



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Department of Justice

Building Pathways Together
Criminal Justice Reintegration
Through Employment Strategy
2025-2027

Minister's Foreword

As Minister for Justice, it gives me great pleasure to welcome the publication of *Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy 2025-2027*.

This is the successor to two previous employment-focused strategies my department has produced. There are a range of benefits associated with supporting individuals with previous convictions accessing employment, including increased public safety as individuals in employment have the stability to support long-term desistance.

The aim of this strategy is to remove barriers to employment for people with a criminal conviction and to increase opportunities for employment. Employers will have a pivotal role in the implementation of the strategy. Therefore, this document sets out a range of measures to support employers. This includes my department supporting, promoting and advancing the development of a detailed guidance document, incorporating a trauma-informed approach, for employing and retaining people with criminal convictions. It is also intended to develop interactive support provisions, including phone and email supports and training sessions, for employers willing to hire people with previous criminal convictions, providing supports relating to both recruitment and retention.

Data is key to understanding the needs of both employers and the staff it recruits. As such, the strategy sets out how it will continue to support measures, including data collection on levels of employment and earnings for those with previous criminal convictions.

Finally, I wish to thank stakeholders, including the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service, for their assistance with finalising this Strategy.

Helen McEntee T.D.

Minister for Justice

November 2024

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Introduction

Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy 2025-2027 has been developed by the Department of Justice, in conjunction with the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service, and in consultation with key stakeholders including Government Departments, agencies, and those with lived experience of the criminal justice system and have faced barriers to reintegration.

The path to desistance is not always straight, nor is everyone's path identical. Those who have engaged in criminal activity are not a uniform collective, the causes of such activity are heterogeneous, and the supports needed to assist a long-term, meaningful transition away from a life that involves offending may be many and varied.

Employment alone is not always the single solution to complex social, cultural, or health-related factors which may feed into the commissioning of criminal acts.¹ However, employment that offers remuneration, alongside opportunities to affect how those who have previously engaged in offending behaviour are perceived by others, encourage friendships between peers and have supportive mentors that help people to change, has been shown to have the potential to aid desistance.² Research indicates that "individuals who are motivated to establish a life without crime need an opportunity to make that transition. It is likely that work can provide such an opportunity".³ (p. 648)

Building Pathways Together seeks to provide effective interventions to ensure that those who have ceased offending, and those who are looking for stability to move away from a life which involves offending, have the appropriate supports and opportunities open to them to make the success of their endeavours more likely. In doing so, this strategy seeks to support the development of a fairer, safer Ireland.

¹ See Piquero AR, MacDonald JM and Parker KF (2002) Race, local life circumstances, and criminal activity. *Social Science Quarterly* 83: 654–70; Sampson RJ and Laub JH (1993) *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; Wright JP and Cullen F (2004) Employment, Peers, and Life Course transitions. *Justice Quarterly* 21: 183–205.

² Oswald, R. J. (2023). Exploring how employment schemes for young offenders aid desistance from crime. *Probation Journal*, 70(1), 52–69.

³ Skardhamer T., Telle K. (2012). Post-release employment and recidivism in Norway. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 28, 648.

Guiding Principles

There are a number of guiding principles underpinning the actions under *Building Pathways Together*, including:

- Individuals in employment are less likely to reoffend, which is a benefit to public safety.⁴
- A whole-of-Government approach is required to ensure appropriate access to key supports and opportunities for those with criminal convictions to lead them to enter and remain within the workforce.
- The lived experience provides vital insight, and a criminal justice employment strategy must engage with and reflect the perspectives of those who it targets.
- Alignment between appropriate education and relevant employment opportunities is vital to ensuring people with convictions are well placed to find employment while filling gaps in the State's employment needs.
- Where possible, every effort should be made to ensure current supports and structures are open to those with criminal histories as appropriate, only developing bespoke supports where justifiable with objective evidence.
- The understanding and support of all employers is vital to ensuring a wide range of employment opportunities are available that will suit the varying skills, qualities, and qualifications of the target cohort.

⁴ See Lageson S., Uggen C. (2013). How work affects crime and crime affects work over the life course. In Gibson C. L., Krohm M. D. (Eds.), *Handbook of life course criminology: Emerging trends and directions for future research* (pp. 201-212). New York, NY: Springer; Uggen C., Wakefield S. (2008). What have we learned from longitudinal studies of work and crime? In Liberman A. (Ed.), *The long view of crime: A synthesis of longitudinal research* (pp. 191-219). New York, NY: Springer; Berg M. T., Huebner B. (2011). Reentry and the ties that bind: An examination of social ties, employment, and recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 28, 382-410; Piquero A. R., Brame R., Mazerolle P., Haapanen R. (2002). Crime in emerging adulthood. *Criminology*, 40, 137-169; Skardhamer T., Telle K. (2012). Post-release employment and recidivism in Norway. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 28, 629-649.

Our Vision

To increase recruitment opportunities and long-term secure employment retention for individuals with criminal convictions, contributing to a decrease in the likelihood of reoffending and leading to a fairer, safer Ireland.

Mission

To utilise interdepartmental and interagency cooperation and coordination to take a whole of Government approach to removing systemic barriers to employment for people with a criminal conviction, and to increase opportunities for employment through engagement with employers of all types. This strategy will build on previous strategies, mainstreaming existing functions where appropriate, with a renewed focus on practical steps to increase employment in this cohort.

Target Group

Building Pathways Together will seek to increase the potential opportunities for employment for:

- Those currently in prison;
- Those currently on a probation sanction in the community; and
- Those with historical criminal convictions who continue to face barriers to securing employment but are no longer formally engaged with any criminal justice service.

