



Bouncing back

IN THE past, conversations about Brixton in south London largely revolved around riots and mugging. Then it became the unlikely emblem of gentrification. Now it is gaining recognition for housing some of the best programmes for the rehabilitation of ex-offenders and early-stage interventions.

For some years I chaired the board of Bounce Back, a project which started in Brixton prison training inmates first in painting and decorating and then as it grew, into scaffolding and dry lining. The construction industry has a severe skills shortage and when we held open days for building firms and developers, they would all come. Some, like Wates, did so because they resolutely believed in the transformative power that a job can have on the life of someone who more likely than not would return to crime on release without one.

Others came simply because they had vacancies they were struggling to fill. My view was always that it didn't matter – so long as people were given a job, the prospect of re-offending for a young person going through the programme dropped from 60 per cent to 12 per cent. Bounce Back's founder Francesca Findlater has taken the success in Brixton to other prisons across the country.

Also housed in Brixton prison is the first Clink restaurant, a stunning-looking dining venue open to the public offering high-quality food and drink cooked and served by inmates. As a restaurateur myself I've worked with The Clink on day-



Inmates at Brixton prison learning painting and decorating skills with Bounce Back



The Clink outside and inside, located in the former governor's octagonal house built in 1820 by Soane's pupil Thomas Chawner

release programmes and have hired former Brixton inmates to come and work with us. The re-offending rate for participants in the Brixton Clink is 11 per cent. Headed by Chris Moore, there are now five Clinks in prisons across the country.

The big question we don't spend enough time looking into is how to stop young people getting into the criminal justice system in the first place. I was hugely impressed when visiting Brixton police station to meet Inspector Jack Rowlands, who has created a programme called Divert. When an arresting officer brings someone in and places them in a cell, if it's a first-time offence they have committed and they genuinely regret what they have done, the officer can make a request to the duty sergeant.

If agreed, the officer can go to the cell and say to the person they picked up that they are about to be charged, will go to

court, more than likely end up in prison and it will be game over. 'Or,' the officer says, 'how about we get you trained up for a job?' No criminal record and a new path to follow. Training bodies like Bounce Back then equip them with the skills they need not just to work in construction but with other local employers too like Crystal Palace Football Club.

Divert projects are now spreading to other police stations and it's a model that's working. In less than a year, over 700 young adults have worked with Divert, more than 400 have been given mentoring and advice, 200 are in training and nearly 70 are now in employment.

Brixton is now getting a reputation it can be proud of.

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High Sheriff of Greater London 2019-20