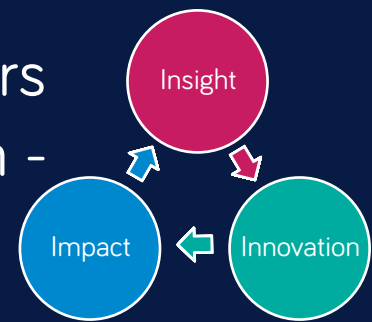


# Employment and skills for ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction - fulfilling potential, building futures



Pulse is a series of briefings from The Forward Trust for staff, partners, commissioners and stakeholders to communicate:

- **Insight** from our research team's analysis of client data and other findings
- Examples of **innovation** and continuous service improvement
- Evidence of our personal, social and economic **impact**.

The Forward Trust (Forward) provide a range of care, support and employment services to people struggling with drug or alcohol dependence or who have a history of offending. Despite our clients being amongst the most marginalised in society, we believe in everyone's ability to transform their lives and to achieve recovery from a lifestyle of addiction and crime.

## Executive Summary

- Having a job has a proven impact on recovery and rehabilitation. However, ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction have, for many years, struggled to find work due to a combination of employer discrimination and lack of education and training opportunities.
- In recent years, the economy has changed, resulting in the highest employment rates since 1971. But many of the jobs created have been low-skill, poorly paid and temporary. Whilst being more accessible for disadvantaged groups (including Forward clients), these types of job don't offer the stability or progression opportunities that our clients need to build a future. Our clients need skills – as does the wider economy, which, despite generating jobs, lags on productivity.
- Forward's experience shows that, given the opportunity, ex-offenders and people in recovery are highly motivated to work and to learn new skills, and can make committed employees – but they need support to get them started in the world of work, especially when leaving prison.
- Forward has supported over 2,000 clients into employment. Our unique approach is centred on:
  - » **Clear steps to a 'career change'** – from a life of crime and drugs, through vocational and life skills training, to volunteering and work tasters, to proper paid jobs
  - » **Positive peer influence** – maximising the belief in, and motivation for, this career change through exposure to the lived experience of role models, and peer support networks
  - » **Targeted skills and employability training** - covering both the 'soft skills' needed for the workplace and the targeted vocational skills that employers are looking for in growth sectors of the economy (90% of clients complete our training; 88% find and keep a job)
  - » **Access to real jobs** – in Forward's core work force, or our own social enterprises (e.g. Blue Sky Services and Trew Era Café), or with partner employers in a growing range of sectors
  - » **Supporting entrepreneurship** – helping clients to become self-employed, and providing investment and support to businesses run by and for ex-offenders or people in recovery
- The work of Forward's Employment Services has a proven impact:
  - » **Reduced re-offending** - up to 23% according to the Ministry of Justice's Data Lab, one of the highest performing interventions on record
  - » **Recovery from addiction** - those in recovery who are employed are 22% more likely to be abstinent, and having a job more than doubles the length of abstinence<sup>1</sup>
- Building on our achievements to date, we are looking to work in partnership with more employers, and a wider range of skills and employment providers, to reach more offenders and people in recovery from addiction.

## Context

### Employment is key to recovery and rehabilitation

Having a job is a key enabling factor in recovery and rehabilitation and is one of the most important factors in reducing the likelihood of someone re-offending, alongside housing and positive relationships with family and friends. As well as financial stability, structure and routine, and a future career pathway, employment brings profound personal and emotional benefits – including self-esteem, a sense of purpose, and pride from being a role model for family members. All this leads to a changed attitude to crime, longer-term thinking and ultimately a commitment not to re-offend or relapse.

“It’s wonderful to be able to tell my kids about what I’m doing – they’re so proud of me. My wife tells me I’m a different man, and I feel like one too.”

### Prejudice and discrimination

But for many years, ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction have been excluded from the workplace. Research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions in 2016<sup>8</sup> showed that ex-offenders and people in recovery from addiction were the two groups that organisations were least likely to employ, being viewed as high risk.

“I have worked really hard to address my addiction, but I still feel my criminal record will hold me back”

“Bosses can stereotype ex-cons and addicts”

“I’ve not been able to get work on certain building sites due to my criminal record”

“I am struggling to get to interview if I tell the truth on an application, so I lie then, when I get to interview I disclose my history”

- 75% of prisoners have no job on release
- Over half of Forward’s clients have not had a job for 3 or more years or have never worked
- One in four people in recovery have been turned down for jobs three times or more by disclosing their past

### Poor educational outcomes

Employer discrimination and prejudice against ex-offenders and people in recovery has been compounded by poor educational attainment.