Context

Background

In recognition of the positive impact that securing employment may play in reducing recidivism rates and creating safer communities, the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service established a Social Enterprise Steering Committee in 2016. This Steering Committee was supported by the then Department of Justice and Equality. The purpose of this Steering Committee was to oversee the development of social enterprise initiatives, in a manner complementary to existing initiatives relevant to more mainstream employment, as a way of increasing employment rates of people with criminal convictions.

A New Way Forward: Social Enterprise Strategy 2017-2019, while focusing solely on the criminal justice sector, represented Ireland's first strategy specifically targeting social enterprises. 24 actions were identified across four pillars, with the goal of developing a vibrant social enterprise sector that would result in people with criminal convictions securing sustainable employment leading to active citizenship, safer communities, and fewer victims.

Following on from this, *Working to Change: Social Enterprise and Employment Strategy 2021-2023* was launched in November 2020. Building on the work of *A New Way Forward*, this strategy expanded beyond social enterprises with the goal of taking a whole-systems approach to increasing employment options for people with past convictions. *Working to Change* was composed of 46 actions across three pillars relating to three avenues of forms of employment; social enterprises, mainstream employment, and entrepreneurship.

Recognising the achievements of preceding work in this area, noting relevant developments in related matters and the need to evolve to ensure alignment and effectiveness of efforts going forward, the new *Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy 2025-2027* progresses efforts in this area to maximise the opportunities for employment for those with criminal convictions who are seeking employment and attendant stability and security which will facilitate the sustained move away from offending.

Current Situation

Ireland currently has the highest level of employment since records began. The CSO's Labour Force Survey for Q3 2023 identified that 2.66 million people were in employment, and unemployment stood at 4.6%, which represents 128,600 people, 31,000 of whom are long-term unemployed.⁵ Despite this record level of employment, IrishJobs Jobs Index for the same period identified that job vacancies had returned to pre-Covid levels, representing a large number of unfilled positions across a wide range of sectors, particularly in catering, management, health, customer service, and IT.⁶ This presents a significant opportunity to focus efforts on ensuring those with criminal convictions can be fully recognised as an important cohort that may go some way to addressing critical gaps in the State's employment market.

In stark contrast to the population more generally, those with criminal convictions have very high rates of unemployment. October 2020 statistics from the CSO identified in the relevant cohort, those that were in prison on the night of the 2016 census, that:

- One in-ten (11.7%) people with previous criminal convictions had engaged in substantial employment up to May 2019;
- One-in-five people with previous criminal convictions (22.0%) had enrolled in education and training up to May 2019; and
- More than half (59.7%) of those with previous criminal convictions were not at work or education up to May 2019 but had other records of administrative activity such as receiving a social protection payment from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.⁷

The 11.7% figure of employment represented a significant improvement on previous years, but as the CSO identified, this was still some way below previous levels.

Most recently, and complementary to this 2020 report, on 1 November 2023 the CSO published its report on 'Circumstances of People Linked to Justice Sanctions 2015-2021'.⁸ This report identified that the number of individuals formerly under the supervision of the Probation Service (+14%) and the number of individuals who had previously served a custodial sentence (+19%) who were engaged in paid employment increased at a comparable rate with all employees (+14%) between 2019 and 2023. However, this relative increase comes on foot of a greater impact of COVID-19 on levels of employment, where rates of employment for those formerly

⁵ Central Statistics Office, [Labour Force Survey Quarter 3 2023](#).

⁶ IrishJobs, [A more settled job market, Q 2 2023](#).

⁷ Central Statistics Office, [Offenders 2016: Employment, Education and other Outcomes, 2016-2019](#). Note, these statistics do not address those released on licence or serving community-based sanctions.

⁸ Central Statistics Office, [Circumstances of People Linked to Justice Sanctions 2015-2021, Key Findings](#).

under the supervision of the Probation Service had decreased by 23%, and rates of employment for those who had previously served a custodial sentence decreased by 20%, compared to the overall figure of a decrease of 13% for all employees in 2020. Coupled with the report's findings that in 2021 those with previous criminal convictions earned just over four fifths of that of the total population of employees, this indicates those with previous criminal convictions remain in less secure employment and have lower income levels than those who have not received any such convictions.

*Table 1: Offenders in substantial Employment (including those in education) by year**

Year	Employment (%)
2005	14.8
2006	15.5
2007	15.8
2008	12.7
2009	10.5
2010	10.1
2011	8.3
2012	8.3
2013	7.4
2014	6.3
2015	4.7
2016 (up to April)	3.3
2016 (after April)	3.4
2017	7.5
2018	9.6
2019 (up to May)	11.7
<i>*Approximately 40 offenders were self-employed in 2017 and 2018</i>	

CSO Figures for percentage of those that have offended in substantial employment⁹

The criminal justice sector, working with agencies, bodies, and Government Departments, continues to make efforts to improve this situation through a number of services and supports.

⁹ Central Statistics Office, Offenders 2016: Employment, Education and Other Outcomes, 2016-2019, [Economic Status](#).

As a community based organisation, the Irish Association for Social Inclusion Opportunities (IASIO) receives significant annual funding from the criminal justice sector to provide its GATE Service for people in prison and its Linkage Service for those who have engaged in offending behaviour who are referred by Probation Officers. The GATE Service assists those serving custodial sentences in planning for release, including identifying suitable training, education, and employment opportunities and helping those serving a custodial sentence to access these in prison and in the community. The Linkage Service provides individuals with practical guidance and assistance leading to obtaining and keeping a job. In its most recent report, a ten year overview from 2012-2022, IASIO indicated its clients succeeded in completing 7,437 training and education placements and 4,146 employment placements.¹⁰

Education and skills development is a key tenet of the goals of the criminal justice system in relation to facilitating the rehabilitation of those with previous criminal convictions and their reintegration into society. The most recent figures from the CSO indicate that the highest level of education up to May 2019 for more than half (57.0%) of those in prison on the night of the 2016 census was the Junior Certificate or less.¹¹

Education is in itself a positive, providing opportunities to build on previous education which might have been interrupted, and to develop key skills such as literacy and address any obstacles to learning. However, such education may also function to ensure those with criminal convictions are prepared to enter the job market with appropriate education and skills.

