

The role of Work Integrated Social Enterprise (WISE) in supporting employment and desistance for criminalised individuals

Preliminary research findings

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Contents

Contents.....	2
Executive summary	4
i) The impact of WISE at a glance.....	4
ii) Main project findings	5
iii) Recommendations	7
Introduction	9
Methodology.....	11
Findings	13
1. Barriers to employment for criminalised individuals.....	13
1.1. Practical barriers	13
1.2. Education, skills and work experience	13
1.3. Mental health, alcohol and substance addiction	16
1.4. Stigma, discrimination and criminal records.....	19
1.5. In summary	21
2. The value of WISE in supporting employment.....	23
2.1. Creating an environment to support complex needs	23
2.2. WISE as stepping stone	25
2.3. WISE as end-employer	28
2.4. In summary	29
3. The value of WISE in promoting desistance.....	31
3.1. Providing a stable foundation for change	31
3.2. A hook for a new 'self'	37
3.3. Co-desistance and mutual aid.....	45
3.4. In summary	48
4. Challenges faced by WISE	49
4.1. Financial resilience	49
4.2. Avoiding dependence.....	51

4.3. Contemporary employment markets.....	54
4.4. Chaotic life trajectories and a ‘cumulation of disadvantage’	57
4.5. In summary	59
Conclusion and next steps	61
References.....	66

Executive summary

i) The impact of WISE at a glance

Participants in this study with a significant criminal history described how employment at a Work Integrated Social Enterprise (WISE) had had a positive impact on their life and wellbeing, as these extracts from project interviews demonstrate –

“I’m in the best position I’ve been in my life in the past 20 years... [WISE] its given me a life, something to do, we all have a laugh, I’m always smiling... I’ve been a criminal all me life and I’ve never had as much as what I’ve got now and I’ve only been working not long... I’ve not had me own property for 17 years, that’s the last time I’ve had a property in my name” – WISE employee 8

“I’ve never been in such a good place at a point in my life... I’ve changed so much. I’m more determined. I’m more motivated. I’m more confident” – WISE employee 14

“Like my life’s good at the moment: I’ve got a job, kids, I’ve got a missus, I’ve got a house, I’ve got a roof over my head, I’ve got plenty of food in the cupboards, electric, gas. Literally, I’m happy with my life at the moment” – WISE employee 11

“If there was more, like more businesses who were willing on doing what [WISE] is doing, like taking criminals on to give them a chance, it would be brilliant. It would be brilliant because [WISE] have literally changed me in myself and made me look at life differently” – WISE employee 15

“My [WISE] experience helped make me who I am today, it helped me progress and mature as a person” – (former) WISE employee 16

The impact of WISE is also illustrated in the answers given in interviews when current and former WISE employees were asked where they think they would be now, had they not engaged with WISE -

“Honestly, I don’t think I’d be here ... I’ve been in some bad places over the past few years” – WISE employee 5

“Because of the life that I was living I would have been dead or in jail for the rest of my life” – WISE employee 11

“Probably not be here really... the way I was at the time before I got this job, yeah” – WISE employee 13

“Jail. I honestly say it would probably be jail. At the time I was applying for jobs and just wasn’t getting anywhere with it... I was already in the process of going back to dealing and stuff like that” – WISE employee 14

“If weren’t for [WISE], I wouldn’t be where I am now. 100% would not be here” – WISE employee 15

“Without [WISE] I wouldn’t be in the position I’m in today, with having a criminal record I probably wouldn’t have a proper job” – (former) WISE employee 16

“If I wasn’t at [WISE], I think I would’ve still been sitting on my bum sleeping in the middle of the day just generally not giving a hoot really about the world... life wasn’t very enjoyable” – WISE employee 4

ii) Main project findings

This pilot project involved research with three UK WISE who aim to support individuals with significant criminal histories to access and sustain employment. These WISE offer ‘supported employment’ for criminalised individuals within their organisation, in an environment which can accommodate for complex needs, whilst also receiving holistic support with the issues that are acting as a barrier to maintaining employment.

This initial research was largely exploratory, with the intention to be a precursor to a larger-scale research project in this area. Using qualitative methods – including interviews with WISE employees (n=16) and other stakeholders (n=12) – it aimed to investigate the impact engagement with WISE can have for criminalised individuals, both in terms of labour market integration, as well reducing reoffending and supporting a move away from crime.

The project findings can be summarised as follows:

Barriers to employment for criminalised individuals

The barriers faced by participants in this study to obtain and sustain employment were considerable, and often multiple and overlapping, including:

- Practical difficulties, such as having no fixed address, a lack of identification documents, insufficient funds to travel to interviews, and not having their own bank account.
- A lack of necessary experience, training and qualifications, specific learning difficulties and difficulties with reading and writing.

- Poor mental health, deep-rooted trauma, PTSD, substance addictions, and being unable to access appropriate treatment for these.
- Experiences of stigma and discrimination, primarily due to their criminal record.

The value of WISE in supporting employment

The findings in this project clearly demonstrate the valuable role of WISE in assisting criminalised individuals to access and maintain employment:

- WISE create a safe, flexible and supportive working environment that can accommodate for those with complex needs, as well as help address them.
- WISE can act as an essential intermediary step towards gaining mainstream employment for criminalised individuals who may need time, training, work experience and support before they are ready for work outside of this environment, without which they risk being 'set up to fail'.
- For those for whom mainstream employment might not be an appealing or realistic goal, WISE can act as an alternative end-employer, providing employment for those who might otherwise have been entirely excluded from the labour market.

The value of WISE in promoting desistance

The findings in this study indicate that WISE can aid desistance from crime in several ways:

- By helping service users develop the financial, physical, emotional and relational stability required in their lives to begin to support a move away from crime, through the provision of holistic support from peer mentors, WISE management staff and external partners.
- By offering, through working at WISE, a 'hook for change' for those who have begun to feel disillusioned with engagement in crime and the criminal justice system, and are open to trying something different in their lives.
- By providing an opportunity through legitimate employment for service users to build a law-abiding identity that they can take pride in, which can support longer-term change and solidify their views of the ultimate futility of engagement in crime and the merits of a law-abiding lifestyle.
- By creating a safe, non-judgemental space at WISE where employees can be open about, and receive support with, their struggles with mental health and other related issues, which promotes a more pro-social identity and increased empathy for others.
- By providing credible role models and peer support for change through working with others who have lived experiences of crime, addictions and other difficult life experiences.

- By trusting, where appropriate, service users to take on a mentoring role for newer WISE employees, thus strengthening the mentor's self-concept as a changed individual.

The challenges faced by WISE

WISE face many challenges in achieving their social mission:

- WISE must maintain a balance between dedicating resources to supporting employees with a criminal history, and maintaining a viable business, yet gaining access to sources of funding which can subsidise the work of WISE appears to be increasingly difficult.
- WISE also must strike a balance between supporting the needs of criminalised individuals and creating a safe space at WISE to do this, and avoiding dependence by empowering employees to sustain their employment and desistance on their own, without the support of WISE, and achieve their full potential.
- The conditions of contemporary labour markets are increasingly condemning those without qualifications and work experience - and particularly those who have a significant criminal record - to insecure, mundane and socially isolating work. A challenge for WISE therefore is to try to assist criminalised individuals to gain access to secure, meaningful work that can effectively support their desistance.
- While WISE can have a considerable impact upon the lives of the criminalised individuals they support, the accumulation of disadvantage they have experienced through their life course can make ensuring long-term success in sustaining employment and desistance more difficult to achieve.

iii) Recommendations

Following this initial research, the following recommendations can be made:

- While there was certainly evidence that WISE can support the desistance process of their employees, there is scope for further research here. A longitudinal study, which follows the progress of employees post-WISE, would provide greater understanding of how involvement in WISE can influence pathways towards sustained, long-term employment and desistance. This research is particularly critical considering the impact of 'cumulative forms of disadvantage' on lifelong opportunities, and the effect of changing labour markets on the availability of stable, meaningful forms of employment that can aid desistance.

- It was evident in this research that individual WISE staff members' dedication to and empathy for their service users was vital to the wider organisation's success. While these efforts should be applauded, it should be recognised that - as is the case with many third sector organisations - losing these staff members could cause extreme upheaval for service users and greatly impact the resilience of the organisation, and therefore having a succession plan in place is vital (acknowledging that this may require access to additional sources of funding).
- There is a need to raise awareness amongst policy makers, and other key stakeholders in the areas of reoffending and employment, of the value of WISE that offer a 'supported employment' model for criminalised individuals. This is especially pertinent as current government initiatives appear to be focused upon assisting criminalised individuals to *obtain* employment, but less so on supporting them to *sustain* this. Simply placing criminalised individuals into employment will not tackle the multiple barriers they face, and in some instances may make these worse. WISE can offer a solution to this issue.
- It is also important to raise awareness of the value of WISE to potential funders. A more favourable funding environment could aid the development and expansion of WISE. It could allow WISE to dedicate more resources to building connections with mainstream employers who would be willing to employ criminalised individuals, lessening concerns around dependency and stagnation of WISE employees who remain at WISE for long periods of time. Furthermore, it could assist the expansion of WISE to provide more variety in terms of the employment pathways and qualifications offered, creating more opportunities for employees to progress and flourish within the organisation.
- It is vital that the economic savings that are being generated through the work of WISE in the areas of criminal justice, education, healthcare, social care, welfare benefits and others are better understood through further research, and that these savings are brought to the attention of those who seek to tackle reoffending and/or reduce demand on public services.

Introduction

One in four adults and one in three juveniles will reoffend within one year, with economic and social costs estimated at £18 billion per year (Ministry of Justice, 2024; Scottish Government 2023)¹. Within academic research, there is strong evidence indicating that employment is associated with reduced criminal activities and reoffending (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Savolainen, 2009; Weaver and McNeill, 2015). Yet many of those with a significant criminal history face numerous barriers to participation in labour markets, such as employer stigma, low levels of educational attainment, a lack of experience/training/skills, substance addictions, physical and mental health issues and housing insecurity/homelessness (Weaver and Jardine, 2022).

This pilot project aims to scrutinise and raise awareness of the activities of Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE) in the UK. The aim of WISE is to support marginalised groups to access employment. There exists considerable variation across WISE (Roy et al., 2014). Some may run employment skills workshops, or act as an employment agency, whereas others may provide work experience, paid placements or even permanent employment. The focus in this project is WISE who offer a 'supported employment' model for criminalised individuals, which attempt to make sustained employment more achievable for those with the complex needs highlighted above. These WISE are unique in that they provide paid employment opportunities for criminalised individuals within their organisation, in an environment which can accommodate for complex needs, whilst also receiving holistic support with the issues that are acting as a barrier to sustaining employment. WISE can enable both 'pathways to mainstream employment', by providing temporary employment, training and support to help reintegrate criminalised individuals into the open labour market, as well as 'alternatives to mainstream employment' by acting as an end-employer for these individuals (Davister, Defourny and Gregoire, 2007).

The number of WISE in the UK offering this 'supported employment' model for criminalised individuals is difficult to determine. While Social Enterprise UK lists 3362 members, only four are specified as dedicated to supporting ex-offenders. Likewise Social Enterprise Scotland lists 560 members, with only one identified as supporting those with convictions into employment. Of course, not all social enterprises in the UK will be members of these organisations. Indeed, Social Enterprise UK reports that there are a total of 131,000 social enterprises in the UK. Twenty-five percent of these list creating employment opportunities as their main objective, yet only 6% seek to employ ex-offenders (Hochlaf,

¹ In England and Wales, the proven reoffending rate was 25.1% for adults and 34.2% for juveniles in the January - March 2022 quarter. In Scotland, in the 2019-20 offender cohort (all ages) the reoffending rate was 24.1%.

Gregory and Darko, 2023). Likewise, Social Enterprise Scotland states there are 6047 social enterprises currently in operation in Scotland, but only 12% list their beneficiaries as people with convictions (Social Enterprise in Scotland Census, 2021). An initial scoping exercise conducted by the researcher revealed a minimum of twenty-three UK WISE utilising a 'supported employment' model for criminalised individuals that are currently in operation, although due to the difficulties in identifying these there are likely others. Nonetheless, these findings would suggest that these organisations may still be relatively rare.

This initial research aims to explore the impact WISE may have upon the labour market integration and desistance² process of criminalised individuals. The project is small-scale and exploratory, with the intention to be a precursor to a larger-scale research project in this area.

The structure of the report is as follows: the subsequent chapter will outline the methodology adopted in the pilot project. Following this, the research findings are presented, which focus on 1) the barriers criminalised individuals face in seeking to obtain and sustain employment, 2) the value of WISE in providing employment opportunities in a safe and supportive environment for those who are at a considerable distance from the labour market, 3) the value of WISE in promoting the development of a pro-social identity and a commitment to moving away from crime and 4) some of the challenges WISE face in seeking to achieve their social mission. The report ends by reflecting on the importance of these findings, how they may have relevance to policy makers and other stakeholders, and suggests where further research should be conducted.

² Defined by Maruna (2001) as the process of abstaining from crime over time

Methodology

This project involved three UK WISE, which offer a ‘supported employment’ model for criminalised individuals. These WISE were located in Scotland and Northern England and offered employment in groundworks, gardening, commercial/domestic cleaning, caretaking and house and void property clearances.

Interviews (n=12) were conducted with various WISE stakeholders, including CEOs/senior management and other WISE support staff, however resource and time constraints only allowed the researcher to interview employees/service users (n=16) from two of these WISE: FreshStart Ventures and Rebound Careers.³ N=14 were current employees, and n=2 were former employees (they had left WISE 3 and 4.5 years ago). Interviews with stakeholders were focused on the operation of WISE, the additional support provided to WISE employees who have a criminal background, the progression of employees during their time at WISE and the transition of WISE employees into further employment. Interviews with WISE employees/service users were designed to elucidate self-narratives from participants concerning their previous offending and background, their routes into WISE, the experiences working for WISE, and their hopes and plans for the future. Where permission was granted, interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Data was thematically analysed and coded, using a general inductive method (Thomas, 2006).