- Over half of Forward’s prison clients left school before the age of 16- with limited qualifications.
- The Ministry of Justice’s Education and Employment Strategy (2018) reports that over 50% of the prison population have English and Maths Skills equivalent to those of a primary school child.

Forward’s clients have missed out on the opportunity to gain qualifications, work experience and soft skills (e.g. how to communicate assertively, listen well, and show empathy) as well as technical or career-focussed skills. They may not have had the opportunity to re-train or up-skill due to the inequalities they have faced, a lack of good quality careers advice and affordable pathways to access these re-training opportunities, especially in the field of technology.

### A changing economy

In recent times, the structure of the economy has changed. Employment rates in the UK are at their highest since 1971, with around 75% of people aged 16-64 in work. But two-thirds of the growth in employment has been in ‘atypical’ roles such as zero-hours contracts or agency work. Disadvantaged groups (including Forward’s clients) have benefited from access to these types of job, according to research by The Resolution Foundation and The Institute for Public Policy Research. This indicates a welcome change in attitude on the part of employers, albeit driven by business need.

However, whilst any job is a starting point on the road to recovery and rehabilitation, the type of work that is now more readily available does not provide job satisfaction, security or contractual rights and can make it hard to plan for the longer term, for example to obtain a mortgage. It can also lead to ‘in work poverty’ – being stuck in a low paid job with little prospect of progression. Forward’s clients require a firmer foundation than this on which to build a future, which means access to skills, training and job opportunities with a clear career trajectory.

### Poor productivity and the need for skills

Despite achieving high employment rates, the UK economy is far from healthy in terms of productivity: according to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) the UK ranks 11th out of the 30 OECD countries (Gross Value Added per hour worked) with two-thirds of workers employed in businesses with productivity that falls below the industry average. Investment in skills for the workforce is key to addressing this problem, with Forward’s client groups being an untapped reservoir of potential.

## Our approach

Having a job is a key enabling factor in recovery and rehabilitation and is one of the most important factors in reducing the likelihood of someone re-offending, alongside housing and positive relationships with family and friends. As well as financial stability, structure and routine, and a future career pathway, employment brings profound personal and emotional benefits – including self-esteem, a sense of purpose, and pride from being a role model for family members. All this leads to a changed attitude to crime, longer-term thinking and ultimately a commitment not to re-offend or relapse.

### Clear steps to a 'career change'

Our organisation-wide Theory of Change charts an individual's progress from chaos and dependence, to responsibility and independence (illustrated opposite). We set out for clients a clear pathway with achievable steps to progress from a life of crime and drugs, through vocational and life skills training, to volunteering and work tasters, to proper paid work, traineeships and apprenticeships and the independence with that brings. For many of our clients, this journey starts in prison with a realisation, a 'light bulb' moment, that a 'career change' is possible, which might (for some) be less lucrative than previous criminal pursuits but which ultimately leads to greater security, personal development and self-respect.



### Peer networks

At each step of the pathway, people with lived experience build belief in, and motivation for, this career change among our clients. Peer support networks are central to the work of all Forward services and we offer progressive opportunities for our clients to become involved in our work and to 'give something back':

- Peer supporters – current service users who volunteer to help promote our services and share their inspirational stories and experience
- Peer mentors – former service users trained to Level 2 Peer Mentoring, offering structured support and co-delivering workshops and interventions
- Peer practitioners – full-time, salaried work placements for up to 12-months supporting service delivery; we have employed over 100 of these to date, with 75% progressing to full-time work (the initiative won the national HR Awards 2017)

Further, and beyond this peer progression pathway, over 1/3 of our permanent staff have lived experience of addiction or of the criminal justice system.

### Relevant skills and employability training

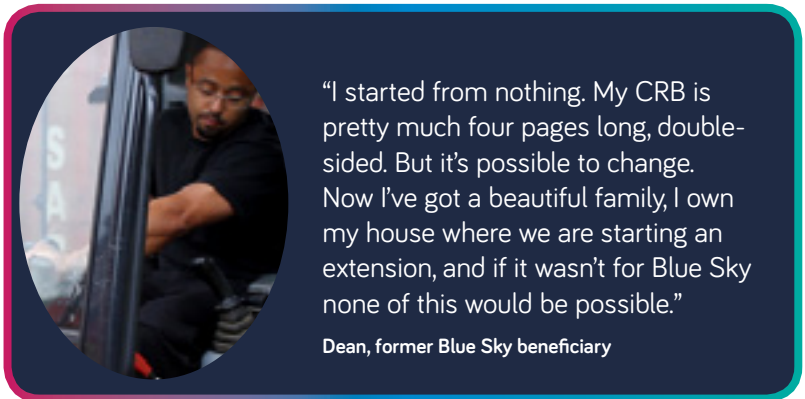
Our skills and employability training, delivered in both prison and community and work settings (e.g. Job Centre Plus), is informed by many years' experience as a direct employer of ex-offenders and people in recovery, and bridges the gap between a life of crime and drugs and the real world of work. Our training includes:

- Individual learning plans – starting with the client and their interests and previous experience, we establish motivation for work and co-produce plans that set realistic but aspirational goals
- Soft skills and mind-set – understanding what employers are looking for, developing routine, building confidence (e.g. creating an 'elevator pitch' to help clients best present their attributes)
- Vocational skills – highly targeted courses delivered either directly by Forward or in partnership with others skills and employability providers and covering employability skills, customer service, ground maintenance, business administration, hospitality
- Coaching – clients receive personalised support from an Employment Coach who develop employability, job search and hunting skills, help with making applications, and match clients with our network of employers

## Access to real jobs

We offer real jobs through Forward's own social enterprises:

- In our outreach, advice, programme and support teams – where people's lived experience of offending, or drug and alcohol problems, is particularly useful.
- Blue Sky Services – over 12 years' experience of employing ex-offenders to deliver grounds maintenance and wider facilities management services, working for local authorities and social landlords
- Trew Era Café – a vocational training café with a focus on progressing into jobs and apprenticeships in the hospitality industry



“I started from nothing. My CRB is pretty much four pages long, double-sided. But it's possible to change. Now I've got a beautiful family, I own my house where we are starting an extension, and if it wasn't for Blue Sky none of this would be possible.”

Dean, former Blue Sky beneficiary

We also have an extensive network of employers we work with to source candidates that match their skills requirements, in sectors including hospitality, facilities management, retail, construction, ICT/digital and public services. We offer employers real choice with options including work tasters, work trials, traineeships, apprenticeships, part- and full-time positions.

## Supporting entrepreneurship

We can also help clients to become self-employed (an aspiration for many of our clients), and we provide investment and business support to businesses run by and for ex-offenders and people in recovery through the Forward Enterprise Fund, in partnership with Social Investment Business. Businesses recently supported include HMPasties, a not-for-profit social enterprise selling baked foods founded by Lee Wakeham, an ex-offender who wants to give people with a criminal record a second chance through training and peer mentoring whilst employed and earning a living wage.



## Origins - 'About Blue Sky'

Blue Sky is the brainchild of a former investment banker (Mick May) and an ex-bank robber (Steve Finn). On getting to know each other, Steve told Mick how hard it had been for him to find a job once he'd decided to turn away from a life of crime, despite being desperate to work. Employers just didn't want to know. So Mick and Steve together came up with the idea of setting up a company where you had to have a criminal record to work there, flipping employer prejudice against employing ex-offenders on its head.

Blue Sky started off delivering grounds maintenance services for Slough council, exclusively employing local ex-offenders to conduct the work. Blue Sky then went on to win similar business from local authorities across the south of England before expanding their employment model by providing companies with an alternative to agency labour in a range of industry sectors – including waste management, distribution and construction.

Fast forward 12 years and Blue Sky has directly employed over 1,500 ex-offenders, equivalent to the population of a large prison.

Blue Sky is now fully integrated into the Employment Services division of Forward following its merger with RAPt. Mick May has since retired though remains a strong supporter of Forward. Steve Finn is still at the helm of Blue Sky Services and excited by the potential to grow and develop the service. (He is pictured opposite as the 'poster boy' of Forward's forthcoming campaign, *More than my Past*, which gives voice to personal stories of recovery and rehabilitation).



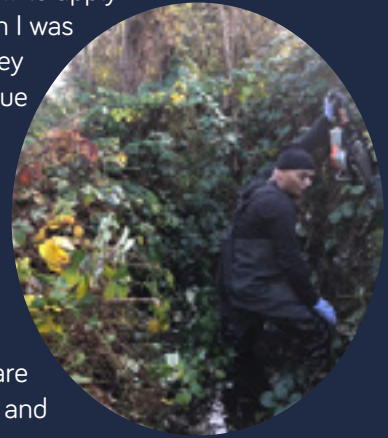
"I first heard about Blue Sky while I was still in prison. I was near the end of my sentence and told a member of prison staff that I wanted to get a job when I got out. They told me about Blue Sky and asked if I wanted to sign up for one of their courses, so I said yes. I went on Blue Sky's one-day 'Work Taster' session at HMP Onley in April 2018.

