

Evaluation Report

Freedom to
Work Pilot

September 2025

Freedom to Work Pilot

Over three months in 2024-25, Triage self-funded an employability pilot in partnership with HMP Holme House, a men's Category C prison. The Freedom to Work pilot supported 22 individuals in their transition from prison, with a focus on those due for release within 12 weeks.

In our 27 year history

Triage has helped hundreds of ex-offenders move towards and into work as part of contracted employment programmes funded by the Department for Work and Pensions or the Scottish Government. However, we had not previously delivered support that started within the prison environment.

Our Freedom to Work pilot was impactful, rewarding and thought-provoking. The outcomes achieved and lessons learned are shared throughout the report.

Further information

For more information, including outcomes from our other pilots, please contact:

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Pilot Background

Through our Impact Pilots, Triage supports people transitioning from economic inactivity into the workforce, engaging individuals who are often hardest to reach.

Freedom to Work

Freedom to work was aimed at addressing the complex challenges faced by prison leavers, offering a structured pathway towards employment and ensuring they are equipped with the necessary skills, resources and support to build a stable future and reduce their risk of re-offending.

Government findings from the Offender Employment Outcomes publication show that in the year to March 2024:

19.3%

Offenders were employed at six weeks post-release from custody

However, employment outcomes were significantly lower than this locally. Recognising the challenge, the Freedom to Work pilot was designed with a clear focus on improving these outcomes.

HMP Holme House

Working closely with the Employment Lead at HMP Holme House; Triage were able to build upon the prison's existing employer links and introduce new employer connections, therefore expanding the range of employment opportunities available.

Pilot participants employment rate:

36%

Significantly above the national average.

Getting the pilot off the ground required significant preparatory work, including obtaining security clearances (a process that took seven weeks) as well as conducting initial visits to the prison to establish relationships with staff and participants, ensuring all parties understood the structure and benefits of the programme. This early engagement was crucial in shaping delivery, addressing logistical challenges and setting a strong foundation for success.

Delivery Model

The model ensures that participants are not only equipped with the skills they need but also have the necessary support to secure and sustain employment upon release.

1 Week 1

Initial engagement and an informal meeting with our Pilot Facilitator, Matty Flanagan.

To build rapport, understanding each participant's background and identifying key barriers to employment

2 Weeks 2-3

Weekly one-to-one sessions. Allowing a deeper understanding of needs and development of a personalised action plan.

3 Weeks 4-10

Combination of ongoing one-to-one support and structured group sessions covering confidence building and practical employability skills. Practical support was provided, e.g.

- to open bank accounts
- obtain identification documents
- navigate the complexities of disclosing a criminal record to potential employers.

4 Weeks 10-12

Signposting to community-based support services post-release, ensuring continued access to housing assistance, mental health services and substance misuse support where needed.

One-to-one guidance and support to help foster personal resilience, problem-solving skills and self-motivation, ensuring each participant had a clear exit strategy in place.

A key milestone was the organisation of a job fair within HMP Holme House, designed to connect participants with meaningful employment and training opportunities.

The event brought together 25 employers and training providers, offering participants and other inmates - 60 in total - the rare opportunity to engage directly with businesses that were open to hiring people with criminal records. Sectors represented included construction, logistics, hospitality and manufacturing.

For many participants, this was their first direct interaction with employers since their incarceration, providing valuable insights into the expectations and requirements of the job market. The event also helped to challenge employer perceptions around hiring ex-offenders, promoting inclusivity and demonstrating the potential of the participants.

Overcoming Delivery Challenges

Limited access to technology within the prison restricted the ability to conduct digital job searches, submit applications and provide online learning resources.

Workbooks

Triage adopted a workbook-based approach, ensuring that participants could still engage with employability training despite the technological constraints.

Workbooks proved effective, allowing for structured learning and self-paced independent study.

It provided participants with guided exercises that covered key employability topics, such as CV writing, interview techniques and workplace expectations.

To reinforce learning, homework assignments were introduced, encouraging individuals to take ownership of their progress. This approach helped maintain momentum in the programme while accommodating the unique challenges of the prison environment.

Participant engagement

At the outset, participant engagement proved to be a significant challenge. Attendance at both one-to-one and group sessions was inconsistent.

Many participants struggled with self-motivation, while others faced difficulties in prioritising employability sessions amidst the complexities of prison life.

We adapted our delivery model to begin sessions at 7:15am, straight after breakfast, to maximise engagement.



Overcoming Delivery Challenges

We flexed our approach to enable our Pilot Facilitator to deliver one-to-one sessions directly within the prison wings, eliminating the need for participants to come to a central location at a set time. This approach removed logistical barriers and significantly increased engagement.

By meeting participants in their own space, Matty was able to establish stronger relationships, build trust and tailor support more effectively to each participant's unique needs.

Operational challenges

Several operational challenges impacted the delivery of group sessions. Internal conflicts among participants created tensions that made group learning environments difficult to manage.

Additionally, logistical difficulties in moving inmates between houseblocks meant that coordinating group sessions required significant time and effort from prison staff, which sometimes led to delays or cancellations.