FreshStart Ventures and Rebound Careers both follow what Weaver et al. (2019) terms a ‘hybrid model’ – they provide employment not just for those with convictions, but also for those with a variety of other social needs and issues, that might act as a barrier to employment, such as asylum seekers/refugees, care leavers, military service leavers, those who are neurodivergent and/or in recovery from substance addictions, as well as those without specific barriers to employment. Thirty-nine percent of employees at FreshStart Ventures are comprised of those with experiences of the criminal justice system and at Rebound Careers this figure is 17%. The WISE employees (n=16) interviewed in this project all had significant criminal histories and were recruited on this basis, although often this interacted with other barriers to employment also.

These WISE also follow a ‘progressive model’ (Weaver et al., 2019) where there are opportunities for the temporary employment of criminalised individuals with the aim (once they feel ready) to progress into mainstream employment, as well as opportunities for the permanent employment of some employees. They also have an initial voluntary phase which involves a work trial and mentoring

³ These are pseudonyms, as are all people and place names in this report to protect the identity of WISE employees and stakeholders

support, although the length of this varies between WISE from 2-8 weeks. All of the WISE surveyed in this study provide significant additional support throughout the period service users are working with the WISE, this is primarily supplied 'in house' through sessions with support staff, counsellors and mentors. Where necessary, they will also refer service users to external organisations.

The WISE surveyed in the pilot project employ those with a range of criminal backgrounds, including those with serious and violent criminal convictions. Indeed, the majority of participants in this study had experienced extended periods of imprisonment. Only one WISE however employs those with sexual convictions, due to the non-public facing nature of the work carried out there. Previous crimes committed by the WISE employees interviewed in this project included drug distribution and possession offences, fraud, domestic violence, serious assaults (including with weapons), sexual convictions, theft, shoplifting, burglaries, armed robbery, knife carrying, stalking and harassment and various driving offences. Indeed, one participant had over 360 convictions. Any reduction in the seriousness/frequency/volume of offending would be a notable change therefore for these participants with significant and serious criminal histories, making this an ideal population with whom to study processes of desistance.

All WISE employees interviewed in this study were men and indeed the bulk of the workforce in these WISE are male, although women are not excluded from engagement. The WISE in this study employ a wide variety of ages; those interviewed were aged between 26-61. Employees interviewed had been working at WISE for between 3.5 months and 11 years – the average was 2.5 years. Participants were commonly referred into the WISE through job centres, probation, police and other third sector organisations.

Findings

Key themes from the project findings included, 1) the significant barriers participants had faced in obtaining and maintaining mainstream employment, 2) the value of WISE in helping criminalised individuals to sustain employment, 3) the impact of WISE upon desistance, and 4) the ongoing challenges faced by WISE in their mission to support criminalised individuals into employment. Each of these themes will be explored in turn.

1. Barriers to employment for criminalised individuals

The barriers faced by participants in this study to obtain and sustain employment were considerable, and often multiple and overlapping. Key barriers to gaining secure employment included practical difficulties, a lack of necessary training and qualifications, poor mental health and substance addictions, and experiences of stigma and discrimination, primarily due to their criminal record.

1.1. Practical barriers

Several participants, and particularly those who had been imprisoned and/or had been homeless, experienced practical barriers to finding employment, such as not having access to the IT required to apply for jobs or create a CV, having no fixed address, being unable to afford clothes that are appropriate for working, having lost key identification documents and not having a bank account. The extreme poverty that some participants experienced also could be a barrier to searching for and obtaining employment, as one WISE employee explained when discussing past interviews -

“I had an interview... and I walked, it took me nearly two hours and fifty minutes, nearly three hours... and I had to walk home as well. It was 16-17 miles... the little universal credit we were getting ... it would have cost me nearly £15 to get there and back” – WISE employee 5

1.2. Education, skills and work experience

Many participants described having scarce engagement with education since primary school and experiences of school exclusions were common. Schooling had been a difficult experience for many, and had a lasting impact on their self-esteem and identity. In some cases, WISE employees reported now having been diagnosed as neurodivergent, including dyslexia, specific learning difficulties, ADHD, Autism and Asperger’s syndrome, however often they had not received any support for these conditions while at school -

“I went through years of fucking feeling not as bright as everyone and not very confident in myself and things like that” – WISE employee 6

“they used to have targets on the wall at school for throwing stuff at, they used to sit me on a stool in front of it, with a dunce hat on, and throw stuff at you because you were stupid” –

WISE employee 5

“I could never do maths. It’s not because I’m a prat or I was a bad person in school, it was the fact of I needed more than the teacher saying this is that or that. I don’t understand it... Then what I would do I’d feel embarrassed because I’d look around and everyone’s getting on with it and I’d end up kicking off... I ended up in a behavioural school, mainstream couldn’t handle me” – WISE employee 6.

Difficult school experiences and subsequent disengagement from education had had a lasting impact upon the life opportunities of many participants. A number of WISE employees reported still struggling with reading and writing, which necessarily made many elements of life, and in particular applying for legitimate employment, difficult –

“If you were to give me a form now to fill out, I just, I couldn’t do it. I can’t hold a pen proper. I could never read through school” – WISE employee 6

“I’ve got bad reading and writing and that. That puts me off doing a lot of stuff... I do try and avoid work that’s involved with where you have to read or write and stuff like that” – WISE employee 13

“I always wanted to be a mechanic, a bike mechanic, but I could never get into a college because I had no qualifications and obviously I had difficulty with reading and writing and nobody wanted to take me on... I just give up then, like, what’s the point do ... nothing I can do about it now” – WISE employee 15

However, it should be acknowledged that were participants in this study who had gained GCSEs at school, and some had progressed to college. A very small number of WISE employees, some of which had a history of sexual offences, had higher education qualifications and extensive prior work experience. The criminal record and employer stigma were their barriers to employment, as discussed further in the following section.

A number of participants in this study, prior to their engagement with WISE, had very limited work experience, and this was a clear barrier to finding employment –

“[They] come from worklessness households, worklessness communities, come from families where that’s just how they roll. Get a wee bit, get benefits and get a wee bit additional money through the black economy or wee bit of crime. Nothing too serious, maybe selling stolen goods, that kind of stuff. How do you break that when it’s entrenched?” – Stakeholder 1

“There's something about if you're if you've lived in a family where you have four generations there, four generations that have never worked, you're growing up in a family thinking ... well Mum and Dad never worked, Gran never worked so – actually am I gonna work?” –

Stakeholder 6

Some of the younger participants in this study appeared to have cycled through various post-16 education and training schemes that had not made any meaningful difference to their employability, resonating with the observation made by Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) and Roberts (2009), that under-qualified, working-class school leavers are usually encouraged onto lower-level vocational qualifications which prove to be worthless in terms of labour market fortunes.

Some of the older participants who had been able to obtain employment at various points through their life course, reported having had numerous insecure jobs, interspersed with pro-longed periods of unemployment and welfare dependency; a precarious existence in a stream of unfulfilling jobs, with limited or no potential for progression. These findings exemplify the ‘chronic churning’ that Russell, Simmons and Thompson (2011) describe as characterising the contemporary experiences of many of those without skills and/or qualifications. Barriers to finding employment for some older participants also included difficulties in developing the IT capabilities necessary for secure employment in the current labour market.

Consequently, prior to engagement with WISE, the low paid, low-quality work options that were available to those with limited education, skills and qualifications were often insufficient to outweigh the temptations of illegal activities, which could be a lot more lucrative, but also sometimes just the more feasible option to ‘make ends meet’ -

“What I used to do, little things, sell weed, things like that. A bit arrogant really but I was making more money off doing things like that than going out to work” – WISE employee 6.

“I just thought I could make more money doing what I do on the streets, do you know what I mean... They sacked me and I just thought, do you know what, fuck it, and just started committing loads of crime” – WISE employee 10

1.3. Mental health, alcohol and substance addiction

Almost all participants in this study reported suffering one or more of a wide range of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), paranoid schizophrenia, psychosis and bipolar disorder. The root causes of these were complex, but included chaotic upbringings, parental poor mental health or suicide, experiences of abuse (physical, emotional and sexual) and neglect as a child, difficult schooling experiences, experiences of homelessness and sleeping rough, losing contact with their children through social services interventions and persistent substance misuse. Also relevant was trauma related to the criminal lifestyle. Indeed, participants described long-term trauma from witnessing and partaking in violent behaviours -

“Its all the violent or sick things I’ve seen... hearing certain people scream from the prison door... I’ve seen my mate get shot for his pedal bike... I’ve seen people robbed. Tied up. Put in the boot of cars. People being filmed getting beat up in prison. I’ve seen pure crazy shit.” –

WISE employee 6

Furthermore, experiences of long-term trauma following assaults with weapons were reported by a number of participants, and many were still suffering the physical and emotional effects of PTSD –

“I got stabbed, I snapped a tendon with a knife, big sharp kitchen knife went through there... the trauma that I went through was out, it was awful, five days I didn’t sleep” – WISE

employee 6

“I got knife attacked and was in hospital for a couple of weeks. I went back to work actually, but then the mental health got to me, the PTSD, I came out of work and have been on the sick ... I have flashbacks of being stabbed and that... I don’t like to go out in public crowded places

any more” – WISE employee 7

“When it happened, like six months later I started thinking oh I nearly died, so when I went out I’d have to have a drink at home before going out to get my confidence and then I’d end up drinking more when I went out” – WISE employee 10

“I think being shot didn’t help. I think the PTSD and the anxiety side of things really got to me. I think that’s what ruined them years of my life from 18 to 21 my head was fucked because of it all” – WISE employee 7

Several WISE employees described past and recent mental breakdowns, which had resulted in unemployment, homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse and hospitalisation. Sadly, a number of

participants in this study described past suicide attempts. These issues had made engaging with and sustaining mainstream employment extremely difficult –

“Sometimes my anxiety’s that bad I can’t leave my flat and I don’t know why or anything it’s just I’m scared and I don’t understand it” – WISE employee 6

“Like a few weeks ago, my head absolutely flopped, I just fell off and I didn’t know what to do. I started going mad. I was punching walls... I was screaming.... I ended up going hospital that day” – WISE employee 14

Experiences of poor mental health and extreme emotional turmoil could also be connected to continued offending –

“It’s desperation. I truly, well and truly believe - I’m not making excuses for myself - but what happened, what I did when I got arrested and sentenced the second time, it was a cry for help. My head was just fucking gone. I had nowhere. I had nothing” - WISE employee 7

“When I split up with my girlfriend, I had a mental breakdown so I didn’t really, I weren’t really arsed about working and that. I was just doing daft shit. Getting battered every other, couple, I wanted to get beaten up, I was making trouble for myself. But then I went to prison and went three times in like eight years” – WISE employee 12

Reports of being unable to access effective treatment for these issues, relying on the internet to self-diagnose, and experiencing long NHS waiting lists were common. Also relevant were the difficulties in navigating the mental health system and a lack of continuity of care – many participants reported finding it extremely difficult to open up and tell their stories to one practitioner, and the requirement to do this with multiple individuals to be able to access appropriate care could be a barrier to receiving support. Perhaps unsurprisingly, following many years of austerity, public sector cuts and a cost-of-living crisis, there was a sense amongst the stakeholders in this study that the levels of mental health issues, addictions and trauma among service users was increasing -

“what we’re seeing now, and what we’ve been seeing a while, it’s that conviction, and there’s so many more complex barriers around. It’s not just a conviction, it’s the drugs and alcohol, it’s the deep-rooted trauma, and it’s the mental health issues” – Stakeholder 2

“Most of the people we work with are coming from communities where there's massive issues around vulnerabilities and trauma and drug and alcohol use and mental health as and we're seeing more and more of them come... It's not just the complexities, it's the number of complexities that people are coming through our door with... its horrendous, to be honest, horrendous” – Stakeholder 6

Furthermore, the role of the COVID-19 pandemic and national restrictions in worsening mental health conditions was noted by several participants -

“We've noticed that the guys coming in, because of the pandemic, are in a worse state mentally. None of the long-term prisoners took up zoom calls during the pandemic; they were worried staff were listening in. It's really impacted their socialisation, there were times when they weren't even speaking to each other, when the wing got Covid etc.” – Stakeholder 9

“I fear for the generation that have just come through Covid. Because their mental health is through the roof. And I think there's still a fear of going out... they missed so much school, so they didn't have a routine” - Stakeholder 2

“When I got arrested I was put straight on remand and because of Covid there was no mental health in prison... Covid, it just changed me brain, my brain chemistry, I still don't recognise myself, I'm not the same person” – WISE employee 5

In addition to struggles with mental health, many participants reported difficulties with alcohol and drug addictions. These were rarely two separate issues, experiences of trauma, PTSD and poor mental health (and barriers to receiving help for these) had led some participants to self-medicate using these substances, and in turn, abusing drugs and alcohol could have a severe detrimental impact on mental wellbeing. Participants described how addiction had impacted their ability to find and engage in employment, maintain healthy relationships with families and friends and manage their finances –

“I was addicted to coke for two years and neglected my son for three years because of the coke addiction” – WISE employee 14

“I've struggled to find work all the time... most of my life I've been a drug addict, its only been the last 3 years I've been clean” – WISE employee 8

“when I was addicted to cocaine, and stuff like that, so you just don't think about other people, you just think about the drugs” – WISE employee 11

1.4. Stigma, discrimination and criminal records

Approximately 1 in 6 people in the UK have a criminal record, including 1 in 3 men (Unlock, 2017). Yet, with only a very small number of these past convictions being unspent, many of these individuals would not consider themselves to have a criminal record and do not routinely have to declare these historical convictions to employers. However, for those who have been imprisoned, have a very lengthy criminal history, and/or offences that will never become unspent, the stigma attached to their criminal record can cause marginalisation and social isolation from mainstream society, and particularly can cause difficulties in gaining employment. A common theme in interviews was participants' experiences of employer stigma and discrimination due to their criminal record. The highest levels of stigmatisation were unsurprisingly experienced by those with sexual offences on their record, although stigma and employer discrimination had been an experience of nearly all prior to their engagement with WISE –

“As soon as they see a criminal record, that’s it, your application goes in the bin... there’s a stigma attached to that; ‘Oh, he’s been in jail, right forget him.’ They’re forgetting that they’re human beings as well. Fair enough, they’ve made a mistake, give them a chance” –

Stakeholder 4

“I must have been to twenty interviews... there was one... I sat down for the interview, and he said you do know you’ve not got a chance, but I’ll do the interview... A few others were saying more or less the same thing as well, as soon as you walked through the door you knew they were telling you straight away, but they had to go through it” – WISE employee 5

“No one wanted me.... I spoke to companies, loved the sound of me, yeah, yeah, hang on what you been doing the past few months... Right unfortunately I’ll let you know. Before we do a CRB check on you’re not going to get the job. I must have heard that about five or six times.” –

WISE employee 7

“Right, I’ve done six months in jail but this job I want now I did for 15 years before I went to jail. Does that not outweigh the little bit of jail time I did? I could bring so much to your company” – WISE employee 7

“People look at people with criminal records a lot different, a lot different. They just think oh he’s done that in the past, so he’s going to be like that now, do you know what I mean, but that’s not always the case... some people they want to change their life” – WISE employee 11

“I’m truthful and I tell them, listen, I’ve got a criminal record, I’ve got a past... “No, we don’t want you”. It’s horrible. It makes you feel like crap, it really does” – WISE employee 15

“once you’ve passed that threshold of going to jail, there’s no turning back. It’s like you are going to be known as a criminal for the rest of your life no matter what, because you are going to have to tell them you are a criminal no matter what” – WISE employee 15

Participants understandably felt frustration at this unfairness. Many could not understand why employers (prior to their engagement with WISE) were unwilling to take the risk of employing them when they had served their sentences and had been considered rehabilitated by criminal justice services. They expressed just needing employers to give them a ‘chance’ where they could prove themselves to be reliable, trustworthy, and not a ‘bad person’, but many employers were not willing to offer this chance. Atherton and Buck (2021: 193) discuss organisations’ fear of ‘image transfer’ where “those who are closely associated with – or viewed as identified with – a stigmatized person acquire some of the same stigmatization”.