The Prison Education Service provides a number of important services to address the educational needs of those serving custodial sentences. Educational services are available in all prisons and are provided in partnership with a range of educational agencies including the Educational Training Boards (ETBs), Public Library Services, the Open University and the Arts Council.

The Probation Service also provides funding and support to 60 community-based organisations (CBOs) across the country to develop and deliver services in communities which extend the work of the Probation Service in changing offending behaviour. These CBOs provide direct services to those with criminal convictions, both in prison and in the community, including a range of supports and education and training initiatives.

¹⁰ IASIO, [2012-2022 Anniversary Report](#).

¹¹ Central Statistics Office, *Offenders 2016: Employment, Education and Other Outcomes, 2016-2019*, [Education and other outcomes](#).

A recent survey of CBOs identified that 36% of those funded by the Probation Service avail of supports provided by ETBs. Findings of this survey include:

- 32,544 ETB hours are provided every year on average;
- QQI programmes are being provided from Level 1 up to Level 5;
- The majority of programmes being provided are at Levels 3 and 4; and
- On average 614 clients are availing of ETB hours / QQI programmes every year.

Efforts in relation to employment, and education as a pathway to employment, are multiple and varied across a number of organisations within prisons and in communities, and the entire scale or scope of same cannot be captured in a brief overview.

Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy 2025-2027 aims to align with efforts in these areas and to strengthen current provisions and supports to be as inclusive and effective as possible, while building on progress to date to make it easier for people with criminal histories to find employment and decrease the likelihood of reoffending.

Recent Developments

In August 2022 Government approved the *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024*. In setting out a progressive penal policy and a range of related actions, this review is informed by a number of guiding principles, including:

*A range of relevant services must be available to support rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders, as citizens. Collaboration, co-operation and co-ordination across the justice sector, as well as the involvement of the non-criminal justice sector in addressing offending and assisting offenders in maintaining crime free lifestyles is key.*¹²

Under this review, and in line with this guiding principle, Action 11.6 commits to examining the development of a follow on to the *Working to Change* strategy. *Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy 2025-2027* represents the culmination of the work undertaken under this action.

In preparing this new strategy, a number of important developments outside of the work progressed under *Working to Change* have been identified and have helped shape the vision and mission of the strategy to build on previous work in a way that is also aligned with other efforts that have a direct impact on the target cohort and goals of this strategy.

In seeking to take advantage of the opportunities offered by social enterprises for employment for the target cohort of those with previous criminal convictions, *A New Way Forward* represented the first strategy focused solely on social enterprises. This was a sector-specific strategy however, and in 2019 the Department of Rural and Community Development launched the *National Social Enterprise Strategy 2019-2022*.

The first of its kind, this national strategy set out 26 commitments on the part of Government across three objectives: building awareness of social enterprises; growing and strengthening social enterprise; and achieving better policy alignment. A commitment to build on the *National Social Enterprise Policy 2019-2022* is integral to the Programme for Government, published in June 2020, and ensuring alignment and efficiencies going forward is vital to the success of the social enterprise sector as it plays a valuable role not just in the criminal justice sector but across society more widely. As a result, understanding of the progress and commitments made under a national strategy necessarily impact the criminal justice sector's approach to social enterprises in this context.

Education and skills development is key to ensuring those wishing to find appropriate employment are as best prepared as possible to enter the job market, while also

¹² Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024, p6.

ensuring that employers are gaining valuable contributions to their teams. In May 2023 the Department of Justice and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, alongside the Irish Prison Service, established a Prison Education Taskforce.

Co-Chaired by Minister Patrick O'Donovan T.D. and Minister of State James Browne T.D., the aim of the Prison Education Taskforce is to ensure appropriate education and training opportunities are available to those serving custodial sentences. This will support their rehabilitation and access to employment post-release. The taskforce is comprised of representatives from both departments, the Irish Prison Service, SOLAS, the National Apprenticeship Office, Education and Training Boards Ireland, the Probation Service and individuals who had previously served a custodial sentence. The work plan, which commenced in 2023 sets out key priority areas, including access to specific apprenticeships and retrofitting.

Further, the new programme of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) was rolled out in January 2024. SICAP, which is administered by Pobal and co-funded by the Irish Government, through the Department of Rural and Community Development, and the European Social Fund Plus under the Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training (EIST) Programme 2021 -2027, provides funding to tackle poverty and social exclusion through local engagement and partnerships.

SICAP addresses high and persistent levels of deprivation through targeted and innovative, locally-led approaches. It supports disadvantaged communities and individuals including unemployed people, people living in deprived areas, people with disabilities, single parent families, people on a low income, members of the Traveller and Roma community and other disadvantaged groups. The new programme commencing in 2024 will for the first time redefine the target cohorts to include those with previous criminal convictions, recognising their position as a disadvantaged group.

