

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

Businesses hold the key to unlocking potential

Alice Thomson, Rachel Sylvester

It was a prison version of *The Apprentice* that caught Michael Gove's imagination on a recent visit to Texas. He watched as prisoners came up with ideas for a business, then learnt how to write accounts, draw up marketing strategies and pitch to potential investors. Instead of Sir Alan Sugar, the inmates are mentored by young entrepreneurs who help them to turn their plans into reality.

The justice secretary is convinced that companies should play a far bigger role in prisons in this country too. He wants to make it easier for them to operate in jails and hire offenders after they are released, as part of his rehabilitation revolution. "We should definitely have more businesses going into prisons; you could have businesses running in prisons," he tells us. "I want to support prison governors to get the energy and enthusiasm of people outside prison to support prisoners."

Timpson, which specialises in shoe repairs and key cutting, began recruiting ex-offenders more than a decade ago after James Timpson, the chief executive, went around Thorn Cross prison, near Warrington, and recruited the inmate who showed him around. He became one of his best managers. His father, John Timpson, says: "We now have the pick of a talented bunch."

Of the nearly 400 people who have joined the company from jail, fewer than a dozen have reoffended. Susanna Stephens, who ran the shop in Potters Bar after prison, says: "It did seem quite weird that I was going out of prison to cut keys."

James Timpson admits that it doesn't always work. "A third of people in prison are right for employment, a third have significant health problems which means they are not ready for employment, and a third will never be the right personalities for us." The key thing, he believes, is that "if you leave jail today you start working for us tomorrow" But it is worth it, he adds: "They're more loyal and, after being in prison, obsessed with turning up on time."

Sir Richard Branson, the Virgin founder, thinks that businesses have a responsibility to get involved in rehabilitation. Virgin Trains has recruitment events in prisons for inmates who are nearing the end of their sentences. "Giving people a second chance in life is not only the fair thing to do, but it is also a position of fiscal responsibility," he says. "It makes perfect sense, as it increases the talent pool, lowers the price tag of reoffending, nurtures entrepreneurial spirit, and contributes to safer communities."

Jonathan Aitken, the former Tory cabinet minister who spent time in jail, believes that prisoners should be paid a proper wage. At the moment, inmates are given about £750 a week. Campaigners argue that paying a market



Brixton prison was once called a "hellhole" but is now setting an example with training in skills that give inmates a work ethic and better employment chances

nationwide reoffending rate, they know they have more of a chance than most. As one said: "If I have this qualification and I get help finding a job as a barman, I know I enjoy the work. At least the missus will be pleased I can cook now."

Peter Hickey, head of reducing reoffending at Brixton prison, says: "We have a window of opportunity to get them to change. We need the resources to do it, but it will save money in the long term. The secret is to get them to find what they are good at and enjoy and they might stick at it."

Nearly 85 per cent are learning or working at Brixton. "A few don't want to do anything, they are more likely to be back inside," Mr Hickey says

Several now want to bake. "I can make 500 treacle tarts for £2 every day. When I get out I want to start a mobile bakery and I wouldn't mind going on *The Great British Bake Off*," one says. "I didn't get school and lessons, my behaviour let me down, but since I started here it focused my energies."

Bakery they sell their cakes to local cafés and want to open their own coffee shop outside the prison walls in the old gatehouse. "It's not about producing Mary Berrys, it's about giving the men a work ethic. None of them can cook so it's a useful skill whatever they do," Malcolm Cock, who runs the bakery, says

job when he leaves the prison. Two other men are working on the construction site at Battersea power station.

There is a national shortage of scaffolders so Brixton has been given money to train prisoners in the skill — well away from the perimeter walls. At the Bad Boys'

start working in the community as they near the end of their sentences.

Bounce Back, a charity that trains offenders and helps them to find jobs, says that employers are queuing up to take inmates from Brixton. One said: "We are more reliable than most workers, they know our history and they know we will turn up on time."

If they work hard they can earn more family visits and eventually home leave.

Faruck is determined to be both polite and hard-working. He now has an unpaid job in the Sue Ryder charity head office. "When I first started working again I didn't even know what an Oyster card was," he says. He hopes to continue his

the rehabilitation revolution as south London's category C/D resettlement prison. Inmates can work in the Bad Boys' Bakery set up by Gordon Ramsay, the barber's or the Clink restaurant, or they can learn how to paint or do bricklaying courses. It is a challenge to fill out all the forms and undertake the required level of training but if the prisoners are persistent and get their certificates they can apply for release on temporary licence and

burglary, including a hairdresser's once. "Now I want to set one up," he says. The head of the prison service in the 1980s called Brixton "a hellhole". Even in 2013 there was a complaint from Nick Hardwick, the chief inspector of prisons, that the smell of cannabis permeated the men's clothes and that there were only two changes of underwear a week for men locked up two to a cell 20 hours a day. Now Brixton has become an example of

The inside story: Brixton's bakers and barbers show how rehabilitation works

One 42-year-old was horrified when he was sent to the barber's shop at HMP Brixton to learn how to cut hair on dolls (Alice Thomson, Rachel Sylvester and Richard Ford write). Now he's hooked. "At first my cuts were a mess, now I wish I'd learnt to cut hair at college," he says. "It's really relaxing. I could do this when I get out, I'm really good at it." He has been sent to jail twice for



Warders threaten

Rachel Sylvester, Alice Thomson

The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 makes it unlawful to

to strike over pay and rising violence

to protect prison staff from rising levels on but we are prepared for a fight" he crease in serious assaults on staff and cers would have had an increase of just