

Self-employment opportunities for female ex-offenders

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Abstract

This purpose of the study was to investigate and identify the self-employment opportunities available for female offenders on release from custody and in the community.

The research involved interviews with women in custody, business support organisations, financial institutions and entrepreneurial women who have had experience of the criminal justice system.

A key aim of the research was to produce information about self-employment in a guidebook format for the use of women in custody and the community — the 'Self-employment Guidebook'.

Findings

- There is a demand for business start-up support and services in prisons and this demand is being addressed with events and services expanding across the female estate.
- The majority of respondents had access to self-employment support and advice when in custody but felt the information could be more consistent between establishments as effort can often be wasted after being transferred to another prison. They were also well equipped and aware of the self-employment support information and how to access it on release but many mentioned that home life can take over and they neither have the time or concentration to commit to the business idea on release.
- Support organisations in various sizes exist in the community and support the needs of both women and ex-offenders. Many organisations recognise the potential of those in custody and are currently going to great lengths to gain access to and meet the need of this group. Business in Prisons has gained a good profile in a large number of prisons and the Department of Trade and Industry and the Phoenix Fund are creating funding opportunities for smaller organisations to develop new services (DTI, 2004).
- On release, accessing appropriate services are difficult and family commitment or personal issues override plans and hopes of pursuing self-employment.
- There is a lack of tie-up of services between services in the prison and the community with regional variations.
- Social enterprise is a realistic option, which will have long-term positive effects on communities and reduce exclusion.

Recommendations

- That a service level agreement or Prison Service Order is developed to identify need and standardise the support given in each establishment.
- That the organisation supplying the advice is responsible for linking individuals with support services in their area of release.
- That social enterprise becomes part of the education curriculum and business enterprise schemes are set up within establishments. This could become part of the life and social skills module, to include self-employment.
- That business start-up and self-employment information days become regular events and a centrally updated database of local and national exhibitors and contacts is available on the Prison Intranet. This could include letter and invitation templates so that when a governor or resettlement manager decides to run an event the most time consuming part is taken care of. This could initially be achieved through information sharing and better publicity of events currently running within the prison estate. This could be replicated for all resettlement needs – housing, employment, training, education and BME events.
- That a membership organisation available in custody and the community where entrepreneurs who have faced challenges and barriers of a criminal record when starting and running a business can offer advice and establish a network where your past is positive, no stigma exists and confident expression and idea sharing is easy.
- The last recommendation leads to the initial aim, the 'Self-employment Guidebook' — it is hoped to produce a resource suitable for use in custody that identifies support on release.