It was a great opportunity - I'd never done anything like that before. It was really practical and hands on, and gave me an idea of the kind of jobs that I could do when I got out of prison and also how to apply for them. I left the session feeling really inspired and ready to start working. When I was released from prison I gave Blue Sky a call to see if there were any jobs going. They had one to wash cars, which I interviewed for and although that didn't work out, Blue Sky stuck with me. They offered me a job in their Blue Sky Services team in June 2018 working in grounds maintenance, a month after I got out of prison.

I really enjoyed working in grounds maintenance because I am a fitness guy and I like keeping active, which is what the job allowed me to do. We did different jobs like trimming hedges, cutting branches, cleaning ponds, you name it, we did it all. I also got to go to different places every day and meet new people.

The job helped me to do well after I was released from prison - it helped me to care about myself and to want an even better life for myself. It helped me to stay busy and out of trouble, which probation and my family was very happy about.

I took my job seriously and worked very hard. I was always on time and I even worked overtime when I could. Fast forward to today, I haven't been in any trouble and my family are so proud of me and I'm proud of myself too. I have just accepted a permanent job with Amey and all of this would not have been possible without Blue Sky. They changed my life and opened doors for me. Without Blue Sky not many companies would have given me this opportunity with my background and I'm so grateful."



Mez, Blue Sky beneficiary

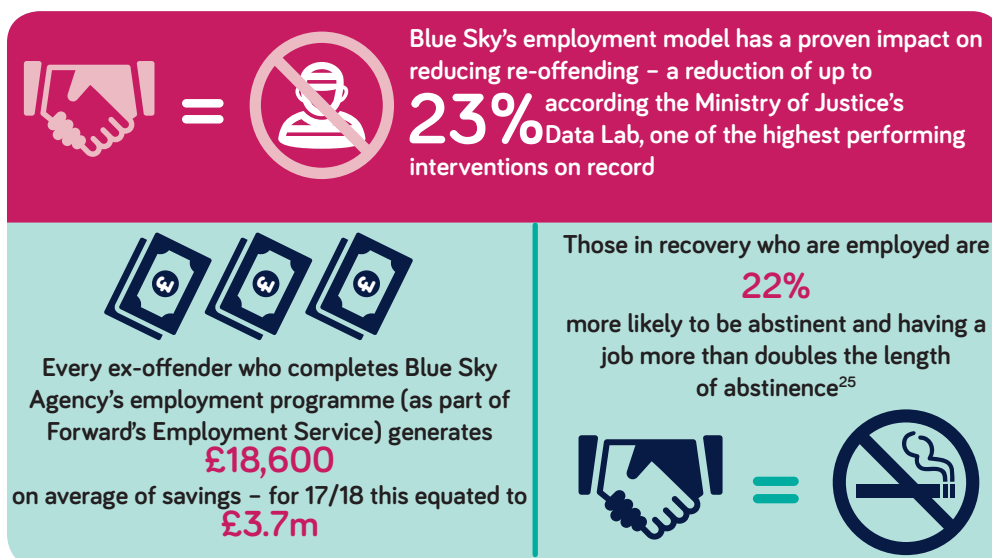
## Our impact

Since 2005, Forward has supported over 2,000 ex-offenders and people in recovery into employment, within our own organisation and through our social enterprises and employer networks.

Over the last year, we have also delivered skills and employability training to 353 learners in prison and the community. Of those trained in the community:

- 90% completed their employability programmes
- 91% said they had developed new skills
- 94% would recommend the training to others
- 88% found and sustained a job

## Recovery and rehabilitation



## Changing employer attitudes

By providing employers with trained, motivated and hard-working individuals for their workforce, we believe we have contributed significantly to a shift in employer attitudes towards hiring ex-offenders and people in recovery. Whilst more work is still needed to convince employers that people with records of offending and addiction can turn their lives around, an increasing number of employers are coming forward who are willing to give a second chance to ex-offenders in the workplace.

- The Government's recent guidance on employing prisoners and ex-offenders says that over 300 businesses all around the UK are already employing ex-offenders.
- The Ban the Box campaign (which calls on UK employers to create a fair opportunity for people with convictions to compete for jobs by removing the criminal record tick box from application forms and asking about criminal convictions later in the recruitment process) is supported by 96 employers, covering more than 757,000 roles.