Some participants explained that the work (if any) that was available to them was temporary, low-quality work; permanent positions with better conditions and employee rights seemed unobtainable for those with a criminal record. Shepherd and Riccardelli (2020) identify how the rejection those with a criminal record experience from labour markets can lead to a lowering of expectations, and self-stigmatisation; those with a criminal record come to believe that they are only good enough for low quality forms of employment, even if they have experience and skills that could qualify them for more meaningful forms of employment. A particular difficulty faced by those who had sexual offences on their records was lowering their expectations of the forms of employment now available to them following these convictions. The restrictions that could be attached to such offences, the increased permanency of their criminal record and the intense stigma these populations faced resulted in many facing prolonged unemployment or poorly paid, unstable and low-quality work. For those who had previously been skilled and well-paid employees, this meant a huge lifestyle change -

“We’ve had teachers who were convicted of sexual offences. They will never get a job as a teacher again. And so, it’s about helping them to come to terms with that because I have to say for some of them that’s a bitter blow and they need to come to terms with that” –

Stakeholder 1

The impact societal and employer stigma had had upon participants was considerable. Participants described the judgement of others due to their past offences having a devastating impact on their mental health, having led to them being afraid to leave the house, having lost relationships with friends and family and having been ‘hounded out’ of employment following their employer being made aware of their convictions. Participants (again particularly those convicted of sexual offences) had considerable fears around the requirement to disclose past offences to employers, leading some to have avoided applying for and engaging in employment, prior to engagement with WISE.

Participants explained that the online reporting of offences and sharing of information on social media had particularly exacerbated these barriers. For individuals with spent convictions, who should be protected by the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, this was severely undermined by the existence of online records of their offences, for instance on social media or news websites, which had little chance of ‘expiring’, and were readily available to prospective employers, should they choose to ‘google’ the names of job applicants. Stakeholders discussed some WISE employees having been previously ‘shunned and pilloried in the press’ and therefore being hugely fearful of engaging in employment because of this. Some participants made connections between the stigma they had experienced, their difficulties in finding employment, or indeed finding any sort of ‘life’ post-conviction, and incidences of reoffending –

“no-one can really be rehabilitated the way the stigma is with the criminal record, anyone that comes out of prison thinks that they can’t get a job, I’ve had friends who just go back to offending, they say they can’t get a proper job anyway so what’d the point?” – (former) WISE employee 16

1.5. In summary

Overall while the existence of the barriers identified in this research have been reported elsewhere, the capturing of the voices of participants and stakeholders in this study emphasises the vast challenges those who have a significant criminal history can face in obtaining and sustaining employment. Challenges at the individual (or micro) level, such as debilitating mental health issues, ongoing substance addictions, the constraints of extreme poverty, and/or low levels of educational attainment and skill development, interact with challenges at the macro-level, where increasingly in contemporary labour markets stable, quality forms of employment are the preserve of those who have the skills, qualifications, stable social background and ‘clean records’ to effectively compete for such opportunities. The result of this is that those with a significant criminal history can struggle to obtain and sustain employment and/or are restricted to poor-quality work opportunities. Yet, evidence

suggests that stable, meaningful employment is required to aid and maintain desistance; a process of change which takes considerable time (Jaynes, 2020; Oswald, 2020; Van der Geest, Bijleveld, and Blokland, 2011). Informed by this background context, this report will now explore the value of WISE for criminalised individuals, and their role in tackling these barriers to employment and supporting participants to gain secure employment which can promote a move away from crime.

2. The value of WISE in supporting employment

The findings in this project clearly demonstrate the valuable role of WISE in assisting criminalised individuals to obtain and sustain employment. As a third sector organisation, WISE can create a safe, flexible and supportive working environment that can accommodate for those with complex needs, as well as help address them. Furthermore, WISE can act as an intermediary step towards gaining mainstream employment for criminalised individuals who may need time and support before they are ready for work outside of this environment. Moreover, for those for whom mainstream employment might not be an appealing or realistic goal, WISE can act as an alternative end-employer. Each of these areas will be explored in turn.

2.1. Creating an environment to support complex needs

To create a working environment suitable for criminalised individuals, WISE will, where possible, seek to adapt their working activities around the conditions of their employees' licence conditions, such as curfews and electronic tags. This is particularly important for those individuals who have sexual offences on their records, who might not be able to enter certain areas or might be required to report to probation offices more often than non-sexual offenders as a condition of their release, which would otherwise affect their attendance at a place of employment. As a further example of this adaptability, to support those recovering from drug addictions, WISE can accommodate collecting methadone prescriptions during their working day.

Furthermore, because of the understanding WISE have of the realities of their employees' lives, their personal histories, and the significant challenges they face, they make allowances when outside issues are impacting WISE employees' performance or attendance at work. WISE can be more flexible than a mainstream employer in allowing employees time away from work for a range of issues such as mental health difficulties, substance addictions and family and relationship breakdowns. Because of the social mission directing WISE, in contrast to most employers, they see it as their responsibility to understand how issues outside of work are impacting upon their employees and to actively support them to maintain their employment during this time –

“We have to realise that sometimes they are going to dip, they are going to go back on the booze. They are going to have smoked too much wacky baccy the night before, and sleep through their alarm... their lives can be pretty chaotic. Whether it's, you know, they've fallen out with their ex, and they can't see their kids... their issues aren't going to go away just because they've got a job” – Stakeholder 2

“you’ll get a phone call, on a Sunday night, from somebody saying, ‘my mental health’s through the roof, I need time off’. Other companies wouldn’t, they just wouldn’t put up with. But we’re more understanding. You know, so if it’s a case of ‘right, take a few days annual leave, get your head sorted, give me a ring when you’re feeling better.’ So, there’s that. There’s a duty of care that we have to these guys” – Stakeholder 2

WISE employees identified in interviews the massive difference having this understanding and flexibility made for them in terms of being able to sustain employment and build more stability in their lives -

“things have been done for me by this company and that wouldn’t happen anywhere else ever. People have come and drove and picked me up from the door, there was one time I couldn’t walk about in public... I don’t know but I was scared of being that scared, if I did get attacked or something... petrified not knowing what they’re going to do to me, stab me, throw bleach in my face, fire bomb me, whatever... My mind was completely gone, honestly” – WISE employee 6

Moreover, WISE recognise that, realistically, their employees with extensive criminal histories and many associated difficulties might ultimately fail to maintain their employment with WISE, but could successfully re-engage at a different point in the future. WISE reported in this study allowing their employees multiple attempts to try to maintain their employment, and would often give those who had to be dismissed another chance at a later date, when potentially outside issues impacting their ability to engage in employment had settled down –

“He sent me a heartfelt, I mean really heartfelt, email. I mean, he was in a bad place, and I know why [WISE] got rid of him. You know, he was just so flaky and just he wasn’t in a good place. But I could tell by his email that his life had changed for the better... And he’s worked out brilliantly. He’s turned up, he’s here before me some mornings” – Stakeholder 2

“We’ve given them second chances... second and third chances, because we feel... there’s certain guys we’ve felt if we can work on this guy, he’ll be fine, and it’s worked sometimes. There’s other times, obviously, it doesn’t work, but I would say about 70% of the time it works... giving them a bit of a chance to get things together” – Stakeholder 4

“We anticipate that people will mess up. We allow for that. Three strikes not turning up and they’d probably lose their job. So we’ve let people go when they’re not ready, but we’ll give them another go in say 12 months” – Stakeholder 7

“I’m privileged that they gave me another chance, I’m also surprised at the same time that they gave me another chance because I was a nightmare you know, I’m forever indebted to them” – WISE employee 4

While WISE expressed that there had to be limits that employees could not cross, the social priorities of their organisation, as opposed to the solely commercial ones of organisations in the private sector, meant that the challenges WISE employees faced in their lives outside work could be better accommodated for, and ultimately their chances of sustaining employment at WISE were much greater.

Nonetheless, WISE recognise that this supportive employment environment can not always of itself transform the lives of their employees, especially considering the complexity of challenges their service users faced, as described in section 1. Consequently, WISE also provide significant support in other areas such as mental health, housing, managing finances and whole-family support. In some instances, this involves referrals into external organisations, or organisations that WISE work in partnership with. However, considerable support is also provided in-house by management staff at WISE, or – where appropriate – by peer mentors who are often WISE employees with lived experience of involvement in criminality. These forms of additional, holistic support shall be considered further in section 3 which explores the value of WISE in promoting desistance. However, their impact in helping employees to sustain their employment at WISE should also be acknowledged. For instance, support to obtain secure housing and manage finances necessarily gives employees more structure and less uncertainty in their lives outside work to make engaging in employment more feasible. Similarly, supporting employees with their mental health and family relationships can help stabilise WISE employees emotionally, again helping them to build the structure and routine needed to maintain employment. These are forms of support that that WISE, in seeking to achieve their social goals, provide for their employees, that could not realistically be expected of a mainstream employer, yet without which many participants would be unlikely to sustain their employment.

2.2. WISE as stepping stone

The WISE surveyed in this study can function as a temporary employment and support programme that can help criminalised individuals prepare for mainstream employment. WISE can help service users access the training they might need for further employment, examples include the CSCS card for access to the construction industry, UKCPAS cleaning training and gaining their driving license. They

can also assist with writing CVs, preparing for interviews and provide advice on disclosing criminal records to employers.

However, while such employability skills training is undoubtedly valuable, Weaver and Jardine (2022) highlight the importance of investing in structures of employment that can integrate and generate work opportunities for criminalised individuals and tackle systematic employment barriers, such as stigma and the absence of meaningful employment opportunities. What is unique about WISE following a supported employment model, is their ability to combine this employability training with paid work experience. As stakeholders described –

“I’m a bit critical of employability provision on its own, it usually classroom based and cheaper and tends to be what people will fund these days, but a lot of people just cycle through these and don’t get anywhere” – Stakeholder 10

“You can achieve a CV or an application, or a form of confidence and motivation and whatever maybe, you can achieve at pretty much any organisation you go to. But what you can’t get is hands on practical work experience, and vocational qualifications, and real-life practical experiences, and then a job waiting at the other end of it.” – Stakeholder 5

“A lot of money is put into employability, but not so much in helping people obtain or maintain a job” – Stakeholder 11

The WISE included in this project had formed relationships with a number of organisations willing to employ criminalised individuals, and could in some instances act as a broker between their employees and these organisations, making the transition to further employment easier for employees. Research confirms that interventions to improve employability are more likely to be effective in helping criminalised individuals achieve employment where they are linked to tangible opportunities (Home Office, 2014). Stakeholders explained that a benefit of engaging with WISE is that those with a criminal background can demonstrate to potential future employers that they can work and sustain employment. Furthermore, WISE can advocate on behalf their service users and explain to employers how they have changed following their criminal convictions and work with WISE, hence reducing the risk for mainstream employers –

“you’re that cushion between the behaviour, the bias-removal and mainstream employment. You’re absorbing all the risk. You are the one that’s having to cope with them not turning up, or turning up stoned, high from the night before, or whatever it may be. You’ve taken, and at the other end hopefully you’ve got somebody who is more aligned with mainstream employment” – Stakeholder 5

“We’re establishing a lot of trust with the employers so that they know when someone comes on a recommendation from us, they know the programme that they’ve gone through. They’ve been on work placement. They’ve got qualifications. We’ve spent a long time on things like the reliability, their ability to take instructions, work part of a team. All these kind of softer skills” – Stakeholder 1

WISE employees reported feeling more prepared for employment following their engagement with WISE. They had developed a routine, gained confidence, improved their social skills, learned how to work with others and in some instances members of the public, and had gained work experience and new skills. It was widely reported that WISE were crucial in providing employees with time in a supported environment where they could get used to working, and if they had gone straight into mainstream employment the likelihood of them being able to sustain this employment were slim –

“Instead of sticking them in the mainstream, gradually, it’s like a build-up... a gradual build-up of confidence. They build-up their work ethic. It’s just gradually getting them back into society again. It’s no use shoving them in at the deep end, just to slowly integrate them back in just gradually” – Stakeholder 4

“It’s too big a leap from for someone who’s been unemployed for a long time who has got barriers to employment... it’s too big a leap to go from nothing into employment. I think there’s a danger as well, we were setting people up to fail if they’re not prepared properly for employment” – Stakeholder 5

“A lot of people think that just get them a job and everything will be fine. You’re just opening up a whole different set of issues. ... it needs to be the right job and at the right time, for this client group, for a lot of people, they need to be supported to get to that space” – Stakeholder

1

Stakeholders emphasised the dangers of criminalised individuals going straight into mainstream employment and not being able to maintain this and then labelling themselves as a ‘failure’, ‘unemployable’ and massively knocking their confidence.

