

Comprehensive Spending Review 2020: Employing people with convictions

What?

In the 2020 Comprehensive Spending Review the government should consider piloting financial incentives for employers to encourage recruitment of people with criminal records.

Financial incentives – whether a tax holiday, wage subsidy or other model – could be the nudge employers need to make positive hiring decisions. After that, the performance of recruits will speak for itself. Investment need not be high to achieve returns and the benefit is likely to continue after the incentive is withdrawn. However, those returns may take time to be realised, and some monitoring of this will be necessary.

Narrowly targeted interventions are more likely to see take-up and success and we recommend a focus on recent prison leavers and/or those currently serving a sentence in the community under probation supervision.

At the same time, we encourage government to look at ways to make ‘Ban the Box’ a statutory requirement. The campaign encourages employers to remove questions about criminal records from application forms. Where necessary, these questions can be asked at interview or after a conditional offer, prior to a formal criminal records check.

Why?

Many businesses are fearful of hiring people with a criminal record. Recent figures show just [12% of prison leavers are in employment six weeks after release](#). Most employers are free to choose whether to ask about criminal records, and can ask at a later point in application if they need to – yet our research found almost 75% of companies [ask about criminal records on application](#). 75% of companies admit [discriminating against applicants who tick the box](#). In a 2016 [survey](#) 32% of employers had concerns about this group’s skills and capability, 45% were concerned they would be unreliable and 40% were worried about the public image of their business.

These concerns are unfounded; employers who proactively recruit from this population [report positive experiences](#). Polling from [2019](#) shows that 81% of employers report a positive impact on their business, while 75% of consumers would buy from a business that hired people with convictions. Jobs working with children or vulnerable adults, or other trusted roles, require a standard or enhanced DBS check later in the recruitment process, so delaying disclosure does not create a risk. There is simply no need to ask in the earliest stage of application and doing so is likely to be in breach of the GDPR.

Countering employers' reluctance to recruit people with criminal records requires a multi-faceted and cross government approach, including building awareness of the benefits and incentivising proactive recruitment. Ban the box is one part of this, financial incentives another – and the two can go hand in hand.

A [2018 study](#) in the US examined the impact of tax credits on employers' attitude to hiring people with convictions. 60% of employers said a credit on 25% of a worker's wages would encourage positive hiring decisions. Increasing the credit to cover 40% of the worker's wages would encourage almost 80% to do so.

Financial incentives have received significant support. In December 2016, the [Work and Pensions Committee recommended](#) "that the Government pilot the reduction of National Insurance Contributions for those employers who actively employ ex-offenders." Onward's [2019 report](#) included evidence from employers that financial incentives could influence their hiring practice. The Civil Service is [one of 145 employers](#) who have signed up to the Ban the Box campaign, with no negative effect, and is now able to benefit from the widest pool of talent. But there is a long way to go – in 2018 there were around [2.94 million active businesses in the UK](#).

The [Ministry of Justice's recent White Paper](#) emphasised employment as way to drive down the [£18bn a year](#) cost of reoffending, citing evidence that employment reduces reoffending by between 6 and 9%.

How

We recommend a three-year wage subsidy pilot to ensure enough time to raise awareness and boost take-up as well as realise benefits. The pilot should be regionally based and designed in collaboration with businesses who have expressed an interest in recruiting from this population.

The subsidy should apply to prison leavers and those serving community sentences based in selected regions, and paid in instalments at agreed intervals in the contract. This would need to be managed through specified services to monitor take-up of incentives and adherence to any conditions. The [New Futures Network](#) is a specialist part of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. They broker partnerships between prisons and employers and are now in contact with over [500 employers](#) nationally. The New Futures Network is well placed to understand employers' needs and ensure effective delivery of incentives to both people leaving prison and those serving sentences in the community.

About Unlock

Unlock is an independent award-winning national advocacy charity that provides a voice and support for people with convictions who are facing stigma and obstacles because of their criminal record, often long after they have served their sentence.

We challenge discrimination faced by people with convictions seeking employment, building on our track record of working with government, employers and others. We use our knowledge and experience to influence and develop policies and initiatives to increase the employment of people with convictions.

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