“In my experience, they are hardworking guys. The ‘ex-offender phobia’ never really bothered me. We get people through (a regular) agency and you don’t know his background or anything” (Amey – Jo to check source of quote)

“We are very pleased with the way Jason has blended into the team. His work ethic is really good and he is always willing to learn. He has proven to be a brilliant team player who always gets the job at hand completed. What a great addition to our team. Thank you Forward for referring him to us” (MBNA Thames Clippers)

## Future plans

Building on our achievements to date, we have a number of objectives for 2019/20 and beyond:

- To deliver in the community a range of **Government contracts**, including the devolved skills and employability contracts in London, local authority employability contracts, Department for Work and Pensions, Job Centre Plus, the new test and learn framework and European Social Fund.
- To deliver through the new **Prison Education Dynamic Purchasing System**, where we will respond flexibly to local needs that cannot be met by central contracts – providing information, advice and guidance, employability programmes and vocational programmes.
- To look at **introducing new qualifications** in customer service and business administration, as well as to explore other sectors, such as hospitality, that align to the priorities of Combined Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships, with progression to higher level qualifications, so that clients are more marketable and can progress to more skilled, high-paid roles.
- To continue our focus on **developing soft skills and mind-set for work qualities**, as demonstrated through our employability qualifications.
- To **seek new partnerships in additional sectors**, such as coffee and hospitality in a similar way to our targeted programme ‘Espresso Futures’ (see box below)

### Partnership innovation - ‘Espresso Futures’

Espresso Futures provides training and employment opportunities in the coffee industry for young offenders and those at-risk of offending. It is a new proposed project delivered in partnership with ‘Redemption Roasters’ (who currently run a coffee roastery and barista training in HMYOI Aylesbury, alongside 3 cafés in central London). The project will engage, motivate and train young offenders, leading to employment opportunities and apprenticeships in the coffee industry, enabling them to gain self-respect and a job with strong career prospects, thereby reducing the likelihood of them offending or re-offending. Why coffee? The coffee industry is growing significantly (there will be more coffee shops than pubs in London by 2022) with many high-street chains and their suppliers urgently requiring skilled labour. Also, cafés are aspirational places that appeal to young people, places where those in society’s mainstream meet as friends or for business. Espresso Futures offers previously excluded young people the opportunity to be on the inside of this world, delivering a valued service, meeting people, and earning money.



- **To get onto the register of apprenticeship training providers as a main provider**, to fulfil the Government's ambition to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds into apprenticeships, and to work with employers to become a niche provider of specific vocational apprenticeship standards that benefit our clients and employer partners.
- **Working with young adults** (18 – 24 years old) who are at risk of offending or are in contact with the criminal justice system and not in education, training or employment (NEET).

In 2019, we are focussing on London, Surrey and Kent. We then hope to grow our offering to extend outwards from there.

## Find out more

To find out more about the range of services that we provide, or to discuss partnership opportunities with The Forward Trust, contact Asi Panditharatna: [asi.panditharatna@forwardtrust.org.uk](mailto:asi.panditharatna@forwardtrust.org.uk)

Asi joined The Forward Trust in June 2018 as Director of Employment Services. He has over 20 years' experience as a manager and leader in the post-16 skills, apprenticeships, training and employability industry. Prior to joining The Forward Trust, Asi was Director of Apprenticeships and Employability at Catch22 and a member of the Mayor of London's Skills for Londoners Task Force that developed the inaugural skills strategy for London. He is a board member of the Association of Employability and Learning Providers London Advisory Forum, recently became a board member of the Events Management Apprenticeships Trailblazer Board and is the former chair of the ERSA Youth Employability Forum.



Asi Panditharatna  
Divisional Director of  
Employment Services

## References

1. Butzin et al. (2005)
2. [www.citb.co.uk/global/research](http://www.citb.co.uk/global/research)
3. [www.thecaterer.com/articles/368873/how-big-is-hospitality-skills-shortage](http://www.thecaterer.com/articles/368873/how-big-is-hospitality-skills-shortage)
4. [www.hrmagazine.com/article-details/closing-the-uk-transport/skills-gap](http://www.hrmagazine.com/article-details/closing-the-uk-transport/skills-gap)
5. [www.policyconnect.org.uk/apsrg/sites/site\\_apsrg/files/report/331/fieldreportdownload/apsrg-sustainableskillsreport.pdf](http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/apsrg/sites/site_apsrg/files/report/331/fieldreportdownload/apsrg-sustainableskillsreport.pdf)
6. Unlocking Potential – Ministry of Justice (2016)
7. Bridging The Gaps – Forward Trust (2017)
8. An independent review into the impact of employment outcomes of drug or alcohol addiction and obesity – Dame Carol Black (2016)
9. [www.jrf.org.uk/report/budget-2018-tackling-rising-tide-work-poverty](http://www.jrf.org.uk/report/budget-2018-tackling-rising-tide-work-poverty)