For those who do transition into mainstream employment, support can be provided by WISE while they adjust to mainstream employment –

“Once they get into a job then I would always keep in touch with them for 12 weeks after just to offer support... you can contact me if you want another meeting... if like something’s going on that you don’t quite know if it’s within your employability rights, we can have a look at it.

Even if you’re not sure about anything then contact me and we can go over things” –

Stakeholder 3

Many WISE in this study reported never officially ending contact with employees, and reassuring those that move on that they could get back into contact with WISE if they needed help in the future. Thus, demonstrating the value of WISE in working in a way that is flexible, needs-driven, centred around service users and, unlike many statutory agencies working with criminalised populations, not bound by fixed timescales. This all helps to ensure that the goal of sustained employment is more achievable.

2.3. WISE as end-employer

The WISE in this study can also act as an end-employer and alternative to mainstream employment for criminalised individuals. The reality is that for some individuals WISE are supporting, in particular those with convictions that will never be spent, ongoing issues with addiction and severe mental health issues, their likelihood of gaining and sustaining employment elsewhere is so limited that it is necessary for WISE to also provide opportunities for permanent employment –

“There has to be a place where it is a final destination. Now we have that for people with disabilities, and learning difficulties, we have that. So, why can’t we have that for individuals with convictions, or individuals who are on methadone scripts. We write off people, saying you can’t work, but why can’t you work? Of course you can work” – Stakeholder 5

“I think there are still people that just probably wouldn’t be able to move away from [WISE] and I think if [WISE] stopped, I think a lot of people would really suffer from that and then maybe not get anything else” – Stakeholder 1

“I definitely think that there are some people who, something in their past, something that’s happened to them, will always hold them back and... will never get a job anywhere else” –

Stakeholder 2

In interviews with WISE employees, many reported feeling that there would not be other employment opportunities open to them beyond working at a WISE, this was the only place that had ‘given them a chance’ and they ‘didn’t know where they would be without it’. WISE stakeholders confirmed that there could be difficulties in moving participants from WISE into mainstream employment due to the complexity of their needs and the reluctance of employers to employ those with a criminal record. It was expressed by both employees and stakeholders that the WISE in this study provided a unique

opportunity for criminalised individuals for whom employment would usually be a struggle, or even impossible.

“Some of the guys we see won’t get a job anywhere else, and that’s why people like us and any other social enterprise, that is perfect for these guys” –Stakeholder 4

“There are individuals there with convictions of a sexual nature who are just not, probably not going to get other employment, so that space needs to exist, it has to... And that’s why [WISE] is so important, because when you’re a high-risk client and nobody will work with you, and nobody knows what to do with you, where do you go? By default, we’re just telling you ‘Sorry, we’re writing you off; you might as well go back to prison or not be here’. That’s the message that we’re sending.” – Stakeholder 5

This is particularly relevant for those who have a sexual conviction, who would find it especially difficult to access work opportunities outside of WISE (and as detailed above only one WISE in this study offers employment opportunities for this group). Such a unique opportunity is often rewarded with hard work and loyalty by employees -

“People with sexual offenses, and so many people would disagree with this statement, but I don’t really care, are some of most hardworking, loyal individuals I’ve ever worked with because as much as I’ve said earlier on that people are grateful, they are even more grateful. Because their life was over, done, finished” – Stakeholder 5

The WISE surveyed in this study also have opportunities for these permanent employees to progress within their organisation, for instance into mentoring or supervising roles. Stakeholders explained that having a core set of permanent employees who had significant knowledge of the business could be very valuable as a mentor for those new employees coming through. Thus, providing a degree of career progression for those who would likely otherwise have been entirely excluded from the labour market.

2.4. In summary

The findings in this project clearly demonstrate the valuable role of WISE in assisting criminalised individuals to both obtain and - crucially - sustain employment. Unlike mainstream employers, WISE can create a safe, flexible and supportive working environment that can accommodate for those with complex needs, as well as help address them. Furthermore, WISE can act as a vital ‘stepping stone’ towards gaining mainstream employment by providing criminalised individuals with training, employability support, practical work experience and connections with future employers, which avoids

'setting them up to fail'. Moreover, for those for whom mainstream employment might not be an appealing or realistic goal, WISE can act as an alternative end-employer.

3. The value of WISE in promoting desistance

The findings in this study demonstrated that WISE could aid desistance from crime in three key ways: firstly, in assisting participants to develop more stability in their lives to support a move away from crime, secondly, in providing an opportunity through legitimate employment to build a law-abiding identity and thirdly, in promoting mutual support amongst employees to help each other in their journey towards desistance. Each of these areas will now be explored in turn.

3.1. Providing a stable foundation for change

3.1.1. Financial stability

The WISE surveyed in this research all provide the living wage for their employees. While surviving, and particularly supporting families and partners on this wage, could still be tough, having a regular legal income, which for some had been a rare occurrence prior to engagement with WISE, was described by service users as reducing their risk of offending for economic gain, or simply to 'make ends meet'. In addition, WISE can provide support to help their employees become more financially stable. Initially, this can involve making sure they have a bank account set up in their name for wages to be paid into (reducing risks of exploitation), and reducing some of the financial barriers to engaging with employment, such as by helping with transport costs, food or childcare vouchers –

“obviously I explained to her I’d just got out of jail, I’m in a hostel, and I was like I’ve got no money. She was like don’t worry about it, we’ll get someone to come and pick you up, we’ll give you some money to last you throughout the week and stuff like that, and I was like, oh, right, you sure? Never experienced that before in my life and I was shocked” – WISE employee

11

This is particularly important to prevent employees returning to illegal forms of work -

“the debt company took half my wages out so I was skint... normally I would been right fucking hell I need to go rob something, just naturally in my head, but because I knew that there was support, I got support from here and I got a food bank voucher and stuff” – WISE employee 14

WISE can also work with employees to maintain longer-term financial stability, providing advice on how to budget and manage their finances better. Where necessary, they can put employees in contact with welfare, benefits and debt advisors. Again, this reduces the risk of employees returning to crime for economic gain.

3.1.2. Stable housing

Housing support is also something that is offered by the WISE in this study. A number of service users reported being homeless at the point of being employed by WISE and were living in homeless

accommodation. Some of those who had stable housing, described living in poor conditions with damp, mould, vermin and inadequate heating. WISE will work with the necessary agencies to ensure that their employees have access to secure, more adequate housing -

“I’ve always fought passionately for them to get rehoused and then when they are rehoused, or in a house, to get them all the stuff that they need” – stakeholder 2

“They helped me get a property, I’ve just got me own flat, where I’ve been homeless for over three years... I’ve got me own property now, I’m not staying in homeless accommodation... they gave me a £250 voucher so I went and got a fridge/freezer” – WISE employee 8

Having stable accommodation reduced the risks of reoffending for participants. In particular, homelessness was associated with drug misuse for some participants, which in turn had led to engagement in criminal activities. However, participants wished to make clear that it was the homelessness that had triggered the drug addiction and not the other way around –

“They become homeless not because they are taking drugs, they become homeless because they’ve got nowhere to go, they got no friends or family, and then they take drugs because they are homeless, and then they can’t get off it, they turn to drugs because they are on the streets, just to sleep at night, they are cold so they turn to the bottle, and they turn to the drugs” – WISE employee 10

These findings support the ‘housing first’ strategy; by providing homeless individuals with access to permanent housing as a starting point, this provides a more secure base upon which to tackle non-housing related issues, such as engagement in criminality, and substance addictions (Wilson and Loft, 2021).

3.1.3. Routine, purpose and structure through employment

In addition to access to a regular legitimate income and permanent housing, having employment can also help to stabilise the lives of WISE service users and aid their desistance. Laub and Sampson (2003: 135) state that attention should be paid to the role that life-course events such as gaining employment ‘play in restructuring routine activities’. Many participants discussed the benefits of having purposeful activities to fill their day, and particularly how this had altered their routine activities to make offending less feasible and/or appealing -

“You’re busy all day, and when you get home you want to just sit down and have something to eat, so no-one’s going to get up to anything” – WISE employee 5

“When you have that structure in life you don’t really want to go down any wrong path, I think that’s what people look for, if you don’t have that you don’t care you just do whatever” -

(former) WISE employee 16

“At nighttime, I don’t want to do that stuff. I want to wind down then and chill out... Once I’ve finished work and I’ve come home... the last thing on my mind is going to be wanting to go and do something or look for some sort of motive or anything like that” – WISE employee 14

The impact of having employment, routine and purpose for individual self-worth and mental wellbeing was also extensively reported and connected to desistance -

“If your offending behaviour is related to mental health and addiction, and you’ve got structure and routine in your life, and you’re feeling good about yourself, and your endorphins are up and everything is positive, it stands to reason that you’re not going to offend... If you give somebody a purpose and they’ve got self-worth” – Stakeholder 5

“I just think employment is key. If you can employ somebody and give them a purpose for getting up every morning, coming into work, grafting, getting a wage at the end of the week, or the month or whatever, it gives them self-esteem” – Stakeholder 2

“I was in the house for a couple of months and my mental health just started to be affected so I think getting out of the house and getting into a routine. I think it’s all about having structure and place in your life and getting up in the morning, doing something, going home, having food” – WISE employee 1

“Work’s probably the only thing, and my children and that, kept me alive through my mental health in the last two years” – WISE employee 6

“It’s with the mental health as well, if you sit at home all day, you’re just going to be thinking about stupid stuff all day, aren’t you... you need to get out, have a laugh, talk to people” – WISE employee 11

“I just wanted work. I was sat watching fucking Jeremy Kyle and Loose Women and my head it almost imploded. I was going back into that circle of doing stupid things, being out, getting drunk” – WISE employee 7

“Not being in your mind all day, isn’t it. It’s constantly having stuff to do... You’ve got other things to think about rather than just being sat in your house. It takes your mind off stuff when you’re busy, doesn’t it?” – WISE employee 13

Having purpose, routine and keeping busy during the day also had an impact on participants' relationships with others. Employees reported that the work routine had stopped them from associating with others who were also not working during the day and potentially involved in crime. Furthermore, as employee's lives had become more stable and less chaotic, so too had their relationships with those closest to them. Stakeholders explained that for some who had issues with alcohol misuse, working at WISE had prevented them from drinking alcohol at home during the day, potentially reducing conflicts and acts of violence in their homes, which necessarily improved family life. WISE would also help employees to repair their relationships. Through the mentoring and support provided by management staff, WISE employees were encouraged and given advice on how to rebuild relationships with, for example, children, partners, family members and friends outside of work that had been damaged by their offending and past behaviours. Building supportive social networks can be crucial to maintain desistance, as has been found in numerous studies (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Godfrey, Cox and Farrall, 2007; Weaver and McNeill, 2015).

3.1.4. Stabilising mental health

Consequently, keeping busy, having structure and purpose through working clearly boosts WISE employees' mental wellbeing, particularly if they have previously been unemployed and unoccupied for a considerable period. However, WISE stakeholders reported that many employees had experiences of deep-seated trauma, which the structures of employment alone could not address. Indeed, WISE reported that often once employees' basic needs were met and they were in a more stable and comfortable position than previously, mental health crises could come to the fore –

“This often happens once the foundation starts to stabilise. Once they have the wages, housing, sorted, that's when the psychological stuff starts to come forward... once they relax the mental health crisis can come forward... we see this almost every time” – Stakeholder 8

One WISE, recognising the severity and prevalence of mental health issues among WISE employees, secured funding for in-house counsellors, to allow employees to access weekly therapeutic support. The benefits of this for employees was widely reported, indeed many described struggling to access mental health support on the NHS, or previously being scared to talk to a counsellor and not being motivated to engage. Having these sessions as part of their working day, and crucially from an organisation they could trust, appeared to lead to much higher levels of engagement, as various employees described -

“I’m a private person, would never talk about anything. But I started realising that my brain isn’t as powerful as I thought it was and certain things in my life... my mental health went through the roof... But I’m on the mend. I’m on the straight and narrow.” – WISE employee 6

“I tried to kill myself... but I never saw anyone from mental health until I started here ... I kept phoning [the doctor] to say something was wrong, me head wasn’t right, and no one was bothered” – WISE employee 5

“They [counsellors] make you look at it in a different way. You look at things in a different perspective... you talk about in your past and you’ll be like, it’s me doing this. Well, it’s not really. It’s this that’s affected that.” – WISE employee 13

Although not all WISE could provide this level of specialist mental health support for their employees, supportive, caring relationships with management staff at WISE could be very powerful too -

“She’s absolutely amazing. She’s helped me a lot since I’ve been here... All my mental health and all that kind of stuff probably wouldn’t be out in the open the way it is without her egging me on to speak. And somehow she managed to, I did end up breaking down and speaking about what is going through my head and why am I thinking this... If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t have opened up. I’m not an easy person to crack to be fair” – WISE employee 6

“I’ve been in some bad places... they’ve helped me a lot, they’ve changed my life, you can just go and see her whenever and you can just walk in the office and she’s always there for yeh” – WISE employee 5

“I think it was just the one-to-one sessions with [WISE manager] and the support I was getting at the time, she made me feel appreciated, and telling me that I can do what I wish to do and achieve my goals, its pretty nice to hear, especially when everyone else is telling you that you can’t, but you just need to hear that one person say you can do this” – (former) WISE employee 16

All WISE employees in this study were male, and many prior to their employment with WISE had embraced hyper-masculine values, such as “toughness”, “strength” and “machismo”, ideals which had dominated many of their social contexts, from their time spent in prison to living on the most socio-economically deprived estates (Ellis, 2016). They described initially finding it very difficult to disclose and discuss their mental health and past experiences, however the cultures observed within FreshStart Ventures and Rebound Careers were to actively challenge those stereotypes and create a safe place for discussions around mental health and wellbeing –

“And a lot of places especially with males and that, it’s major stigma about it but I’ve been balling in here before, heads gone and then a 10 minute blow out” – WISE employee 7

“At my old work I was a bit embarrassed, I did speak to me boss but I was a bit embarrassed speaking to other people there, cos I felt a bit soft like...but here I’ve got other people in the same boat as me and we talk to each other as well, everyone’s got problems here, you can speak to anyone about anything, and that gave me more confidence, there’s no shame in talking, men need to speak out” – WISE employee 10