Policy Alignments

Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy 2025-2027 has been developed both as informed by and seeking alignment with a number of relevant strategies, policies, and publications including:

- Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024 (Department of Justice)
- The National Social Enterprise Strategy (Department of Rural and Community Development)
- Social Enterprises in Ireland – A Baseline Data Collection Exercise (Department of Rural and Community Development)
- Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 (Department of Social Protection)
- Future Jobs Ireland 2020 (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment)
- Enterprise 2025 Renewed (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment)
- Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment)
- Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland’s Future (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science)
- Probation Service Strategy Statement 2021-2023: Probation Works for Community Safety

Outstanding Challenges

According to a survey commissioned by SOLAS in 2019:

- 53 per cent of respondents said it wouldn't bother them to work alongside someone who has a previous criminal conviction;
- 68 per cent of respondents said it wouldn't bother them to be served by someone who has a previous criminal conviction in a customer-service setting;
- Of the employers / decision-makers surveyed, 59 per cent said they were unaware of any education programmes undertaken that aim to make those serving sentences more employable on completion of their sentence; and
- 67 per cent of employers said the fact that an applicant had completed education programmes while serving their sentence would encourage them to hire someone who has a previous criminal conviction.¹³

Despite this generally positive perspective on hiring and working with people with criminal convictions, and research which underlines that individuals with criminal records have a much longer tenure and are less likely to quit their jobs voluntarily than other workers,¹⁴ the low rate of employment indicates there remain key issues to those individuals obtaining secure employment.

2024 research from the Irish Penal Reform Trust, led by researchers from Maynooth University, provides further insight into the perspectives of employers and people with previous criminal convictions in relation to employment. This includes:

- 47 per cent of respondents with previous criminal convictions reported negative experiences when applying for employment, and 73 per cent reported facing barriers in applying for employment;
- The nature of the offence plays a key role in employers' perspectives, with a hierarchy of offences informing informal 'risk assessment' during the hiring process;
- 41 per cent of employers indicated their staff would not be predisposed to negative responses to working with people with convictions, while 34 per cent remained neutral on this statement, and 31 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that staff would have a negative reaction to working with people with convictions;

¹³ SOLAS, [02.09.2019 Over 60 per cent of employers would hire an ex-offender if supported to do so.](#)

¹⁴ Minor, Dylan and Persico, Nicola and Weiss, Deborah M., [Criminal Background and Job Performance](#) (September 4, 2018) *IZA Journal of Labor Policy* (2018) 7:8.

- 88.9 per cent of employers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed they would consider hiring people with convictions in the future;
- Employers were clearly open to hiring people with criminal convictions, but legislative, local policy, and practical 'know-how' were perceived to be lacking; and
- 90 per cent of people with previous convictions responding to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they worry about disclosing to employers their experience with the criminal justice system.¹⁵

Throughout the lifetime of the preceding *Working to Change* strategy, a number of actions committed to completing pieces of research which provide some insight into current perceptions, gaps, and needs:

- Needs analysis of social enterprises
- National Employment Survey of social enterprises
- Evaluation of the KickStart Fund for social enterprises
- Needs analysis of target cohort for attitudes, behaviours and perceived barriers to employment
- Attitudes and behaviours survey across employer groups
- Needs analysis of employment intervention providers
- Gaps and blocks reporting (general employment and entrepreneurship)

These pieces of research identified a number of opportunities for progress and learnings have been incorporated into the development of the new *Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy*. This has been complemented with specific stakeholder engagement, particularly with those who have lived experience of the criminal justice system and the effort required to find employment.

It is clear that those with previous criminal convictions continue to experience a number of barriers to entering employment, and actions under Pillar One identify opportunities to address these barriers in practical ways which support them on their journey out of offending lives and towards desistance.

While acknowledging that barriers to employment and being employment-ready continue to cause issues for people with previous criminal convictions, it has also become clear that employers also need dedicated supports to help navigate both the point of hiring someone with previous criminal convictions, and the ongoing process

¹⁵ Irish Penal Reform Trust [“The Secondary Punishment”: A scoping study on employer attitudes to hiring people with criminal convictions](#) (2024).

of employee retention. To address this, Pillar Two identifies a number of specific provisions which, once achieved, will provide dedicated supports to employers of all sizes, including social enterprises.

Finally, there remains progress to be made in terms of promoting and understanding the experience of people with previous criminal convictions and the potential they offer to employers. To this end, a number of actions under Pillar Three will seek to advance our understanding of this cohort and the positive contribution they may make to the State's economy, and to increasing public safety, as valuable parts of the workforce.

Strategy Development

Action 11.6 of the Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024, as approved by Government in August 2022, commits to examining development of a follow on to the Working to Change Social Enterprise and Employment Strategy 2021-2023.

Work under this action commenced in 2023 with initial discussions focusing on achievements of the Working to Change strategy, and potential opportunities to be built on, as identified throughout the course of the Working to Change strategy. This work led to the identification of a number of developments and scope for advancements, and the agreement between the Department of Justice, the Irish Prison Service, and the Probation Service on the parameters to underpin the preparation of the new Criminal Justice Employment Strategy.

At the May 2023 meeting of the Social Enterprise Steering Committee, which provided oversight for the Working to Change strategy, the Coordination Forum, which sits under the Steering Committee, was tasked to develop draft proposals for the next strategy. To advance this, following initial discussions internally, stakeholder consultation formally commenced in July 2023. This included meetings with a working group of individuals with lived experience of the criminal justice system, representatives of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (Ibec) and of Business in the Community Ireland (BITC), representatives of various organisations working in this space, individual members of the Social Enterprise Steering Committee in their respective capacities as representatives of organisations, Departments, and agencies, and with other officials as appropriate.

An overview of the draft strategy was presented at the final meeting of the Social Enterprise Steering Committee in November 2023. Following this, the draft strategy was brought to the Implementation Oversight Group for the Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024, composed of officials from the Department of Justice, the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service in February 2024.

The final draft of the strategy was examined by the Department of Justice's Management Board in May 2024, and subsequently approved by the Minister for Justice in September 2024.

