

WORK

STORIES

Impact Summary Report

Delivered by Big Ideas

Funded by the Ministry of Justice Digital Innovation Fund

Introduction

Work Stories is a digital employability programme for prisoners across England and Wales. The course centres the voices of people who have been through the justice system and offers their insights into every prison. Work Stories provides prisoners access to authentic, peer-led employability education for the first time, on their own terms.

With a focus on empowerment, confidence and growth mindset, the programme demonstrates to people in prison that employment after release is not only possible, it can bring purpose, stability and a sense of identity that goes beyond a pay cheque. Employment is one of the most significant factors in reducing reoffending. Yet for many leaving prison, the path into work feels inaccessible, unfamiliar and daunting. Work Stories was designed to change that, not through specific sector skills training but by developing inherent attributes and characteristics while developing soft skills and awareness of the conventional workplace.

*"If my story can help someone else sitting in a cell... I hope it does."
Stacey, co-production participant*

Designed and delivered by Big Ideas, Work Stories was funded by the Ministry of Justice as part of its Digital Innovation Fund, and is the first employability course to be made available digitally to every prisoner across all prisons in England.

Programme Overview

Work Stories was developed and piloted throughout 2024 and is still available across the prison estate in England and Wales as part of the education and employment digital learning offered within prisons.

The films

At the heart of the programme are five short, co-produced films each featuring an ex-prisoner filmed in their current workplace with input from their employer. Participants span a wide range of backgrounds, industries and locations, from a bike mechanic workshop in London to forestry in Northumberland, making the programme relevant and relatable to a diverse prison population.

Each film follows a similar structure: the participant shares their story, explains how they found their job, what skills they draw on day-to-day, and what employment has given

them beyond financial security. Their employers also appear, speaking openly about how and why they hire people with lived experience and the value they bring.

Employer Partners	Locations
Timpsons - Retail COOK - Food Production Fresh Start - Charity Sector Inside & Out - Land Maintenance XO Bikes - Trade & Bike Mechanics	Liverpool Kent Norfolk Northumberland London

→ [Click here to watch the trailer](#)

The Course

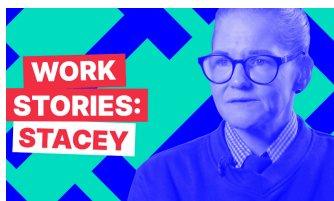
Alongside the films, learners work through an interactive digital course built around the participants' own experiences, with input from their employers on the skills and qualities they look for. The course was designed to be colourful, accessible and easy to navigate and has received positive feedback on its quality and usability.

Five one-hour online modules built around the real stories of five ex-prisoners, designed to help learners reframe their own experiences, build confidence and take practical steps towards employment after release.

"I don't think your convictions define you." Jamie, co-production participant

Each module is structured around one participant's story and builds towards a concrete, practical output that learners keep. By the end, every learner will have produced tangible materials to support the journey to employment, for example a template introduction email for potential employers, or a 90-day action plan for after release.

Learning outputs per module:



Module 1

"Ex-offenders who want to change make great employees"

→ Theme: Confidence

Identifying strengths, reframing lived experience as a strength and asset for employers, working towards tangible goals.



Module 2

"You need to look after your mental and physical health"

→ Theme: Wellbeing

Building the physical and mental foundations for a stable life after release.



Module 3

"This charity means the world to me"

→ Theme: Skills & Knowledge

Exploring causes which interest you and navigating workplace scenarios.



Module 4

"His experience gives him empathy, that makes him a great leader"

→ Theme: Empathy & Planning

Using empathy/lived experience as leadership qualities.
Planning your first 90 days after release.



Module 5

"It's the little things which add up"

→ Theme: Resilience & Positivity

Building a positive vision through small, manageable changes.

Impact

Reach & Engagement

Work Stories was accessed by 114 prisons across England. Its completion rate was the highest of all courses available on the platform, demonstrating that the content was genuinely engaging learners through to completion.

The programme was also broadcast on Wayout TV, which is the in-cell television service available across the prison estate. It ran for three consecutive 12-week cycles which significantly extended the reach of the films beyond the online modules into cells across the country. Each broadcast cycle was accompanied by promotion of the digital modules, encouraging prisoners to engage with the wider self-directed learning programme.

Staff Response

Education staff across all prisons we spoke to were enthusiastic about Work Stories, both for its content and for the type of learning it provided which is rarely available within standard prison education provision. The growth mindset and personal development framing was particularly valued; staff noted that they do not usually have the time or resources for this kind of enrichment work in their day-to-day roles. Staff in women's prisons were particularly positive about the programme's empowerment-led approach.

The films were consistently praised as professionally produced, authentic and thoughtfully presented, as was the UX design of the digital course itself which staff described as accessible, colourful and engaging.

The personal outreach approach taken by Big Ideas to build relationships directly with prisons was vital, with direct contact proving more effective than broad or centralised promotion in driving uptake and gaining support from staff. This was important to ensure prisoner access to the course which is complicated in the prison system and is different from prison to prison.

Hearing from people who have been in the same situation as the learners made a profound difference. Prison education staff were clear that this peer-to-peer aspect was the defining feature of the programme, and one that sets the course apart from others.

"I got to share my experience for the first time. If you're sitting in prison thinking about what to do when you come out you can see this person has done it, and say: if he can do it, I can do it. We were both in prison. What's the difference?" Fred, co-production participant

The inclusion of employers in the films who spoke openly about hiring people with experience of the criminal justice system and the value those colleagues bring to their companies reinforced the message of hope and opportunity. Learners could see not just that someone like them had found work but that they were valued and respected in that workplace.

Participant Experience

The participants involved in the co-production were equally empowered by the process and for many it gave them confidence to do more with their jobs and careers.

"I feel quite proud to be a part of it. I'm really enjoying my job and being able to be myself, working towards change." Paul, co-production participant

Media & Sector Interest

Work Stories attracted significant attention from both broadcast media and the prison sector. Participants Fred and Stacey were interviewed, with additional pieces on National Prison Radio by participants and Big Ideas.

"Work Stories takes a refreshing approach. It's different to what prisoners will usually receive. It is innovative, and I see it is authentic and has integrity." Wayout TV

Wayout TV described the films as exceptional, leading to the content being scheduled for three full 12-week cycles - the maximum available - across all prison TVs in England. Each cycle was accompanied by promotion of the online modules, raising the profile of the self-directed learning opportunity among the prison population.

The wider sector has responded equally positively. The videos in particular have been highlighted as genuinely distinctive: authentic, high-quality and unlike anything currently available in this space. This interest extended the audience for Work Stories beyond the immediate learner group and reinforced its credibility as a programme.

Legacy

The pilot has enabled innovation in the type of content prisoners receive in prison, especially for resources to support employability, and Work Stories is available to every prisoner across all prisons in England - the first employability course to achieve digital access across the entire prison estate.

Big Ideas is seeking further funding to activate the course and support staff to embed it in their education and employment programmes.