“When I’ve grown up, with me Dad, you don’t talk about anything, if anyone asks if you’re ok, you say yeh, but now you can say no I’m not” – WISE employee 5

“Years and years ago, I’d never think I’d be having this sort of conversation with people. It’s like when I had my counselling and I finished it, I went downstairs and there was loads of lads also stuck downstairs in the office and then the boss has come out to me and he’s like, ‘How was it?’ and I was like, ‘No, it’s good, man, it’s helped me out’. I said, ‘Don’t get me wrong, I was up there crying’, and now I don’t care if there’s other people around, if I’ve got to cry, I’ve got to cry. I’ll cry in front of everyone if I’ve got to cry” – WISE employee 11

The value of improved mental health for successful desistance has been widely reported (see for example Link, Ward and Stansfield, 2019). Addressing challenges with mental health can help criminalised populations to improve relationships, reduce substance misuse and increase chances of engaging in positive activities, all of which are crucial for desistance. Indeed, in this study, for those who had suffered from mental health issues and the stigmatising and marginalising effects of a criminal conviction, the support from WISE had given employees the confidence to try other things, such as hobbies and leisure activities again. This also diverted them away from criminal activities and associates –

“I’ve gained more confidence in myself, and from doing things again, mental health’s improved knowing that I’ve got a supportive team to talk to when I come to work... I’ve just changed, I go back to the gym more now, I do boxing... it’s got me more active being at work, and more active outside of work” – WISE employee 10

“Even in sort of general life, that’s getting better. Because there was a point, I couldn’t even walk down any street, any, go in any shop without being absolutely scared of doing anything... But now it’s becoming better... now I’m like going out again more like I used to go out. Not

with the same group of friends. I've made new friends. It's a big change. Huge change to my life" – WISE employee 1

3.2. A hook for a new 'self'

Crucially therefore, the findings in the previous section demonstrate how employment at WISE and the holistic support provided by these organisations, helps to stabilise the lives of their employees. With greater financial and housing security, a meaningful purpose during the day, and a significant increase in emotional support, WISE helps to create a stable foundation upon which employees can begin to construct a pathway away from crime. The findings that will be presented in this section build upon this, and demonstrate how WISE can not only prevent reoffending, but also assist employees to develop a pro-social or non-offending identity, which can support longer-term change.

3.2.1. A chance for those open to change

Interestingly, many WISE employees described in interviews having made a decision to change their criminal behaviours prior to engaging with WISE. As has been found in research elsewhere (Michalsen, 2019, Oswald, 2020) a number of participants described imprisonment – or one particular spell of imprisonment for those who had been incarcerated multiple times – being the turning point where they had decided to change their lives, and move away from offending in particular. Many described the 'time to think' in prison, a moment of calm away from the chaos outside to reflect on the paths their lives had taken, and what they wanted to change.

"Through my last jail sentence, like I said, I had a straight two whole years to think about my life, do you know what I mean, so I got out and I just thought, there's no point just doing this all the time, literally you need to grow up at some point in your life and take control of your own self" – WISE employee 11

"Getting a jail sentence was the best thing that ever happened... It gave me also a chance to reflect on how shite my life was" – WISE employee 4

"When I went to prison, I couldn't drink, there was minimal access to drugs and things like that... I had a lot of time to think and recap everything... promised myself to live differently when I got out. I was going to behave, the total opposite to how I used to behave, every aspect; in a relationship aspect, with my kids, decision making, things like that" – WISE employee 6

"It was that last time in prison, I'd just had enough, I wanted a life because I didn't have a life" – WISE employee 8

“I decided that in prison. I told my probation officer, ‘I’m not coming back in. When I get out I’ll get job, get a house’” – WISE employee 12

While many participants might have made the decision to change prior to their involvement with WISE, the opportunities provided by WISE were essential to enable this change to take place. A number of participants, despite describing an earlier decision to stop offending, when asked what they might be doing now if they hadn’t been employed by WISE, predicted that they would likely be more seriously involved in offending and potentially serving a lengthy prison sentence –

“Literally, I probably would have been doing a long time in jail or dead, because I was like doing my time in and out of jail, there was times where I’d get myself involved with gangs” –
WISE employee 10

“That’s what it is, a chance, that’s what they’d done, these have done for me, they give me a chance and I took it with both hands and I’m still there eleven years later, do you know what I mean, which is really good, man” – WISE employee 11

WISE can provide, for those who are motivated, a ‘hook for change’. Stakeholders explained that for WISE to help desistance, employees did not necessarily need to be motivated for an entire change in their way of life, but “the motivation to want to do something different has to be there” – stakeholder 8. Those who had been pressured to attend by agencies referring into the WISE were far less likely to engage and the opportunities offered by WISE were less impactful –

“You can tell they’re just here because the work witch has told them that they need to come and then they register and then they’re off. They don’t come back again” – stakeholder 3.

WISE employees reiterated these comments –

“Here you get that chance... it’s your choice whether or not you mess that chance up for yourself” – WISE employee 13

Desistance theorists confirm that the individual needs to be ‘open to change’, before any potential opportunity or ‘hook’ such as employment can influence desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002). Both FreshStart Ventures and Rebound Careers seek to determine whether this initial motivation is present for their service users by having a short unpaid initial phase of work, alongside mentoring support, which allows them to assess the individual’s willingness to work and commitment to a law-abiding lifestyle. After which point, if suitable for the organisation they will be given a temporary employment contract, which could eventually be made permanent.

3.2.2. How WISE shapes employees' identities

In addition to being open to change, scholars have identified that desistance requires criminalised individuals to shift from a deviant to a “pro-social” identity. Identity can be understood as the reflexive questioning of the self – it involves the actor consciously reflecting upon the answer to the question ‘who am I?’ (Mead, 1934; Heshmat, 2014). Identity also crucially involves a self-story – one that we tell ourselves and others about who we are – but one that is fluid and fragile, that adapts to incorporate the events of the external world, and therefore is distinct from personality traits, which are generally viewed as relatively stable over time (Caspi, 2000; McCrae et al., 2000). A ‘pro-social’ identity therefore involves a self-story based upon obeying society’s rules and conforming to socially accepted behaviours. This can aid desistance as ‘identity’ generally provides a direction for and will be consistent with our actions, and consequently developing a more law-abiding self-view helps direct the individual towards non-offending behaviours (Maruna, 2001; Copp et al., 2019).

The findings in this study demonstrate that WISE can help participants develop a more pro-social identity. Through working at WISE, employees perceive that others view them differently, which necessarily impacts upon their own self-view, what Maruna et al. (2004) describe as the ‘looking glass’ self-concept. In interviews, WISE employees described friends and family viewing them more positively since they had been engaged in legitimate employment, as well as the general public they encountered when they were working. Many participants took pride in their ‘employed’ status and the improved social standing that accompanied this; as Owens (2009) asserts, employment forms part of the criteria for ‘respectability’ in society –

“Other people look at you different as well, I think. Before I got the job, people used to, I could tell they were talking about me, you know when I were walking past – ‘there goes that little shit round my area’... You see when you get a job and people see you’re working every day, that your work uniform every day, they think, yeah, look at him, he’s changed and he’s changing. I kind of notice that people who used to walk past and they used to put their head down... but now I walk past them now, now they’re like you alright, how you doing, you okay?”

– WISE employee 11

“We used to ask them, so when you got on the bus to come here, how did you feel?... You have a high-vis jacket on, and a pair of work boots, and you’ve got your lunch in a bag beside you, how are you going to feel, but also how are other people going to view you. They are going to view you as somebody who’s going out to work, who is contributing to society. It’s changing how they see themselves as well” – Stakeholder 5

“Even the lads come up to me and they were like, do you know what, you’ve done so good with your life... they say to me I wish we had the willpower like you’ve got to change... and my missus, in all, she always says it as well, she always says I’m proud of you how much you’ve changed” – WISE employee 11

Work tasks at both FreshStart Ventures and Rebound Careers can involve clearing and cleaning properties for homeless and other vulnerable people. Understanding the beneficiaries of their work tasks gives them more meaning for WISE employees, in particular as several have experienced homelessness themselves. Some have received positive feedback from clients and employers, and doing this work which helps others has an impact on how they see themselves -

“I’ve had stuff put on emails, put on about me... they come out, they’re very professional, the working standards are through the roof and very impressed with the work they’ve done... it’s brilliant. It is. It makes you feel good in yourself when people speak to you with the respect.

Yeah, it was good. Instead of looking down on you” – WISE employee 15

“I get on with people, when I’m out I get on with the tenants... I have a laugh with them and they always talk to me and there’s a bit of a bond there, I enjoy putting a smile on their faces as well, I enjoy doing good work and the thanks I get” – WISE employee 10

The safe spaces created at FreshStart Ventures and Rebound Careers, where employees can be open about, and receive support with, their struggles with mental health and other related issues, also have an impact upon their identities. Understanding their own mental health, addictions and criminal behaviours better and the factors that had influenced these throughout their lives, had led some participants to reevaluate themselves and their past behaviours, as one employee described – “you’re not a bad person, you’ve done a bad thing, you’re not a bad person” – WISE employee 1. Employees had more empathy for themselves and their past mistakes, and admitting their weaknesses to counsellors and WISE staff also created more empathy for the issues of others. A more caring attitude towards themselves and others was promoted which could form the basis for a more pro-social identity. Prior to engagement with WISE, many of the spaces in which they occupied (such as police cells, prisons, pubs, football matches and the estates in which they lived) were characterised by pressures to be tough, antipathetic and feared by others. Pro-criminal identities could be built upon spending time in these places and embracing these values. However, the culture created at WISE and

the nature of the work undertaken often requires the opposite of these values, supporting the development of a more pro-social identity.

3.2.3. Indicators of identity change amongst employees

There were a number of indicators in the interview narratives of WISE employees that they had begun to form a more prosocial identity and self-story. Presser and Sandburg (2015) describe the importance of symbolic boundary drawing in narratives as a method for the storyteller to present a positive self-image. In several of the participants' narratives, they distinguished between the types of crime they had previously committed and more serious 'real' criminals. Often – though only in WISE who did not employ these individuals – this involved drawing moral boundaries with those who had sexual convictions -

“Fair enough crime is crime and crime is bad but like... lets say on drugs... you're not forcing someone to buy it off you... Same with say like an armed robber will got in a shop and rob money, no one will get hurt but yet you'll get a paedophile who will touch a kid or manipulate them and get three years... That kind of shit is a no go in my mind” – WISE employee 6

Other signs of an emerging pro-social identity in the narratives of WISE employees involved how they described past offending. Scholars explain that how we unify and describe the disparate events that have occurred in our pasts informs our current sense of self (Maruna, 2001; Dingfelder, 2011; Stevens, 2012). Some participants utilised 'techniques of neutralisation' to describe past crimes, which according to Harris (2011:2) can be used in order to distance themselves from their former selves and 'to re-create a possible self still worthy to be redeemed in the future'. Indeed, several participants minimised the seriousness of past crimes, and their responsibility for these, which can be seen not just in *what* was described in their narratives, but also *how* they described these offences -

“Been done for a bit of domestic with my first partner, that was a bit mixed up that, we were having a little fight, not a *fight* but an argument and I ended up pushing her face and she fell over and banged her head and her mate rang the police and I got arrested” – WISE employee

10

“It's just daft stuff really. It's just assault and criminal damage and I was doing a lot of drinking and stuff at one point” – WISE employee 13

“My crimes weren't major crimes. The worst one was the drugs. I just used to nick motorbikes and cars and driving offences, just a lot of them. That was it, that was my, like 90s growing up.

Unbelievable amount of bikes and cars” – WISE employee 15

“No matter who you are, you break the law every day. You sitting in the traffic lights and you get your phone out, you’re breaking the law... so everybody’s guilty of everything” – WISE employee 5

Also clear in participants’ narratives and self-stories was their desire to give back to others in some way. This particularly appeared to centre around using their experiences of crime and the criminal justice system to advise and warn others following similar routes, especially younger generations. Maruna (2001) found that such ‘generative’ concerns are a key part of the desistance process, particularly for older individuals. The concept of ‘generativity’ was first introduced by Erikson (1968) and has been defined as ‘the ability to transcend the immediate self-related interests of the person in favour of a view of generations to come’ (Monte, 1995: 291). Utilising past mistakes for a positive use now can be used to make these previous criminal behaviours more congruent with their emerging pro-social identity, and forms a more coherent self-story -

“I’ve been at the lowest of the low since I was 14. If I can get through it anyone can. But we’re all human at the end of the day, we’re going to make mistakes but it’s how you sort them mistakes out. I’d love to come and tell my story at schools... I’ll help anybody if they deserve it” – WISE employee 4

“I can give a lot of advice out to younger people who are heading down the same road and all that... There’s so much shit I’d love to advise younger people not to do growing up” – WISE employee 6

“Young people need to get out of gangs early and not follow the bad crowd. They are throwing their lives away. They might be wanting the best clothes, or be swayed by things like music, friends etc. but they should block these out and focus on the right things” – (former) WISE employee 9

Many WISE employees, reflecting on their lives in interviews, felt strongly that more needed to be done by government and schools to support young people, as this was where many of their problems had started -

“Invest, people in at schools, show them the right way of doing things... They need good role models in schools. A lot of these kids as well are coming from one parent homes sometimes because of what’s gone on with the two parents, the mum’s fucking on drugs or the dad’s not there or this and that. But invest in young people because they are the future of the country” – WISE employee 7

Some participants communicated strong regrets that they had not engaged more with schooling as this might have led to a better pathway in life. Again, many expressed wishing they could pass this message on to younger generations -

“I reckon if I would have stayed and done my schoolwork and got an education, I wouldn’t have ever gone down that road [crime/prison]. That’s what I think to be honest. If I could change back time, I’d go back to school” – WISE employee 15

“Best thing to do now to any of the kids is just to stop. Stop now while you’ve got a chance, get yourself a good job, go the right way now before it’s too late because... Fucking hell, if I could go back to school... start life again, I would. I literally would” – WISE employee 16