The Strategy

Structure

Following identification of the outstanding challenges faced when seeking to increase the number of people with previous criminal convictions in employment, it was identified that actions to address these challenges could be broken into three thematic pillars focusing on supports and structural matters relating to:

1. People with Criminal Convictions
2. Employers
3. Promotion and Knowledge Sharing

Overview of Actions

Pillar One: People with Criminal Convictions

	Action	Owner(s)	Commence
1.1	Develop formal supports through the appropriate bodies to ensure access to work training and job opportunities, including entrepreneurship, and related structures for all those with previous criminal convictions, not just those in prison or serving a community-based sanction	PS / IPS / DoJ	2025
1.2	Provide for the use of training or education courses within community sanctions.	DoJ / PS	2025
1.3	Review, update and agree the current cross agency protocol for individuals with criminal convictions with key stakeholders	DSP	2025
1.4	Develop and provide an exit pack with information on employment-related supports and options	IPS / PS	2026
1.5	Facilitate pilot eLearning entrepreneurship programme with TUD	IPS	2025

1.6	Scope the potential to develop a certificate of recognition of prior learning, to establish a record of positive contributions and achievements since an individual's previous criminal conviction	PS / IPS	2025
1.7	Promote the Gaisce Award within prisons and amongst those serving community-based sanctions, and promote its significance to employers	IPS / PS	2025
1.8	Expand the KickStart Scholarship to provide access routes and dedicated financial supports across all third level institutions in the State	DoJ / IPS / PS	2025
1.9	Develop a disclosures calculator to provide people with previous criminal convictions with clear guidance on individual disclosure needs	DoJ	2027
1.10	Deliver the Lived Experience Leadership Programme	PS	2025
1.11	Provide 'Experts by Experience' (EbyE) employment opportunities	IPS / PS	2025

Pillar Two: Employers

	Action	Owner(s)	Commence
2.1	Establish a public service working group to explore opportunities to develop and promote centralised recruitment and employment policies across the public service and funded organisations that are inclusive of people with previous criminal convictions	DoJ / IPS / PS	2025
2.2	Support, promote and advance the development of a detailed guidance document, incorporating a trauma-informed approach, for employing and retaining people with criminal convictions	DoJ / IPS / PS	2025
2.3	Develop interactive support provisions, including phone and email supports and training sessions, for employers willing to hire people with previous criminal convictions, providing supports relating to both recruitment and retention	DoJ / IPS / PS	2026
2.4	Establish a new Criminal Justice Employer Network, to meet biannually, to raise issues regarding hiring people with criminal convictions, share information, develop a network, and promote activities in this area	DoJ / IPS / PS	2025
2.5	Continue the KickStart Fund to provide funding to social enterprises to hire people with criminal convictions	DoJ / PS / DRCD	2025

2.6	Engage with key organisations and large enterprises to promote the benefits of hiring people with previous criminal convictions to achieve their enterprise goals in Ireland	DETE / DSP	2025
2.7	Introduce efficiencies for in-person commitments relating to Temporary Release	IPS	2026
2.8	Increase the number of those in prison and in the community referred for training and employment related engagement	IPS / PS	2025
2.9	Use skills intelligence data to identify future skills needs at entry level position or above that would be suitable for marginalised communities, namely or including those with previous criminal convictions	DETE	2025
2.10	Conduct analysis of employment permit applications to assist in the identification of skills and labour needs and to inform the development of training and skills for those in prison or serving a community-based sanction	DETE	2025

Pillar Three: Promotion and Knowledge Sharing

	Action	Owner(s)	Commence
3.1	Host an annual event promoting activity in this area, achievements to date, and opportunities in relation to hiring people with previous criminal convictions	DoJ / IPS / PS	2025 / 2026 / 2027
3.2	Deliver a national promotion campaign	DoJ	2025
3.3	Commission independent research on links between employment and desistance and related matters	DoJ	2026
3.4	Support ongoing progress in data collection on levels of employment and earnings for those with previous criminal convictions	CSO / IPS / PS	2025
3.5	Expand measuring of outcomes of interventions with individuals, to include employment outcomes but also other paths, such as education, voluntary work, and desistance	IPS / PS	2026
3.6	Formalise the promotion of training and supports available to all those serving a custodial sentence upon committal and during their period of imprisonment	IPS	2026
3.7	Develop a long-term website to act as an information and empowerment hub for individuals and employers	DoJ	2025

Detailed Actions

Pillar One: People with Criminal Convictions

1.1 Develop formal supports through the appropriate bodies to ensure access to work training and job opportunities, including entrepreneurship, and related structures for all those with previous criminal convictions, not just those in prison or serving a community-based sanction

A number of supports are currently provided to those in prison or those in the community under the supervision of the Probation Service. However, due to their design and intended focus, these same supports are not currently provided to those in the community who are no longer engaged with the criminal justice system in any formal way, but who do have a previous criminal conviction which is hindering their access to the labour market, or hindering their advance into more secure or better remunerated roles.

Under this strategy, actions advanced to provide supports to those seeking employment with previous criminal convictions will also be extended where appropriate to address the needs of those outside of the criminal justice system. This will mark a significant increase in the target cohort for such supports, and in doing so will ensure there is no drop off in supports for those exiting the criminal justice system. This will facilitate continuing the path towards employment and desistance.

1.2 Provide for the use of training or education courses within community sanctions

People subject to community sanctions, such as Probation Orders and Community Service Orders, can face barriers to accessing employment due to their convictions, low educational attainment or other challenges. Provision of training and education as part of community sanctions is an opportunity to both address offending behaviour and support desistance through promoting prosocial pathways away from crime.

This requires the development of appropriate structures to deliver or facilitate training or education courses as part of community sanctions, in order to enable the individual to complete the sanction in a manner which facilitates rehabilitation and increases the likelihood of reintegration and desistance through becoming better prepared to enter the labour market.

1.3 Review, update and agree the current cross agency protocol for individuals with criminal convictions with key stakeholders

The Department of Social Protection works to promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services. The Department engages directly with agencies and organisations operating in the criminal justice system to ensure the appropriate services and supports that fall within their remit are in place for those with a criminal conviction through their journey to employment.

