging the promotion of social justice.

<http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk> – a charity dedicated to improving the lives of those caught experiencing crisis, crime and mental illness.

<http://www.advice-resources.co.uk/selectedresources/visionforchange> - a guide for practitioners to support ex-offenders in overcoming the barriers to learning and work.