As a result, Triage adapted our approach to place a stronger emphasis on one-to-one support, ensuring that participants continued to receive meaningful engagement despite the difficulties of group session delivery.

By maintaining a flexible and responsive approach, the pilot was able to sustain momentum and keep participants actively involved in their employability journey.



The Outcomes



1 enrolled in further training at art college



8 inmates attended interviews

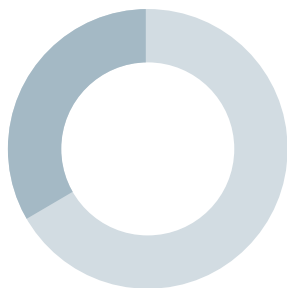


2 secured prison based cleaning & embroidery jobs



8 inmates were nominated for training

We provided a character reference for Construction Skills Certificate Scheme courses within the prison starting in December 2024 or March 2025



36%

secured jobs with many entering full-time roles, e.g. with Iceland Foods



16 CVs completed

including disclosure letters



Participants

22

supported over 4 to 12 weeks



Ethnicity

100%

white British



Age profile

26 - 66

years old



Conviction lengths

18 Weeks to 16 Years

Participant Feedback

The table below represents the percentage of participants who felt that the support provided via the pilot had increased or decreased how they felt about the 10 outcome measures listed:

Overall confidence:

83% 17%

Knowledge of effective job searching:

89% 11%

Knowledge on work ethics and professionalism:

78% 22%

Confidence with interview skills:

94% 6%

How prepared do you feel to start work?

50% 50%

Motivation/Ambitions:

67% 33%

Confidence in creating and changing a CV:

94% 6%

Confidence at disclosing criminal record to employers:

83% 17%

Functional skills abilities:

89% 11%

How is your overall health and wellbeing?

72% 28%

Increased Remained the same Decreased

The results of the soft outcomes assessment at the beginning and end of the pilot programme highlight significant improvements across all key areas, demonstrating the positive impact of the tailored support provided.

A positive but less tangible outcome of the pilot was the increased uptake of in-cell learning among participants. Matty actively encouraged individuals to use their in-cell digital screens to complete courses and further their learning.

While direct data on usage was not available, qualitative feedback suggested a noticeable uplift in engagement with the prison's digital learning platforms.

This demonstrates the importance of embedding a learning culture within employability support, encouraging participants to develop their skills beyond structured sessions. Future programmes could look to formalise this approach by integrating digital learning into participants' action plans, further strengthening their employability prospects.

Case Study

For many individuals leaving prison, the road to employment can be daunting. But for Joe, an ex-offender in his 60s, the journey was made possible through the employability programme at HMP Holme House, guided by the unwavering support of Matty Flanagan.



Joe had served a two-year sentence and faced an uphill battle when it came to re-entering the workforce.

Having never worked for an employer before, he had spent years assisting in his family's fruit and vegetable produce company. However, after over two decades of unemployment and struggling with modern technology, he lacked the confidence and know-how to secure a job on his own.

Matty - employability mentor

In October 2024, Joe met Matty, a dedicated employability mentor who worked closely with him.

Through one-to-one and group sessions, Joe gained invaluable life skills, confidence and self-belief. The programme covered everything from transferable skills and CV tailoring to effective job searching and disclosure guidance.

During the pilot, Matty successfully secured interviews at a supermarket and access to a CSCS card course for candidates, offering real opportunities for a fresh start. Unfortunately, due to early release, Joe missed out on these opportunities. However, Matty refused to let that be the end of Joe's journey. Before his release, Matty provided his contact details, encouraging Joe to reach out when he was ready to take the next step.

A few weeks later, Joe did just that. Matty invited him to Triage's office in Middlesbrough, where they created an action plan and set achievable goals. Understanding Joe's responsibilities, including caring for his ill father, Matty tailored job searches to match Joe's skills and availability.

Job secured

Through dedicated support and guidance, they identified a role that suited Joe's needs - a delivery driver position for a well-known courier company.

Matty assisted Joe with the online application and ensured all necessary documentation was submitted. Before long, Joe received an email with the good news: He had secured the job!

“

I did not have a clue about how to get a job until I met Matty, who helped me get work and got me through my bad times. I am 66 years old and lost everything; I think I would have committed suicide by now without the help I have had from Matty.

”

Case Study

Excited yet nervous

Initially, Joe was excited yet nervous, afraid he might struggle or fail. Matty reassured him that it was normal to feel this way and reminded him that success comes with time, effort, and perseverance. Drawing from his military background and transition to an office role, Matty shared his personal experiences, inspiring Joe to embrace the challenge ahead.

To ease Joe's transition into employment, Matty went the extra mile. On Joe's first day, Matty accompanied him, offering support and guidance as he delivered his first parcel. Understanding Joe's difficulties with technology, Matty even created a simple step-by-step guide to help him navigate the courier app.

That first day, Joe successfully delivered 22 parcels. Joe's story is a testament to the power of tailored support, determination, and second chances.

“

“I would like to say that without these people helping you in prison, so many people would be coming back to prison, so these people are a godsend for the system and worth every penny,” concluded Joe. ”



Return on Investment

The cost of reoffending to taxpayers is estimated at up to...