To achieve this, the Department of Social Protection has developed and agreed a cross agency protocol for individuals with criminal convictions. In order to ensure effectiveness, the Department will re-engage with all parties to this protocol to review and revise where necessary.

1.4 Develop and provide an exit pack with information on employment-related supports and options.

It is vital that those with criminal convictions, on their release from prison or on the conclusion of their supervision by the Probation Service, have information regarding all of the supports available and avenues through which they might pursue further training, education or employment.

To this end, the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service will work to develop a comprehensive overview, and documentation of same will be provided to each individual as they exit the criminal justice system.

1.5 Facilitate pilot eLearning entrepreneurship programme with TUD

Entrepreneurship remains an important avenue for individuals with criminal convictions to pursue, where they may utilise their experience and training to develop new streams of business that may provide steady income to facilitate their desistance.

In support of this, the Irish Prison Service will facilitate the provision of an online eLearning course of entrepreneurship. This course will be delivered by educators from Technological University Dublin, and has been developed under the EU-funded Prisoner Reintegration through Entrepreneurship and Psychology project (PREP).

1.6 Scope the potential to develop a certificate of recognition of prior learning, to establish a record of positive contributions and achievements since an individual's previous criminal conviction

It is important to recognise not only the criminal convictions an individual has received, but also the efforts they have since made to rehabilitate themselves and to prepare to reintegrate into society fully, including through employment. Such efforts represent fulfilling a commitment made, to themselves and to their fellow citizens, to make positive behavioural changes in pursuit of a better life.

To mark such a commitment in a manner that be understandable by many, including prospective employers, the Probation Service will work alongside the appropriate organisation(s) to examine the development of a certificate of commitment to change and recognition of achievement(s) that may be utilised through the employment application and interview process where accepted.

1.7 Promote the Gaisce Award within prisons and amongst those serving community-based sanctions, and promote its significance to employers

Gaisce – The President's Award is Ireland's national youth award and is a self-development programme for young people aged 14-25. It is a direct challenge to all young people to dream big and fulfil their potential. Gaisce participants achieve a Gaisce Award by completing Challenge Areas: Personal Skill, Physical Recreation, Community Involvement, and an Adventure Journey.

Achieving a Bronze, Silver, or Gold Award is an achievement to be marked by any individual, including those who are currently serving custodial or community-based sanctions, and represents a significant commitment to self-development.

The Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service will continue to support individuals in their progress towards Gaisce awards, and will continue to promote the achievement and what it represents to employers so that a criminal conviction alone will not be a barrier to employment.

1.8 Expand the KickStart Scholarship to provide access routes and dedicated financial supports across all third level institutions in the State

The KickStart Scholarship provides funding to those with previous criminal convictions to enter third level education. The pilot of this scholarship was launched with assistance of the MEND Universities in 2022, with a second year funded in 2023.

Building on the success of the pilot, the expansion of this scholarship in terms of eligibility across all third level institutions in the State will ensure equality of access for qualifying individuals across the island.

1.9 Develop a disclosures calculator to provide people with previous criminal convictions with clear guidance on individual disclosure needs

Following the example set in other jurisdictions, this disclosures calculator will act as a resource for individuals with previous criminal convictions to input specific details of previous offences and receive bespoke, up-to-date guidance on their obligations in relation to disclosing these offences to potential employers.

This calculator will function to provide clear information in a manner which supports individuals in their employment journey, to ensure they are not dissuaded or deselect themselves from employment opportunities due to concerns regarding disclosure obligations or processes.

1.10 Deliver the Lived Experience Leadership Programme

Working in partnership with PACE Ireland, and funded by the Probation Service through DAF, Turnaround Project will be implementing a 12 month pilot innovative 'Lived Experience Leadership Programme. Turnaround Project (Belfast based) and Pace (Dublin based) are organisations working to provide support to help people who have been through the justice system to integrate into the wider community. The Lived Experience Leadership Programme aims to strengthen individuals' ability to sustain and flourish in their employment setting, move into positions of influence and leadership within their communities, and be enabled to engage in future discussion of policy and practice.

1.11 Provide 'Experts by Experience' (EbyE) employment opportunities

The IPS currently employs EbyE on a contract basis. The function of this role is to provide support to current prisoners via a) relevant learning and development podcasts for the prison TV channel, b) co-facilitating groups with the psychology service, c) input to planning and roll-out of the annual Irish Prison Service Mental Health Week and related events, d) supporting the implementation of mental health and addiction recovery programmes across the prison estate, and e) sitting on various working groups and informing appropriate policy and procedures from an EbyE perspective.

The IPS will continue to pursue such employment opportunities while exploring the possibility of expanding this role to incorporate an academic component which would leave people with practical experience and an academic achievement. This may involve supporting EbyE's to undertake a relevant academic course with relevant practical placements, positioning people with criminal convictions as sponsors for those leaving prison to support their transition and reintegration.

Pillar Two: Employers

2.1 Establish a public service working group to explore opportunities to develop and promote centralised recruitment and employment policies across the public service and funded organisations that are inclusive of people with previous criminal convictions

It is important for the State to demonstrate leadership in supporting people with criminal convictions on their path to desistance through positive employment. To this end, the Department of Justice will work with key partners to establish a public service working group with appropriate representatives to work together to explore opportunities and address barriers to recruiting people with previous criminal convictions.

Further to this, the Department of Justice the Irish Prison Service, and the Probation Service commit to exploring advances in the hiring policies of agencies and those organisations in direct receipt of funding from the Department and agencies.

The Irish Prison Service will continue to employ EbyEs to conduct appropriate engagements and training for those individuals currently serving a prison sentence, in line with Action 1.11 above.