Some WISE employees were actively passing on these messages to their children, to avoid them making the same mistakes. It was observed that for several of the participants in this study, their emerging pro-social identity was focused on being a good and reliable father. Again such generative concerns can be seen as a way to redeem those who have committed past wrongs against others and allow for the formation of a coherent pro-social self-story -

“Now I have my flat, they come every other weekend. They stay Friday, Saturday. Never let them down. Never been 10 minutes late. I can always bring them there do you know what I mean. That’s what me makes me do the work, to be fair” – WISE employee 6

“Even if worst did come to worse and I did end up losing my job, I would apply every day, but I would not go back to criminal life, I would never go back to criminal life just because of my kids. I just want my kids to look up to me good, not like, oh, there’s that guy who’s been in and out of jail all his life” – WISE employee 11

“I won’t be going back to prison. And if I do, like I say to (my daughter), ‘I’ll only go back to prison if someone hurts you or someone does something to you’” – WISE employee 12

“I did it for my kids as well, me kids are getting older, I want me kids to have respect for me and say that’s my dad, I don’t want them to walk past like they don’t know me” – WISE employee 16

“I’ve got kids, and if I get arrested, they’re going to think my Dad’s got arrested, and me boy’s 10 and he might think its ok to get arrested” – WISE employee 8

Desistance theorists Massoglia and Uggen (2010) and Walters (2018) emphasise that identity development amongst criminalised individuals may not always entail a shift from a deviant to pro-social identity, but rather to a progression to an increasingly mature self-view, or 'adult' identity. While these scholars were largely focused on explaining youth desistance, these sentiments resonated with some of the findings in this study, where participants' – even those long past their adolescent years – narratives were also focused around their increasing maturity, and crime no longer being appropriate with the stage of life they were at -

“When I started here as a 21-year-old little squat running about screaming and shouting. I’m a 26-year-old man now. I’ve really got my head screwed on my shoulders” – WISE employee 7

“At 30 odd it’s time to grow up. Stop acting like a kid... Yeah. You’ve had so much shit go on and then you get to the point and it’s yes, I can't be bothered with it anymore.” – WISE employee

13

“I’m 40 years old, 41 years old, I can’t keep on and doing criminal things, and it’s just stupidity... I’m going to be an old man with no money, and it’s like what am I going to do and it’s just no point. Like I know I’m going to change, I’m going to get a job and start paying a pension and start just being a better person... I’ve had my fun now, it’s time to settle down, get on with my life” – WISE employee 15

A number of employees reported that since their employment at WISE they 'understand more about life' and despite the benefits of committing crime at the time, now realised they had made poor decisions in their younger years. While many acknowledged that they had made more money through offending than working, and it was considerably less time-consuming, now they recognised that illegal forms of working, such as drug dealing, were not worth the emotional effort and the constant fear they had experienced. All felt strongly now that a law-abiding lifestyle, with engagement in legal work, despite often being more challenging and with less financial rewards, was a far better path in life and had made them and their families much happier. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) describe how desistance and identity change for many involves a realisation on the part of the individual that their criminal offending is more costly than beneficial – there is a 'crystallisation of discontent' with offending. This was apparent in the self-narratives of participants, and many attributed this to their experiences working at WISE. In particular, working legally improved self-esteem and allowed employees to think of themselves more positively, which they had ultimately come to the realisation was more valuable than the financial rewards from crime –

“it’s probably self-worth more than anything else. It’s not the money that goes into the bank account. Because if they really wanted money, they would sell gear” – Stakeholder 5

“When you’re walking round the streets, you’ve always got to look over your shoulder... could be walking down the street one day with my kid and someone want to go up to me and stab me... it’s not worth it at all, it’s not worth it all... you’ve just got to grow up some time in your life and realise what life’s really about” – WISE employee 11

“Like the money is peanuts but it’s an honest living. Something I’ve never had before. I’ve always made my money off, let’s say, I wouldn’t say serious thing, but things that say criminality” – WISE employee 6

“You can make more money but it’s not safe work. Obviously, you can get in a lot of trouble with it. You can go to jail, you can have all the criminals who want your stuff... always worrying about your family, whether somebody’s going to come to your house” – WISE employee 15

“The benefits is staying away from everything – staying away from prison and basically being alive, like having your life... so pulling away from everything and you actually have a lot of self-worth, which is really good” – WISE employee 3

“Listen, all that criminal shit it’s not the life it seems, don’t get me wrong you can make fast money but if you get caught with that money you can’t explain it. You need to spend it quick” – WISE employee 6

3.3. Co-desistance and mutual aid

In addition to the significant levels of support from management staff at WISE, other employees, particularly those who also have similar criminal histories, can also be a source of support and promote desistance at WISE. WISE will organise their employees’ working arrangements so that those who have worked at WISE longer and are further along the desistance process are paired with those more recent to the organisation and who are just beginning to change, so that they can act as a ‘credible’ mentor and positive role model -

“Because our team here have all had their issues, some of them still have issues, they’re really good at dealing with these guys. You know, they show a lot of empathy” – Stakeholder 2

“Those giving them the advice have been through something similar themselves, they’ve hit rock bottom. There is linkage there even if one is a former addict and one a former offender, they are helping each other” – Stakeholder 9

“I’m trying to help because a lot of the guys we’re getting are quite younger, younger than me. They’re quite sort of naïve in a lot of things... We’ve had the guys in who have a whole lot of issues and I feel like I’ve made a difference to their life” – WISE employee 1

“There’s a life that I’ve lived that certain people haven’t ... it’s a certain particular portion of let’s say clientele that I know I could communicate with more than let’s say for example a supervisor where, who’s never been arrested or never been beat up by police or never smoked any weed or do you know what I mean. Whereas I know I could actually, I couldn’t say I could fucking turn someone’s life around, but I could definitely give them an insight of where their life could go if they carry on” – WISE employee 6

“One lad came to work here when he was just 16, he was homeless, I used to make him lunch everyday. When he was working here I was his mentor so basically I was trying to get him off of the drink and him away from the drugs, and get his head sorted out” – WISE employee 2

“It’s a way of moving forward I think if I tell anybody here, never look back at any of, because you can’t change that. That’s happened... don’t be scared to get help. Doctor or anybody. Get help. So, I’ve been trying to help others to learn from how you got through it” – WISE employee 1

Working together with those who have been at WISE for a considerable amount of time can allow new employees to see others like them who have managed to turn their lives around. As Weaver (2013; 2016) explains, if a criminalised individual observes someone else who is similarly situated to them cease offending, a person they can identify with, this can aid in their conceptualisation of a possible changed version of themselves, thus supporting pro-social identity development.

However, the peer mentoring amongst WISE employees does not only benefit the identity development and desistance process of mentees, but also the mentors; a co-desistance effect can be observed. As discussed above, a key stage in the development of a more pro-social identity often involves a desire to help others and ‘make good’ from past mistakes and harms inflicted. Consequently, when WISE employees start to help other employees, and indeed are trusted by the organisation to do so, this helps solidify their self-concept as a changed individual. WISE employees who were carrying out a mentoring role also reported that this made their work more meaningful. Even those who had had a successful career prior to their criminal convictions, reported that this role was ultimately more rewarding and satisfying, despite being less well paid. Again this demonstrates the relevance of generative concerns to the formation of a desistance-supporting identity.

The friendships employees make at WISE can reduce their social isolation, which is also a protective factor for desistance. Many employees reported having lost relationships with friends and family because of their offending behaviours, and others mentioned needing to 'cut out' those who would likely lead them into harmful or criminogenic situations; hence confirming the assertions of others that desistance can be a lonely existence (Nugent, 2015; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Richardson and St.Vil, 2016). Indeed, it is the friendships at WISE, and the support these provide, that often make employees want to stay and work at WISE permanently –

“People want to stay because of the support and the peer group – it’s nice to have that group to help them succeed. It’s very challenging when they go for a job and everyone’s got cars and houses and they’ve been successful with their family life, they’ve not got that and they feel that pressure, and failure” – Stakeholder 7

As indicated in the above quote, the peer support offered at WISE also reduced feelings of stigmatisation amongst employees. Many employees, including those with a sexual conviction, described working at WISE being unique compared to other organisations because it was a safe, non-judgemental space for them. It was one of few places where they could be themselves and felt included and wanted. As outlined in section 1.4 above, the stigmatisation many WISE employees had experienced was considerable and being able to find employment without this fear was very important –

“I feel safe because everybody will know what each other’s done, that’s the way it works. Not because we talk about it just because we know. I’ve nothing to hide, I don’t have to hide anything here” – WISE employee 1

“There’s this quiet understanding that we’re all in the same boat, and we’re not going to ask questions” - Stakeholder 5

“I’ve never felt as included as I do here in my other workplaces, which is obviously really good as well” – WISE employee 13

“Half the people here have got criminal records and everyone’s just in the same boat as me, you just want to get on with work and not think about the criminal world, so we’re all on the same wavelength so we can all talk about our things that we want to talk about, and we all know just by talking what it’s like. We can chat about anything and that’s what gets us through the days, I think” – WISE employee 15

Consequently, while it might be assumed that bringing those with a criminal history together would encourage further criminality, this was not the case at the WISE included in this study. By offering

opportunities only to those open to changing their behaviours, and through carefully selecting working groups so that those who are further along the desistance process are working alongside and mentoring those who are at outset of this journey, WISE create an environment that encourages co-desistance, mutual support and a safe place for those who may otherwise be isolated from and ostracised by outside society.

3.4. In summary

Overall, therefore, the findings in this section demonstrate that WISE can help participants develop the financial, physical, emotional and relational stability required in their lives to begin to support a move away from crime. Furthermore, employment at WISE can offer a ‘hook for change’ for those who have begun to feel disillusioned with engagement in crime and the criminal justice system, and are motivated to try something different in their lives. For those who have a criminal background, the opportunity to work legitimately at WISE changes the way in which others see them, which also has considerable impact on their own self-view. The narratives of participants indicate that many WISE employees are seeking to develop a more coherent pro-social identity, by using their past mistakes and experiences of crime to guide others. Working at WISE also appears to have solidified their views of the ultimate futility of engagement in crime and the merits of a law-abiding lifestyle. Because of their commitment to this new perspective and non-offending self-view, most participants assessed their risk of reoffending as low -

“When I leave here it’s not going to be, I’m not going to go back down to what I was doing before because mentally I’m in such a different place now. But since being here it has helped me a lot just become a different person and you know even think about things differently” -

WISE employee 14

4. Challenges faced by WISE

The findings presented from interviews with stakeholders and WISE employees undoubtedly signify the value these organisations bring to criminalised individuals, their families and communities. The goal of WISE is clear - to assist those who might otherwise be excluded from labour markets into sustainable employment, and for those with a criminal history, this necessarily also involves a move away from crime. While the WISE observed in this study are dedicated to this social mission, the challenges they face in doing so are considerable, and will be outlined in greater detail in this section.

4.1. Financial resilience

Social enterprises to survive must be profitable. This necessarily creates a difficult balancing act between maintaining a viable business and pursuing the organisation's social mission. In the case of the WISE in this study; there could be a conflict between devoting time, energy and resources into nurturing and removing barriers to employment for participants, and the commercial needs of the business. WISE reported instances where times had been tough economically and they had had to ask employees (for some of whom - as described above - engagement in work could be a challenge) to work longer hours for less pay. They also detailed sometimes having to choose to employ those with less complex needs, who would not require as great an investment in additional support services, and whose productivity would be greater, to ensure contracts could be maintained with their clients. As a further example of these conflicts in values and the difficult decisions WISE have to make, one WISE described having previously being offered a lucrative contract in which the commissioning organisation specified that they would only permit WISE employees without a criminal background to do this work. While this contract could have provided significant financial benefits to the social enterprise, it was ultimately decided that to accept this would go against their fundamental values.

With a significant portion of their workers having additional support needs, which require resources to accommodate and address, this can result in a more expensive and less productive workforce. Consequently, the WISE in this study can find it extremely difficult to compete with other organisations to obtain contracts for their services, in areas such as cleaning, grounds maintenance, house clearances and gardening. Furthermore, to maintain contracts, customer satisfaction needs to be high, which can also prove difficult when a number of employees are facing many additional challenges that can impact upon the quality of their work.

Therefore, helping to ensure their business could continue trading even during tougher times, as well as support those who have significant barriers to employment, all the WISE examined in this research project also received financial support from a larger organisation – for instance a charity to support those with criminal convictions, and a housing association. WISE were also subsidised by funding from

other external sources, in some instances governmental support, for which they had to prove they were producing successful outcomes, such as reducing reoffending, moving employees into work, reducing substance misuse and achieving attendance at counselling sessions. Yet, some stakeholders discussed that accessing this funding – essential to subsidise the income made from trading – appeared to be getting more difficult. Indeed, this is supported by the findings of Social Enterprise UK that almost half of social enterprises are describing an insufficient amount of suitable finance and grant funding available for their business, which is diminishing their scope to adapt and expand -

“the growth of new social enterprises has slowed, and many fail to generate the profits necessary for achieving their core missions” (Hochlaf, Gregory and Darko, 2023: 7)

If this increasingly competitive funding landscape for social enterprises continues, and there is greater pressure on WISE to become self-sufficient, this will necessarily impact on the level of support they can provide employees with a criminal history and the types of individuals they can employ – those who need these opportunities the most may not be sufficiently productive workers to ensure the WISE remains viable, thus negatively impacting upon WISE’s ability to achieve their social mission.

While, as noted above, WISE provided significant support to their service users to help those facing financial difficulties, because of the funding challenges WISE face, they could usually only offer minimum, or at best, the living wage to employees. Crime was likely therefore to continue to be a more lucrative and tempting option for employees –

“What I make in a month here, they make three days on the streets. Because literally that’s all it takes is a few days on the streets and there’s fifteen hundred, two grand in your pocket” –

WISE employee 6

As detailed above, many WISE employees found meaning and value in their work at WISE beyond its remuneration, in particular in the positive impact engaging in legal work had upon their feelings of safety, their social standing and self-worth, and their relationships with those closest to them. However, it was noted by some stakeholders that this discrepancy between what service users could earn legally at WISE and the illegal opportunities available to them could be an issue, particularly for younger participants. These individuals had potentially not developed the ‘crystallisation of discontent’ with offending discussed in section 3.2.3 above, as older participants had, and consequently, Becker’s (1968) economic choice theory may have greater relevance here. If young people weigh up the non-criminal and criminal opportunities available to them to make money, it is likely that the latter will consistently render the greatest net benefit.

