

THE PANDEMIC HAS BEEN WITH us for more than a year, and the world has shifted its diversity and inclusion lens. We have become more empathetic and socially minded – two characteristics that have helped bring communities together in these uncertain times. Covid-19 has brought elevated community awareness, a drive to create social change, and a greater willingness to unlock prejudice.

Rehabilitation of offenders is emerging as a prominent platform for discussion. Organisations such as Key4Life, which supports young men who are in prison or at risk of going to prison, can play a vital role in helping rebuild the lives of ex-offenders. By partnering with corporates and small businesses, they guide ex-offenders through employment programmes, help them earn incomes and integrate them back into society.

Reoffending costs the UK government £18.1 billion a year (Newton et al., 2019). A Key4Life participant is four times more likely to be employed a year after release than their peers. Only 16 per cent of those who have completed our programmes reoffend, compared to the national reoffending rate of 64 per cent one-year post-release. This is encouraging.

Research shows that 50 per cent of corporate Britain would not hire an ex-offender (YouGov/DWP, 2016). However, employing ex-offenders is an opportunity to do right for the local community, and to drive change by dispelling stereotypes and prejudice.

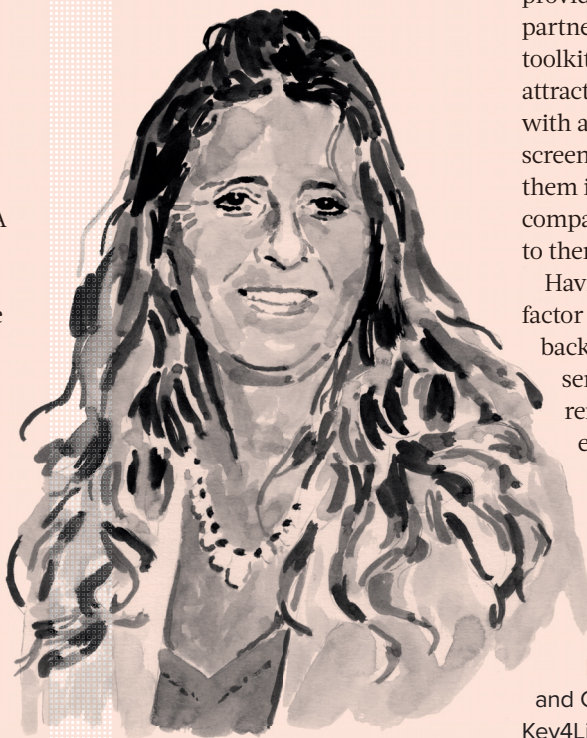
Businesses benefit by extending opportunities to a broader candidate pool, which allows them to address skills shortages and ensure talent isn't left untapped. Employing ex-offenders can bring new perspectives to the workplace and provide an opportunity to do something meaningful by offering a second chance.

Many organisations that take on ex-offenders experience failed hires, which results in a financial loss and means they must recruit at least twice for one appointment. Organisations such

as Key4Life can advise companies on how to responsibly access talent.

The Key4Life employability programme has placed more than 300 graduates in work placements and jobs across small and large businesses. These young men, who have come from backgrounds of poverty and crime, have transformed their lives by applying for and securing jobs, and by being given the opportunity to build trust in others. The social acceptance and ability to integrate that comes from having a regular income and renewed purpose is a lifeline for them.

Due to Covid-19, there are currently fewer vacancies available, which means



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fewer placement opportunities for ex-offenders. We would welcome and encourage any small business that could open its doors to ex-offenders and support these programmes. Key4Life can provide guidance for new business partners, providing a framework and toolkit to enable them to responsibly attract, recruit and retain candidates with a criminal record. The charity screens the young men and works with them intensively before they join a company, and provides ongoing support to them once employed.

Having a job is the critical success factor for men with an offending background. Without that income and sense of purpose, reoffending will remain a high cost for the UK. It is extraordinary to see graduates from rehabilitation programmes attain impressive corporate roles or run their own businesses because someone cared enough, for long enough, to change their lives.

EVA HAMILTON MBE is the founder and CEO of crime prevention charity Key4Life. Views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of FSB.

Positive impact

Taking on ex-offenders isn't just about giving someone a second chance at life; it can also provide small firms with a valuable source of committed skills