2.2 Support, promote and advance the development of a detailed guidance document, incorporating a trauma-informed approach, for employing and retaining people with criminal convictions

A reference guide for those considering employing individuals with criminal convictions, and for those who have hired people with criminal convictions and encountered some issue which may impact on retention of staff, will offer a foundation of information which may be consulted either in the first instance or as a supplement to the services provided in line with Action 2.2.

It is clear from other jurisdictions that, while some employers may wish to engage more directly with a support service for such matters, the reference guide provides some written support which can provide certainty, and can also give those considering employing people with criminal convictions an indication of what they can expect and what further supports are available, both to the employer and to the relevant individual.

Open Doors Initiative, funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, has commissioned the development of an 'Employer Tool-kit' to create awareness among employers, informed by the lived experience of those impacted by systemic barriers, of the benefits of hiring people with past convictions and provide supporting guidance in the hiring and retaining of these individuals.

The Department of Justice, the Probation Service, and the Irish Prison Service will support, promote and advance this resource as appropriate through the lifetime of the strategy.

2.3 Develop interactive support provisions, including phone and email supports and training sessions, for employers willing to hire people with previous criminal convictions, providing supports relating to both recruitment and retention

Complementing Action 2.1, this will involve the establishing of a set of new direct supports for employers who are interested in employing people with previous criminal convictions, and for employers who encounter issues having hired someone with a previous criminal conviction which may affect their retention.

It is clear employers of all types, including general employers and social enterprises, need greater supports to help clarify matters relating to the hiring process for individuals with criminal convictions. Guidance would also be beneficial for the same employers regarding how to retain such individuals and any related matters which may arise during the course of their employment, particularly relating to existing staff and issues regarding disclosure. While some employers may wish to consult a reference guide only, consultation with stakeholders has underlined that many would prefer to be able to send an email or pick up the phone to make a call and discuss matters quickly with experts in this area. There is also scope for the development of training sessions for employers, which would be open to those currently hiring people with criminal convictions and those who are open to doing so.

Under this strategy an organisation will be identified to provide such supports, with clear metrics and supports to be agreed.

2.4 Establish a new Criminal Justice Employer Network, to meet biannually, to raise issues regarding hiring people with criminal convictions, share information, develop a network, and promote activities in this area

The new Criminal Justice Employer Network will seek to bring employers and business representative organisations together with officials from relevant Departments to promote the hiring of people with criminal convictions, discuss any barriers encountered impacting hiring or retaining individuals with criminal convictions that may need official intervention, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, building a community of engaged employers, and providing a centralised route through which important messaging around issues may be conveyed to the employers.

This Criminal Justice Employer Network, to be convened and chaired by the Department of Justice and will meet biannually. The network will also engage with employer representative bodies, including Ibec and Business in the Community

Ireland, to promote the objectives of the strategy, and will support and be supported by the public messaging actions under Pillar Three.

2.5 Continue the KickStart Fund to provide funding to social enterprises to hire people with criminal convictions

The KickStart Fund provides funding to support new and existing social enterprises to create meaningful jobs for people with criminal convictions as a stepping stone to mainstream employment. This funding is disbursed across two strands; Feasibility and Market Research, and Job Creation Fund.

A recent evaluation of the KickStart Fund has identified clear benefits to continuing to provide this funding, and this strategy commits to continuing the Fund as appropriate. This Fund will be continued in new partnership with the Department of Rural and Community Development, to ensure close alignment with the new National Social Enterprise Plan.

2.6 Engage with key organisations and large enterprises to promote the benefits of hiring people with previous criminal convictions to achieve their enterprise goals in Ireland

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment with the support of the Department of Social Protection will utilise channels for engaging with employers to promote the opportunity for employers to recruit ex-offenders. As part of this, efforts will be made to target a small number of large employers who could act as advocates of the benefits of hiring people with previous criminal convictions.

2.7 Introduce efficiencies for in-person commitments relating to Temporary Release

When on temporary release, an individual remains subject to certain conditions which, should they not be adhered to, would result in the withdrawal of temporary release. One of these conditions is often to present themselves to sign on at an appropriate prison on a given frequency.

Those with lived experience have noted that this obligation may result in their waiting to sign on for a number of hours, or having to return to the relevant prison on more than one occasion in a day while awaiting the appropriate paperwork to be prepared. This has a negative impact on their ability to meet the demands of attendance at their paid employment. As a result, this situation may risk the employment status of this individual, which would represent a significant setback in their journey to desistance, but the experience may also negatively impact the efficient business of employers and cause reputational damage with employers who may become less likely in future to take on individuals with such obligations as it impacts the running of their businesses.

In light of this, the Irish Prison Service will undertake to review the current situation and introduce identifiable efficiencies to ensure those signing on in this context may do so as seamlessly as possible so as to not threaten their employment.

2.8 Increase the number of cases dealt with of those in prison and in the community referred for training and employment related engagement

At present 610 is the target number of individuals serving custodial sentences and 1,400 the number of those under the supervision of the Probation Service are who have been referred and subsequently engage with training and employment related engagement per year.

Through setting ambitious targets, ensuring increased efficiencies in delivery, and increasing the target cohort in line with Action 1.1, this strategy seeks to increase the overall number of those referred for training and employment related engagement by 10% year-on-year over the lifetime of the strategy.

Achieving this result, and ensuring these engagements lead to positive, measured outcomes, will increase the cohort of available employees for employers and facilitate addressing gaps in staffing levels where appropriate.

2.9 Use skills intelligence data to identify future skills needs at entry level position or above that would be suitable for marginalised communities, namely or including those with previous criminal convictions

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has responsibility for ensuring that skills needs are identified and met through alignment of education and training provision.

The identification of these needs represents an important opportunity to align current education and training provisions in the criminal justice system with current and future skills needs, which will ensure the target cohort are well placed to find employment in relevant fields.