4.2. Avoiding dependence

WISE reported that by offering intensive support for employees during their employment, they were seeking to build individuals' resilience (be that through a stronger family network, having their own property or managing their finances better) so that when they felt ready, they could be empowered to manage on their own without the support of WISE and maintain mainstream employment. Even with employees on a permanent contract, the WISE in this study encouraged them to continue to build their skills and consider future goals and pathways -

"I'm just waiting for my provisional to come in. It's not something I've ever really been interested in but [WISE] try and push you ... they goes – 'you're holding yourself back. Just try it. if you don't like it, you don't like it but give it a go. See where it goes'" – WISE employee 13

However, because of the safe space and supportive culture created at WISE, where conditions of employment could be more lenient to accommodate for the needs of employees, and employees could access additional support from mentors and WISE management staff, some service users struggled to adapt to the transition into mainstream employment -

"Some of the people that have left [WISE] and gone on to other jobs, it hasn't worked out for them... it's hard for them if, to go out into the real world, and see how a real business works and keep that discipline" – Stakeholder 2

"It's probably a bit of a fake environment at first, because we do wrap all this care around people, it's not the real world because you wouldn't get that with a normal employer. A few have left then asked to come back because of that" – Stakeholder 7

"It would be very hard and I think if I ever lost my job here, I don't think I'd be bothered trying to get full-time employment or I'm not being funny or being rude, I could go on the sick no problem" – WISE employee 6

Where possible, the WISE surveyed in this study would offer opportunities for employees to try out different roles within the organisation, or to progress to positions with greater responsibility, for example in becoming a mentor or supervisor. However, some stakeholders expressed concerns that while for a criminalised individual, employment at the WISE could initially raise their self-esteem hugely, if they became too settled working at the WISE, this could ultimately negatively influence their self-perception and feelings of self-efficacy. Working for an extended period in a non-mainstream organisation, known for providing employment for those with barriers to labour market participation, could limit the development of a pro-social identity as a valued member of conventional society.

Stakeholders described concerns about some individuals' stagnating, retaining the label of 'ex-offender' or 'ex-drug addict' and not believing they were good enough to work elsewhere -

"It's a dead fine balance, because you don't want to become co-dependent, you don't want to become so reliant that you start deskilling folk, endings can be quite difficult" – Stakeholder 6

"It almost becomes a little bit like prison itself... they don't want to leave" – Stakeholder 5

"We don't want to create our own ghetto... and people feel that they can't operate outside of that" – Stakeholder 9

"I'd like to see them move on because I know they're capable of so much more. Whether it's college or, but they're just, how do I push them? I don't want to push them out, I don't want to say 'look, you're wasted here.' But I think they just get into a comfort zone, you know... I think it's holding them back, but they don't, a lot of them just don't have any self-belief. They think that all they're good for is working in a social enterprise... cleaning dirty toilets" –

Stakeholder 2

Some service users also had considerable fear of moving on to mainstream employment which was holding them back –

"I could see why they stay. It's safe, they know they're no going to be judged and they're not having to explain themselves to... If they go into a new job and people say, did you know he used to go in prison? Where do I know your name from?... but personally I don't think it's a good thing for them. I would like them to move onto something bigger and better" –

Stakeholder 1

"Something might come up that might be more money, but will they have the support teams? Are they going to be as flexible? It might be £5 more per hour even, but what if you're going to be out of that job in 2 months?" – WISE employee 10

"In my head I can't see myself working anywhere else because it's all to do with that safety net and that comfort. Even though [WISE] used to always tell us, it's a stepping stone. It's to get you back into employment and then move onto better things. Whereas I don't see anything beyond this at the moment. I can't see anything beyond this... I still feel in that bubble absolutely safe bubble, it's almost like a protection being here" – WISE employee 1

"Happy where I am. I'm used to my job. Confident with everyone here now. Worse thing I could think of is starting a new job not knowing anyone and all that. Horrible" – WISE

employee 6

As outlined above, there undoubtedly exists considerable stigma around employing those with convictions, and moving on from WISE to further employment can be a challenge. Nevertheless, stakeholders explained that some WISE employees had labelled themselves as 'unemployable' when this might not be the case, and this was tied to their fear of stigma, discrimination and being unable to cope with the demands of mainstream employment –

“there’s definitely myths and misconceptions about employer attitudes particularly from ex-offenders themselves... the reality is there’s a lot of employers out there, particularly now, who will take on ex-offenders. Of course, they want to know what they’ve done and what they’ve changed, what’s changed in their life, that kind of thing, but it’s getting better” – Stakeholder 1

While, as described above, there are many benefits of WISE offering permanent employment opportunities to those with convictions, particularly for those who might struggle to gain and maintain employment elsewhere, this can present an issue if it results in limiting the potential of employees, who might by moving on to mainstream employment gain better pay and broaden their horizons through exposure to new skills and colleagues. It can also limit the number of places available for other criminalised individuals to benefit from a period spent working for WISE. Furthermore, with most of the WISE in this study being reliant on external sources of funding that were never guaranteed renewal, the uncertain future of these organisations presented an additional concern for criminalised individuals who had become too dependent upon them.

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of WISE continually making their employees aware of their need to transition to mainstream employment –

“but you provide that assistance in a very holistic/practical way. This has been long-established and could be considered to be best practice” – Stakeholder 10

Some WISE recognised that there was more they could potentially be doing here but were limited by stretched staff time and resources –

“I think personally that they should have more mentoring, and ‘you are capable of doing this, what do you actually want to do’. I’ve not got time to sit down and speak to them about that and I wish I did” – Stakeholder 2

“Once they start getting confidence and seeing this is a good thing for them, that might help. But we’re not quite there yet. I think that’s definitely a priority for us. Because that was never the intention that they would stay with us. I think there’s a confidence building job needing to be done with these guys that they’re good enough and they’re needed by bigger employers” –

Stakeholder 1

“We need to challenge services to be better, staff should be making themselves redundant because they have empowered people to the point where they don’t need them anymore” –

Stakeholder 10

Some WISE employees described choosing to stay with the WISE because of their loyalty to the organisation that had given them a chance. Sometimes WISE also faced a difficult conflict here – between keeping on those who are loyal, hard workers, who have knowledge of the business and can be crucial mentors for other staff coming in, all of which is very valuable from an organisational standpoint, and helps ensure that the business keeps going (see the challenge of financial resilience above), but also pushing them to move on as this might be what is in their best interest - and ultimately aligns with the social mission of the enterprise.

4.3. Contemporary employment markets

Another factor that could deter WISE employees from transitioning into mainstream employment was the conditions of employment available to them in contemporary labour markets. Due to processes of globalisation, deindustrialisation and neoliberalism, an increasingly significant portion of employment is now ‘precariat work’ (Standing, 2011). Such occupations are typically insecure, low-skilled, mundane, repetitive, socially isolating and prevent the formation of an occupational identity, conditions which can undermine self-worth (Currie, 2016). Examples include casual construction, factory, retail, food delivery and call centre workers. Precarious work has been associated with greater loneliness and the erosion of social networks, as well as poorer mental health, emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction (Patulny et al., 2020). Standing (2011) explains that those that have been criminalised often are limited to precariat work options because of the barriers their criminal record presents to normal participation in society. By contrast, the WISE surveyed in this study strove to provide quality, meaningful employment opportunities for service users with decent working conditions, workplace camaraderie and a diversity of work tasks. For instance, WISE refused to employ workers on zero-hour contracts. Due to these working conditions, some WISE employees - despite being aware that they could possibly receive higher remuneration in mainstream employment – did not wish to leave WISE. One employee compared working at WISE with his previous employment –

“So it was like working on your own and you were just stocking up stuff so you weren’t really talking to people, and actually having physical contact with customers and stuff like that, so you were quite hidden away. When you’re here, you’re speaking to everyone, you’re out in public, you’re speaking to clients” – WISE employee 13

Similarly, as another employee described, a benefit of WISE was -

‘Not being a number, just being treated as you are... we’re not disposable assets...’ – WISE employee 4.

Evidence suggests that stable, meaningful employment is required to aid and maintain desistance (Jaynes, 2020; Oswald, 2020; Shephard and Ricciardelli, 2020; Van der Geest, Bijleveld, and Blokland, 2011). Indeed, some service users employed on a temporary contract with WISE reported in interviews being worried they might go back to offending if they didn’t secure permanent employment. Yet, criminalised individuals may be forced to rely on temporary, informal, or insecure employment as they find it difficult to compete with those without criminal records for higher-quality roles (Augustine, 2019). This is particularly difficult for those who often experience instability in so many other areas of their lives –

“If they could be more permanent and have more longevity about them then that would definitely be, I think people would also have a lot less anxiety, I know actually I have got a job, I have got my forever job, I’m fine, I don’t need to think about the future or get worried and then that sends my mental health down and then this happens.. I think it would be nice for people with offences to be it’s fine” – Stakeholder 3

“I think losing their job is like the last string of the ball sort of thing. It would just make everything fall apart and I think still having that loyalty from your employer has like, okay I’ve got one supporter... I’ve got one person backing me up sort of thing” – Stakeholder 3

“That’s why I’m hoping to get a permanent position here because I don’t want I have to leave here and then turn down the wrong road again. I don’t want to have to do that... I’ll know that my life will be financially settled, so I wouldn’t need to go down the criminal road again because everything’s finalised and where I need it to be” – WISE employee 15

A challenge for WISE therefore is to try to assist employees to move into secure, high-quality work. Previous research indicates that WISE can support criminalised individuals to transition from life as part of a ‘sub-preariat’ who are unable to access even the most precarious work due to the complex issues they face, to that of the precariat (Soppitt, Oswald and Walker, 2022). However, to support a move to permanent, ‘meaningful’ employment is more difficult, due to the barrier of the criminal record and also – crucially - a lack of the qualifications necessary to obtain such work. In contemporary labour markets, stable, meaningful employment is increasingly the preserve of skilled workers. To compete in a post-industrial economy, employees need to continually train and re-educate to stay

employable in current labour markets (Ricciardelli and Peters, 2017). WISE employees were well aware of the difficulties in finding employment in current employment markets, and lamented that so many jobs required skills and experience, which they attributed to part of the causes of criminality –

“Yes, it’s a shame because people want experience, where you have to have a job to gain experience... Yeah, and so many people go into crime and it’s a shame because... I knew a few friends of mine that could easily do a good job and do a good day’s work, but because they’ve not got the experience...” - WISE employee 4

As found in the latest report in the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions (2022) life-long learning opportunities are required to integrate criminalised adults who left school without qualifications into labour markets. Employees can gain certain qualifications while working at WISE, such as the CSCS card for access to the construction industry, and the UKCPAS for the cleaning industry. Furthermore, WISE will refer employees to specialist services to improving reading and writing, IT skills and support employees wishing to gain specific qualifications or apprenticeships. However, motivating employees, particularly older individuals, to engage with these opportunities can be difficult -

“We try to refer them to outside services, but they are not good at engaging. There’s a real fear of going in a classroom, a lot of re-traumatising there. We have to be careful when delivering training to make sure it doesn't look like a classroom. We put out fidget spinners for those who find it difficult to focus. We have to put a lot of thought into it, because it’s a system that’s rejected them” – Stakeholder 8

“30 odd years old. I'm past all that now... I've scraped through life long enough, no point in trying to get back into it. It gets to the point where I can't be doing with going to college and classes and stuff. It's not for me that” – WISE employee 13

As demonstrated above, the majority of participants when asked about their experiences of school and education were resoundingly negative, and made connections between their unpleasant and, in some instances, traumatic experiences at school and pathways towards offending. Learning environments and classrooms can be associated with feelings of fear, humiliation and frustration and it is therefore unsurprising that some WISE employees are unwilling to engage with education to improve their employment prospects.

Of those WISE employees who had worked previously to their employment with WISE, many had cycled through several low-paid, low skilled jobs, although for some this could also be attributed to the outside chaos in their lives, as well as limited opportunities for permanent employment. This project indicated that some, though by no means all, former WISE employees moved into precariat

work upon leaving WISE, such as casual construction workers and factory operatives. Both of the two former WISE employees interviewed in this research had moved into skilled, permanent work. In both instances this transition had largely been brought about by WISE who had used their connections to move employees who had potential into meaningful work opportunities. This is particularly feasible for those WISE who are attached to a larger organisation – for example one WISE in this project was supported by a housing association and moved a WISE employee into a financial assistant role within this. This former WISE employee had since worked hard to be promoted and gain qualifications and had secured a highly skilled permanent position. This employee discussed his good fortune at being able to obtain skilled employment, which prior to involvement in WISE he had assumed was unobtainable for those with a criminal record. Similarly, as one former WISE employee who had moved into an apprenticeship described –

“With my apprenticeship I have a chance for more skilled work that I can take pride in, I’m learning a trade, and I know that many benefits will come from that” – (former) WISE employee 9

4.4. Chaotic life trajectories and a ‘cumulation of disadvantage’

It is not just the structural precarity of the current labour market that can impact the desistance process of criminalised individuals. As Kang and Kruttschnitt (2022: 386) describe, some criminalised individuals are on a ‘precarious life trajectory’ because of their experiences of multiple forms of disadvantage. Factors such as experiences of childhood abuse and neglect, domestic violence, inter-generational poverty, housing insecurity, substance addictions, mental and physical health conditions, and turbulent relationships with friends and family have a long-standing impact upon the individual’s worldview, the social connections they will make and the opportunities that will present themselves throughout their life course. The far-reaching consequences of some of these forms of disadvantage are that processes of desistance can be upset, even years later, due to unexpected chaotic life events. Furthermore, Sampson and Laub (1997:12) identify how past criminality can drive further crime through a process of ‘cumulative disadvantage’. Previous crimes and punishments can ‘knife off’ future opportunities and pro-social connections, which lead to fewer opportunities to build a conventional, non-offending lifestyle. Naturally also, the more extensive and serious the criminal record, the more likely the individual is to receive a prison sentence for any further offending, which can seriously compound and worsen the forms of disadvantage noted above.