£18bn

Offenders that secure a job have a...

9.4%

Reduced reoffending rate

The economic benefit of supporting an ex-offender into employment is wide-ranging.

Broad estimates suggest that each prisoner entering employment could potentially...

- Save the taxpayer thousands of pounds
- Reduce reoffending
- Lower criminal justice system costs
- Reduce benefit costs

The Freedom to Work pilot cost Triage

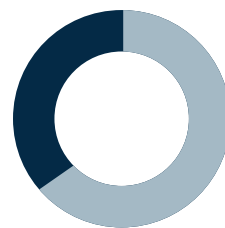
£10,496

Equating to (per participant)

£477

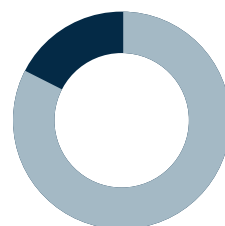
Cost per job outcome:

£1,312



36%

of participants in jobs over 12 weeks, compares favourably to...



19.3%

of offenders nationally were employed at six weeks post-release from custody.

Lessons Learned

Successes to replicate

The personalised one-to-one support delivered by Matty within the wings proved to be an effective approach, directly contributing to eight participants securing employment before their release.

This success highlights the impact that dedicated, tailored employability support can have on individuals preparing to reintegrate into the workforce. By investing time in understanding a participant's:

- unique circumstances
- challenges
- aspirations

We were able to provide meaningful guidance that translated into tangible employment outcomes.

Proactive employer engagement supported employers to broaden their recruitment strategies and highlight the potential of an underutilised but highly capable talent pool. Establishing direct links between participants and employers helped break down preconceived barriers, leading to a greater willingness to consider individuals with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

Learnings on barriers faced and future support

Throughout the pilot, several key barriers to securing stable employment were identified, offering valuable insights for future support of ex-offenders both pre and post-release.

Many participants faced a combination of practical and psychological barriers, including:

- lack of ID documents and bank accounts
- gaps in work history
- digital exclusion
- low confidence in their ability to reintegrate into the workforce

Addressing these issues at an earlier stage – ideally before release – could significantly improve outcomes.

One major challenge was maintaining contact with participants after their release. Due to the prison's process, individuals were often released early with little notice and provided with a mobile phone containing a new number, which they did not receive until the moment they left custody. As a result, Matty had no reliable way of reaching them once they were in the community. Although he provided participants with his work email and phone number before release, engagement post-release was extremely low. This significantly impacted the ability to track progress and offer continued support.

Future programmes may benefit from more structured exit planning, ensuring participants have a clear communication plan upon release, including alternative ways to stay in touch.

Lessons Learned

Another notable learning was the logistical challenge of supporting individuals released to areas outside of the immediate region. A participant who secured employment as a delivery driver for Iceland in Portsmouth required ongoing support despite being hundreds of miles away from Stockton-on-Tees.

This highlighted the need for stronger transition planning, ensuring individuals relocating upon release have:

- all necessary documentation
- transport arrangements
- local support networks in place

Future programmes could explore partnerships with nationwide support organisations to offer a smoother handover for participants leaving the area.

Extending the programme's duration and availability would also create opportunities to strengthen partnerships with both prison staff and external employers, ensuring a more seamless transition from custody to employment. By embedding the programme more firmly within the prison's employability framework, there is potential to increase its reach and provide more comprehensive support.

Internally, Matty's experiences have provided valuable learning for Triage's broader work with ex-offenders. Reinforcing the importance of:

- early intervention,
- proactive employer engagement
- flexible, individualised support

Sharing these insights across our internal teams will allow for the refinement of existing approaches and the development of best practice in supporting this cohort.

Future improvements

Managing group sessions presented a notable challenge due to internal conflicts among participants and difficulties in ensuring consistent attendance, diminishing the intended impact of collective learning environments.

Moving forward, careful consideration should be given to refining the structure and delivery of group sessions to create a more inclusive and productive environment.

Strategies could include more:

- structured facilitation
- conflict resolution mechanisms
- incentive-based attendance models

Given the evident success of the one-to-one approach, there should also be an assessment of whether this method should become the dominant or exclusive mode of delivery, particularly in settings where group engagement proves difficult to manage.

Ensuring flexibility in the programme structure will be key to maintaining engagement and maximising outcomes for participants.

Why are Triage delivering Impact Pilots?

Triage has chosen to invest in a dedicated team to deliver Impact Pilots, enabling us to test 'what works' for key priority groups who need additional support to access employment or progress to other positive destinations. Pilots enable us to be flexible and creative, outside of some of the parameters of our other contracted provision.

Each pilot is carefully designed, monitored and evaluated, with participant feedback built in, enabling us to tweak the delivery model to best meet individual needs. Each pilot aligns with the ambitions of the Government and devolved authorities to provide tailored interventions to support the achievement of an 80% employment target.

Other current and planned pilots include:

- Support for young people not in employment, education or training
- Parent returners
- People with health conditions, mental ill health and/or Musculoskeletal conditions referred via social prescribers
- School pupils at risk of NEET