2.10 Conduct analysis of employment permit applications to assist in the identification of skills and labour needs and to inform the development of training and skills for those in prison or serving a community-based sanction

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment also seeks to ensure any skills shortages may be met, as required, through targeted and efficient economic migration. Analysis of work permit applications will provide unique insight into areas of employment currently serviced by those from outside the State which may be filled by individuals with criminal convictions where appropriate and subject to relevant training and education as required.

Pillar Three: Promotion and Knowledge Sharing

3.1 Host an annual event promoting activity in this area, achievements to date, and opportunities in relation to hiring people with previous criminal convictions

The Department of Justice, the Probation Service, and the Irish Prison Service will each in turn host an open event promoting the actions and achievements of this strategy and the benefits to employers and public safety to supporting people with criminal convictions on their journey into employment and desistance.

The Department of Justice will host the launch of the strategy, with the details of the two subsequent events to be determined in response to developments over the lifetime of the strategy.

3.2 Deliver a national promotion campaign

The Department of Justice will lead on the development of assets and a national campaign promoting to employers the positive skills and traits of those with criminal convictions may bring to their organisation, and promoting new supports available to employers and those with criminal convictions.

This awareness campaign, funding for which has been secured under the Dormant Accounts Fund, will serve to increase understanding and support for hiring and retaining those with criminal convictions, both amongst employers and the public more generally, and will foreground social inclusion and reintegration, along with the positive impact this has on public safety.

3.3 Commission independent research on links between employment and desistance and related matters

Building on existing academic publications, this research will examine the nature of the relationship between employment and desistance in greater detail, with particular focus on the Irish context.

Utilising available quantitative and qualitative data, this research will represent a significant furthering of the knowledge base for activities in this area, which may inform emerging actions, supports for employers, and the work of the Criminal Justice Employer Network through the lifetime of the strategy.

3.4 Support ongoing progress in data collection on levels of employment and earnings for those with previous criminal convictions

The Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service will continue to engage with the Central Statistics Office to build on recent advances in relation to data collection on levels of employment and earnings for those with previous criminal convictions, particularly considered against the relevant figures for those without criminal convictions.

This work will continue to provide important data to inform the development of effective strategic policy interventions where appropriate.

3.5 Expand measuring of outcomes of interventions with individuals, to include employment outcomes but also other paths, such as education, voluntary work, and desistance

While sustained, secure employment is a very important achievement for some individuals who have previously engaged with the criminal justice system, it is also a point on a journey away from an offending lifestyle that not all individuals reach quickly, if at all. It is valuable in this context to note that not all those who cease to offend find long-term employment, and instead may engage in education or voluntary work for varying lengths of time, yet the impact on increased public safety is significant.

In light of this, the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service will expand formal measuring of outcomes to identify the different journeys individuals take away from offending. This will provide data and insights that may inform future strategic interventions.

3.6 Formalise the promotion of training and supports available to all those serving a custodial sentence upon committal and during their period of imprisonment

Those with lived experience of the criminal justice system, particularly those who have served custodial sentences, have indicated room for improvement in relation to ensuring those in prison are fully aware of all resources available throughout their period of custody, so that, complementing Action 4.5, when they are prepared to take positive steps toward desistance that they know what their options are.

The Irish Prison Service will prepare and maintain an up-to-date listing of training and supports available in each place of detention, and ensure that all those serving a custodial sentence will receive this information on committal and at regular intervals through their period of custody.

3.7 Develop a long-term website, hosted on gov.ie, to act as an information and empowerment hub for individuals and employers

There is a clear need to concentrate all information relating to services and supports available to those with criminal convictions looking for employment, and information regarding supports available for employers looking to hire or retain people with criminal convictions into a single, stable, up-to-date, easily accessible, and permanent website.

This site, which will be hosted on gov.ie, will be maintained by the Department of Justice, with input from all agencies and relevant organisations, and will represent a one-stop-shop landing page to provide comprehensive details and directions as appropriate to meet the needs of all visitors.

Costs

Much of the actions under this strategy may be completed in a cost-neutral manner, requiring the work of officials in relevant Departments, agencies and organisations as appropriate.

Primary costs committed to in this strategy, namely the KickStart Fund, KickStart Scholarship, and activities around the promotion of key messaging relating to the strategy will be provided for under applications for funding under the Dormant Accounts Fund, which has already been awarded.

Where extended services incur costs, these will be addressed through examining existing Service Level Agreements with relevant organisations. Where new services incur costs, funding will be sought through appropriate funding streams.

Implementation

The new *Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy* represents a move forward from preceding strategies in this space, which involves both a shift in focus and a shift in the mode of delivery and oversight of the relevant actions.

As work in this space matures, and the success of previous strategies has led to certain outcomes and actions being mainstreamed, the actions under this new strategy have been carefully developed through considerable consultation with relevant stakeholders. As part of this consultation and development process, the owners of each action under the strategy have been clearly identified. Going forward in this new strategy, respective Departments and agencies will be tasked with independently progressing work under these actions and reporting progress on a bi-annual basis.

Reporting of progress will be to the newly formulated oversight group, the Criminal Justice Employment Advisory Committee. This group, which will replace the Social Enterprise Steering Committee, will now be chaired by an official at Assistant Secretary level in the Department of Justice. In order to ensure the voice of those with lived experience of the criminal justice system is appropriately valued and integrated into the delivery of this strategy, the new advisory committee will seek to appoint at least two new members who have previous criminal convictions. In order to ensure the needs of employers are being addressed, the new advisory committee will also seek to appoint representatives from appropriate organisations, including Ibec and Business in the Community Ireland.

An annual report on progress will be published each year for the lifetime of the strategy.



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Department of Justice