Illustrating the impact of this 'precarious life trajectory', although WISE reported low reoffending rates, stakeholders described employees doing well for a period of time (sometimes a significant length of time) only to later be unsettled –

“He worked here for a year, and he was fine, and then all of a sudden his mental health went down and ever it changed him. He just didn't do the job right and he wouldn't speak to any of us, he wouldn't even come in for a chat. Then, he's went back to his drinking again, so that didn't help either. Now, he's left us. We tried to offer him something else, he went, 'No, I don't want it,' and we cannot force them... it's unpredictable. Big time unpredictable, yeah, especially the clients we have” – WISE stakeholder 4

“He was our longest serving employee and probably our best cleaner by far. Most reliable... He's working with us and everything's going great and then him and his partner fall out, separate and he goes and starts drinking again... unfortunately he got into a fight and he's now facing five years in prison” – Stakeholder 1

Many of the individuals employed by WISE have experienced generations of chaotic lifestyles, with mental health issues, substance addictions and violent behaviours being transmitted from generation to generation. Relationships breaking down was described by both WISE employees and stakeholders as particularly detrimental, potentially triggering rapid deteriorations in mental health, disengagement with the WISE and employment, resuming substance addictions, criminal activities and other self-destructive behaviours. Employees described this having happened in the past –

“Split up with my girlfriend and then like in nine month everyone was gone, my house, my bird, everything and then the last 10 years I've spent eight of it in jail” – WISE employee 12

Despite the considerable support the WISE in this study provided for employees in relation to these forms of disadvantage and barriers to sustaining employment, these issues were not just faced by employees alone, but also many of those closest to these individuals, their families and communities. The issues outlined above – mental ill health, involvement in crime and violence, periods of imprisonment, substance misuse, homelessness, poverty and debt - were also common amongst their social networks and could impact in unpredictable ways upon the WISE employees and their process of desistance.

This outside chaos and cumulation of disadvantage always therefore has potential to disrupt WISE employees' desistance process and their ability to sustain employment, particularly as it is often driven by structural socioeconomic inequalities in society and therefore is in many ways beyond the power of WISE to address. Indeed, factors such as long-term mental health issues have been found in research

with homeless populations attending WISE as a barrier to transitions to mainstream employment (Barton et al., 2021). Although engagement with WISE clearly is beneficial for the mental health of employees, the issues many of these individuals have experienced are considerable, connected to deep-seated trauma, and can reoccur. The shortage of mental health provision in the UK continues to make this a challenge for WISE. As many employees have been unable to access effective mental health treatments, they have found unhealthy coping mechanisms for emotional distress and trauma which can compound these issues. Those with substance addictions can relapse following a deterioration in mental health even after many years of being clean. Indeed, while many WISE employees were hopeful for the future, some didn't want to say with certainty that they would never return to offending, or would always be in legitimate employment -

“The only thing that could stand in my way is if I go downhill with my mental health but I'm trying my best just to keep it up...” – WISE employee 10

“If anything ever went pear shaped at home probably. You know what I'd like to think I wouldn't but I'd probably turn to drink. It's a horrible thing to say... Everything at the minute is perfect, do you know what I mean. But you can never say never” – WISE employee 7

The lasting negative impact of the Covid pandemic, years of cuts to public services and the recent cost of living crisis, have also impacted the complexities of the issues service users are coming into WISE with, which means more time and resources needs to be invested in these individuals to make meaningful change. However, as discussed above, this can impact upon the business interests of the WISE, which combined with an increasingly competitive funding landscape, could make the operation of viable WISE of this nature more difficult.

4.5. In summary

WISE who strive to support the labour market inclusion and desistance process of individuals with significant criminal histories face considerable challenges. They must balance pursuing this social mission with maintaining a viable business, in a landscape in which sources of funding grow more scarce. A balance also must be struck between supporting the needs of criminalised individuals and creating a safe space at WISE to do this, and avoiding dependence by empowering employees to sustain their employment and desistance on their own without the support of WISE. Another significant challenge faced by WISE is in the changing conditions of contemporary labour markets, which are increasingly condemning those without qualifications and work experience - and particularly those who have a significant criminal record - to insecure, mundane and socially isolating work. WISE need to find ways to assist criminalised individuals to move beyond this work to more effectively support their desistance. Finally, while WISE can have a considerable impact upon the lives of the

criminalised individuals they support, the accumulation of disadvantage they have experienced through their life course can make ensuring long-term success in sustaining employment and desistance more difficult to achieve.

Conclusion and next steps

“I think there will always be a need, for people like us. Quite frankly I wish there were more social enterprises” – Stakeholder 2

“They need to have a meeting with the companies, everybody should get round table – Government, social enterprises and a few companies, get a meeting and get this sorted. They need to give us a chance, that’s the bottom line, they need a chance” – WISE employee 4

“If there was more [WISE] knocking around everywhere, I think you’ll see the crime go well down, really” – WISE employee 11

“if there was more, like more businesses who were willing on doing what [WISE] is doing like taking criminals on to give them a chance, it would be brilliant. It would be brilliant because [WISE] have literally changed me in myself and made me look at life differently” – WISE employee 15

Whilst intended as a pilot project, and the basis for further research, the findings in this study clearly demonstrate the value of WISE in supporting those with a significant criminal history to access and sustain employment and in promoting the development of a pro-social identity and a commitment to desistance. WISE help address a fundamental difficulty in the movement of those with a significant criminal history into employment. Many criminalised individuals are looking for a ‘chance’, a route away from crime and an opportunity upon which to base a non-offending identity. While legitimate employment can support this, many of those with serious criminal backgrounds and multiple forms of disadvantage are unprepared for the demands of mainstream employment, have insufficient stability in their lives to sustain work, and therefore risk being set up to fail. WISE can provide a crucial intermediate step to support these individuals, by creating a safe, flexible working environment that can accommodate for those with complex needs, as well as help address them. As community-based organisations, they understand the local context and the issues their service users are facing, and consequently are well-placed to provide this support. Moreover, for those for whom mainstream employment might not be an appealing or realistic goal, WISE can act as an alternative end-employer.

This research demonstrates the value of organisations – such as WISE - which adopt a strong case-management approach when supporting and promoting desistance amongst those with significant criminal histories and who have experienced multiple forms of disadvantage. Holistic support was provided to WISE employees largely following a ‘whole systems’ approach; as much as possible, WISE sought to address the key offender pathways to reducing reoffending (NOMS, 2004) – such as

accommodation, drugs and alcohol, family and social support, health and financial management - 'in house' through sessions with support staff, counsellors and mentors. Where necessary, they would refer service users to external organisations, but again this was managed by WISE staff who had built significant levels of trust with WISE employees, and as such these referrals could lead to higher levels of engagement with external services. As Bramley et al. (2019) report, those facing severe and multiple disadvantages are engaging with systems who – despite the promotion of multi-agency working - are still mainly working in silo, and the complexities and dysfunction of this are causing more disadvantage. WISE recognise that the multiple disadvantages their service users experience intersect and overlap, and trusted relationships with staff who can act as case managers to help navigate these complex systems is critical. Indeed, it became apparent during this research that individual WISE staff members' dedication to and empathy for their service users was vital to the wider organisation's success. While these efforts should be applauded, it should be recognised that - as is the case with many third sector organisations - losing these staff members could cause extreme upheaval for service users and greatly impact the resilience of the organisation, and therefore having a succession plan in place is vital.

This research indicates that WISE i) help participants develop the financial, physical, emotional and relational stability required in their lives to begin to support a move away from crime and ii) provide a 'hook for change' for a new identity as a legitimate worker. Consequently, many WISE employees reported having ceased offending and self-assessed their risk of reoffending as low. While this certainly suggests that WISE can promote desistance amongst their employees, there is scope for further research here. While some former WISE employees chose to keep in touch, the WISE in this study – largely due to stretched resources - were not actively tracking the progress of past employees, and so what happened to many of the service users who did move on from WISE – both in terms of re-offending and employment - is unclear. Other evaluations of the impact of engaging in WISE offering 'supported employment' upon desistance indicate positive results for both adults and youths (Aspire, 2019; Baker, 2014; Landworks, n.d; Long et al., 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2013). However, overwhelmingly these studies have focused upon reoffending rates during, or for a short period after (12 months or less), the criminalised individual's engagement with the social enterprise. As recognised in numerous studies, short follow up periods can be an unreliable measure of desistance, as can reliance on binary reoffending measures (Farrington and Wikstrom, 1994; Bushway, Thornberry and Krohn, 2003). Further research is required to examine how involvement in WISE can influence pathways towards sustained, long-term employment and desistance. This is particularly critical considering (and as highlighted above) the impact of 'cumulative forms of disadvantage' on lifelong opportunities, and the effect of changing labour markets on the availability of stable, meaningful forms of employment that can support desistance. This pilot study seeks therefore to be a precursor to a

four-year longitudinal piece of research, conducting a significantly longer follow-up with the participants of such employment opportunities than has previously been conducted, and measures of desistance will extend beyond offending statistics by gathering in-depth, qualitative data representing the lived experiences of participants.

This research is timely and of vital importance. Recognising the valuable role employment can play in desistance, policymakers in the UK have actively sought to increase employment rates among criminalised individuals. In England and Wales this is exemplified by the formation of the New Futures Network, creating initiatives such as Employment Advisory Boards and Employment Hubs, which provide employability support to prisoners and create links between prisons and employers. In Scotland, the launch of Release Scotland and Scotland Works for You has sought to move those with convictions into employment and support employers recruiting those with criminal convictions. Yet, while the Ministry of Justice reports a 116% rise in ex-offenders finding employment in the past 2 years, still less than one-third of persons released from custody are employed at six-months after their release (Ministry of Justice, 2023a). As the research with WISE indicates, helping criminalised individuals to *obtain* employment, while important, is only beneficial to those who have faced multiple forms of disadvantage if there is also support to *sustain* this engagement and thrive within their working environment. As stakeholders explained, simply placing criminalised individuals into employment will not tackle the multiple barriers they face, and in some instances may make these worse. WISE offer a unique situation to this, by providing holistic support in a safe working environment.

Furthermore, at a time where there are shortages of labour in many UK industries, and consequently employers from a range of sectors are more amenable than they have been previously to employing criminalised individuals, WISE could be critical as stepping stone into these industries, and could demonstrate to companies that criminalised individuals can be reliable workers. It is important however, that this shift in attitude does not lead to a move towards further exploitation of this group, and criminalised individuals being used as a source of 'cheap labour' and employed in poor conditions it is assumed they will accept due the barriers having a criminal record presents in gaining employment. Indeed, a focus within recent government initiatives has been on moving ex-prisoners into the UK's retail and logistics sectors, in jobs such as warehouse workers, shop assistants and online sales advisors (Ministry of Justice, 2023b). Such occupations are increasingly forming the basis of what Standing (2011) terms 'precarious work' which may not aid desistance, and instead risks the exploitation of criminalised individuals in insecure, poor working conditions. Therefore, government initiatives to improve the availability of employment for criminalised individuals may not serve to tackle reoffending if these are not the forms of employment that can support desistance. The initial research in this study

indicates that WISE offering paid (and sometimes permanent) employment opportunities for criminalised individuals alongside additional support to tackle employment barriers can assist criminalised individuals to obtain secure, meaningful work that supports desistance. However further research would be of value here.

This pilot project therefore points towards, in addition to further research, a need to raise awareness amongst policy makers, and other key stakeholders in the areas of reoffending and employment, of the value of WISE that offer a 'supported employment' model for criminalised individuals. Some participants in this study reported that the funding available for WISE appeared to be increasingly scarce and difficult to access, which could have an impact upon how many criminalised individuals they are able to support in the future, and ultimately also the viability of their businesses. Yet, in a time of cuts to public services, as well as local authorities' budgets, social businesses could be essential to fill these gaps in provision. Indeed, stakeholders based in Scotland gave examples of government commitments to being a fair work nation, to developing a wellbeing economy, and promoting inclusive employers, all of which WISE could make an important contribution to, however the funding opportunities available did not reflect this. Stakeholders in this study also discussed the importance of policymakers understanding how 'circular economies' in the landscape of WISE can be created. For example, one WISE was contracted to provide employability services to their local authority, but also provided civil amenities services to the same local authority, allowing those receiving employability support to gain paid employment within the social enterprise, allowing that council to invest in its local people.

A more favourable funding environment could allow for the development and expansion of WISE. Some stakeholders in this study explained that a crucial next step for WISE (that would require access to greater resources) would be to work more closely with employers to encourage them to be more open to employing those with convictions. Building connections with employers would help to support the transition of those working at WISE into mainstream employment, and lessen the concerns around dependency and stagnation of WISE employees who remain at WISE for long periods of time as detailed in section 4.2 above. For those for whom this transition may not be possible however, access to greater resources could allow for WISE to build additional qualifications into their programmes, as well as more opportunities for employees to progress and flourish within the organisation, for example in taking on greater responsibilities and receiving higher remuneration. Furthermore, greater access to financial support could allow for a broader range of WISE to be developed. WISE overall mainly offer employment opportunities in the areas of cleaning, construction and hospitality. But to cater to the needs of a variety of criminalised individuals - such as females who may seek different career paths, or those with white collar, or sexual convictions, who potentially are highly skilled - a more diverse

range of social enterprises could be created with more options of employment. The findings from the pilot project suggest that the supported employment model utilised by the WISE in this study has promise for a more variety of individuals and for different routes into industry.

WISE stakeholders in this study acknowledged that the stigma that surrounds those with convictions and the consequential hesitancy of government and wider society to direct greater resources towards helping these individuals was unlikely to imminently change. As research has demonstrated, the dominant narrative around individual culpability for offending is ingrained within the UK criminal justice system and in public opinion (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2023; Roberts and Hough, 2013). However, stakeholders explained that a more likely driver of change would be if policymakers and the public could be greater informed of the financial savings that could be achieved through WISE providing a supported employment model for criminalised individuals. These public sector savings are not just from the lower reoffending rates of those individuals who are employed by WISE, and the consequential reduced need for police, probation and prisons, but also associated impacts on NHS use, addiction services, education, savings to universal credit, and others. Again, this ultimately indicates a need for both further research to fully investigate the impact (particularly long-term) that WISE can have for criminalised individuals, their families and communities and a need to bring this to the attention of those who seek to tackle reoffending and/or reduce demand on public services.

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