

Employers encouraged to take on ex-offenders

EMPLOYERS have been urged to consider recruiting former prisoners after completion of their sentences.

Certain sectors - principally the railway and catering industries - have already grasped the nettle and take on ex-prisoners.

But others are missing out on a potentially valuable source of workforce, says Kevin Straughan, deputy director of offender learning at Milton Keynes College.

The college is the second largest learning provider to prisoners in England, working with 26,000 prisoners in 30 prisons from the Isle of Wight to Yorkshire. It has set up employment academies and last year delivered 81,000 courses with 68,000 successful outcomes.

"The major challenge is to engage employers and get them to employ our prisoners when they are released from custody," Mr Straughan said. "Many prisoners have never had a job and it is work that changes their lives."

Figures show that being employed reduces the risk of a former prisoner reoffending by half. The annual bill for reoffending costs the UK between £9.5 billion and £13 billion



● Kevin Straughan

and half of those crimes are committed by released prisoners who reoffend. "For that reason alone, we all need to come together and do something about it," Mr Straughan said.

Milton Keynes College has been delivering offender learning programmes in prison for the past 20 years. The courses provide real vocational education for real jobs so that prisoners return to the community able to contribute, he told an audience of businesspeople in Milton Keynes.

"The employment academies provide a real pathway to work."

Among the first industries to employ former prisoners is the UK's railways. The college has set up a Railway Academy and 33 former

prisoners took up jobs in the sector last year. "It is a sector that is growing rapidly in this country and one which sees the value of employing ex-offenders," said Mr Straughan.

He called on businesses in other sectors to follow suit. In doing so, employers will demonstrate corporate social responsibility, play their part in reducing reoffending, lessen crime and the fear of crime and benefit from a productive and valuable member of staff.

Many prisoners lose their livelihood, home and family in the aftermath of receiving a custodial sentence. But, armed with qualifications achieved while in prison, that does not make them unemployable.

Mr Straughan said: "Clear evidence proves that prisoners can be reliable, loyal, hard-working and dedicated employees that are extremely receptive to change. The challenge for us all is to be open-minded, to be prepared to take a measured and balanced risk in employing them."

He was speaking to around 100 businesspeople at the Midsummer Breakfast Club meeting held at Jurys Inn in Central Milton Keynes.

Firms urged to take advantage of rugby showpiece

BUSINESS has been urged to take full advantage of the commercial opportunities on their doorstep when the Rugby World Cup 2015 comes to town next year.

Milton Keynes Business Leaders Partnership is supporting efforts to develop home-grown opportunities when the international spotlight falls on the city. *stadiummk* is due to host three games.

"Major sporting events like the Rugby World Cup have to attract

sponsorship and support from big-name international brands," said MKBLP chair Philip Smith. "That could lead to suggestions that they will have the best opportunities sewn up when the rugby circus comes to town but it does not mean home-grown organisations need miss out."

MKBLP has backed plans by Milton Keynes Council and the MK Rugby 2015 Steering Board to develop a festival-like celebration at Campbell Park and other venues

around the games being held at *stadiummk* in October 2015.

Mr Smith said: "We hope that, working alongside Rugby World Cup 2015, businesses of all sizes will be encouraged to think out of the corporate sponsorship box when it comes to commercial opportunities, like fulfilling the accommodation, refreshment and travel needs of the thousands of fans attending the matches as well as catering for the local audience with events and activities.

"Companies should also consider the potential beyond the tournament, when the profile of Milton Keynes will have been raised in front of a worldwide audience as a place to visit and do business."

Milton Keynes will host both Fiji and Samoa during the tournament. Both teams will be based in the city and will train at Woughton on the Green Sports Ground and Bletchley Leisure Centre.

Accountancy and agriculture in perfect harmony. Meet Andrew Lawes, general practice partner at chartered accountants Mercer & Hole and a champion of the outdoor life

Enjoying the 'good life' in every sense

ANDREW Lawes has always enjoyed the great outdoors. From his university days rowing at Oxford to his current position as a trustee of Milton Keynes Parks Trust, he appreciates the value of open space. Furthermore, living on a smallholding in a quiet Bedfordshire village, he understands the benefits, delights and hard work involved in rural life.

When he is not at work as a General Practice Partner at Mercer & Hole, working with the firm's clients to develop and grow their businesses, you will find him and his wife looking after their stock of cattle, pigs, sheep, chickens and turkeys. "The smallholding has grown over the years," he says, "and it is a great way of life. It provides a good contrast to the day job and that is really valuable."

Accountancy, agriculture and 'the good life' were not on Andrew's radar when, after graduating, he went to military college before working for the Government for several years.

Career progression in the Government takes time and patience - a contrast to the meteoric advancement being enjoyed in the 1980s by his university friends who opted for the finance sector. "I was ambitious," he says. "Promotion in Government Service was largely based on time served, but I wanted to get on and do things and accountancy was booming."

He spent the next 25 years working firstly for Ernst & Young in Luton followed by Baker Tilly in Milton Keynes. He has always preferred to work with owner-managed businesses that are today one of Mercer & Hole's specialisms. "I like to make a difference working with business owners to help them grow, develop and realise value from their business," he says.

That is at the core of the Mercer & Hole culture, which is why he made the move to the firm 12 months ago.

"It is a firm that deals with owner-managed businesses and many of the partners and staff at the firm deal with that type of client. It doesn't matter what specialism they have, everyone is focused on that client base. Whatever the client needs, we are geared up to provide it across all disciplines and that is a massive difference."

Over the years, Andrew has worked with clients in sectors ranging from automotive, manufacturing and distribution to property, leisure, recruitment and telecommunications. "The driver has always been to add value and help a business grow and develop - that's what makes me tick."

His work as a trustee of Milton Keynes

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Andrew Lawes

Parks Trust, the independent charity that maintains around 5,000 acres of river valleys, woodlands, lakesides, parks and landscaped areas that make up much of the Milton Keynes parks and green space, is important to him in a different way.

"It is excellent that Milton Keynes recognises the importance of open space for the well-being, enjoyment and quality of life of people who live here and I wanted to be more involved in that," he says.

"The Parks Trust does a fantastic job of looking after the landscape. Open space is important for everyone, whether they live in the country or the city."

He appreciates the open space around his smallholding too, which began with a few chickens before Andrew and his wife took in and reared some orphaned lambs. But his life as a farmer stepped up a gear the day he went to buy a new padlock.

"I got chatting to the owner of the hardware store and realised that we had met at a sheep farm some weeks before. He also kept livestock and asked me if I'd ever considered keeping cows and I ended up buying a couple from him as well as the padlock. It was a bit of a difficult conversation with my wife when I got home... but now we love it - it has become a way of life."

'The good life' extends to Andrew's work at Mercer & Hole too. "For me, this is it," he says. "Mercer & Hole is a firm that cares deeply about the clients it works with and is totally committed to its local client base. Our success is based on having that clarity of purpose and there is a huge amount of opportunity for us in Milton Keynes."

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