

# Unlock Strategy 2026-2031

## Ending the long shadow of criminal records



### 1. Purpose, Vision and Mission

Unlock exists to address the enduring impact of criminal records, which continue to shape people's lives long after a sentence has been served. The organisation recognises that current systems; particularly disclosure regimes, employer practices and public stigma, create ongoing barriers to opportunity, dignity and belonging.

#### **Unlock is driven by a simple but urgent purpose:**

to improve life chances for people with criminal records and to change the systems that hold them back.

Unlock's vision is of a society where individuals are not permanently defined by past mistakes, and where growth, rehabilitation and change are recognised in practice. This vision is rooted in fairness, inclusion and the belief that people should be able to move forward into work, education, family life and civic participation.

The organisation's mission reflects a dual approach:

- **Direct support** through specialist advice and advocacy
- **Systemic change** through research, influencing and campaigning

Central to this mission is lived experience leadership. As a lived experience founded and led charity, people with criminal records are not positioned as passive recipients of support but as leaders, experts and decision-makers shaping Unlock's work.

### 2. Why Unlock Matters

Criminal records affect a significant proportion of the UK population of over 12 million people. For many, the consequences extend far beyond the original sentence, impacting employment, housing, education, financial services, health and wellbeing and relationships.

These impacts are not incidental but are produced by systems that:

- Operate automatic disclosure processes
- Encourage risk-averse decision-making
- Fail to recognise rehabilitation or context
- Are stigmatising and discriminatory

As a result, punishment is effectively extended beyond the court-imposed sentence.

The consequences are profound:

- Reduced employment opportunities and financial stability
- Housing insecurity
- Deterioration in mental health and wellbeing
- Loss of skills and talent from communities
- Civic and social isolation

Unlock's role is critical because it sits at the intersection of:

- **Frontline experience** (through its advice and community outreach services)
- **Policy and system reform**

This unique positioning allows Unlock to identify systemic failures and develop practical solutions grounded in lived reality.

### 3. The “Long Shadow” of Criminal Records

Unlock describes the ongoing impact of criminal records as the “**long shadow.**”

This concept captures how punishment persists through:

- Extensive and sometimes disproportionate disclosure systems
- Digital permanence of criminal records
- Institutional and cultural barriers and assumptions about risk
- Public narratives about stigma, shame and othering

Modern systems have intensified this effect. Millions of DBS checks are conducted annually, and digital technologies ensure that information about past convictions can remain accessible indefinitely.

The result is a system that:

- Lacks proportionality
- Limits recognition of personal change
- Encourages blanket exclusions rather than individual assessment

The long shadow is not only legal but also cultural. It reflects deeply embedded narratives about risk, redemption and worth.

Unlock's strategy seeks to dismantle this shadow by:

- Reforming disclosure rules
- Addressing digital permanence
- Challenging stigma and discrimination in practice
- Increasing equitable access to financial products such as insurance
- Ensuring civic inclusion
- Increasing visibility of lived experience knowledge and leadership to challenge

#### 4. Inequality and Structural Disadvantage

Criminal record systems both reflect and reinforce wider social inequalities.

Evidence shows disproportionate impacts on:

- **Racialised communities**, due to systemic disparities in policing and justice outcomes
- **Women**, particularly where offending is linked to trauma, abuse or poverty
- **Young adults**, whose opportunities are shaped early in life
- **People with mental health conditions or neurodivergence**

Current disclosure frameworks rarely account for these contexts. Instead, they embed disadvantage by carrying the effects of unequal criminalisation into employment, housing and civic life.

Unlock's approach explicitly recognises these intersectional inequalities and commits to addressing them through both service delivery and policy reform.

#### 5. Strategic Ambition (2026–2031)

Unlock's ambition is both **practical and transformative**.

**At an individual level**, the organisation aims to ensure that people with criminal records:

- Have access to clear, accurate information
- Understand their rights
- Can challenge unfair treatment
- Are supported into employment, volunteering and reintegration

This includes transforming the existing Helpline into a broader **Information, Advice and Support (IAS)** service which will undertake a broader range of services, including individual case support and advocacy, employment

readiness programmes and development of potential legal challenges. We will also focus on expanding our community outreach activity through our **Better Advice for All (BAFA)** network, which will bring equity led community organisations into our orbit and extend our work in dispersing our expertise to the frontline where it is most needed.

At a **systemic level**, Unlock aims to:

- Continue our work in pushing for criminal records reform and continue our work in the Fairchecks campaign in our partnership with Transform Justice
- Continue to campaign for stronger digital protections for individuals with criminal records
- Continue policy campaigns about inequitable access to financial products and seek to resolve how Proceeds of Crime orders can have disproportionate life long consequences for recipients
- Continue work on reforming unfair barriers and practice in employment and access to education
- Support policy to maintain and extend the rights of those with criminal records to engage meaningfully in civic life
- Develop a new framework for rehabilitation in a digital age by developing a blueprint for a **Rehabilitation and Reintegration Act**
- Develop a research strategy that embraces participatory methodologies and seeks to develop high quality evidence in relation to issues faced by those living in the Long Shadow of the Criminal Record

A distinctive feature of our new strategy is its emphasis on delivering our work in partnership, such as our Fairchecks campaign with Transform Justice and we are committed to the developing of further partnerships and collaborations.

We also commit to development of an organisational wide **imagination practice and developing approaches to build narrative change**, recognising that systems are sustained not only by law but by constraint of thought, hope and pervasive existing societal beliefs about risk and redemption.

## 6. Impact and Credibility

Unlock has established a strong national reputation through:

- Contributions to reforms in rehabilitation periods and filtering rules
- Campaigns such as **Ban the Box**
- Trusted expertise in criminal record law and disclosure

Its credibility is built on a combination of:

- Specialist legal and policy knowledge
- Frontline insight from thousands of service users
- Evidence-based advocacy
- Lived experience leadership

Each year:

- Thousands of individuals receive direct support
- The website reaches over 1.4 million users
- Policymakers and institutions rely on Unlock's analysis
- This foundation positions Unlock to lead more ambitious system change over the next five years.

## 7. Strategic Aims

Unlock's strategy is structured around four interconnected aims.

### **Aim 1: Support People to Move On**

This aim focuses on strengthening frontline services to ensure individuals can access:

- Specialist advice on disclosure, DBS checks, employment and rights
- Advocacy and potential legal challenges in cases of discrimination or unlawful treatment

Key developments include:

- Transforming the Helpline into an integrated IAS service
- Expanding **Support Plus** casework and advocacy
- Development of pre-employment programmes
- Increasing outreach through BAFA networks
- Embedding trauma-informed and intersectional practice

The intended impact includes:

- Greater confidence and self-advocacy among individuals
- Improved access to employment and opportunities
- Reduced self-exclusion due to stigma

## **Aim 2: Change Systems That Hold People Back**

This aim addresses structural reform.

Key priorities include:

- Developing a Rehabilitation and Reintegration Act
- Reforming DBS and disclosure practices
- Addressing digital permanence and online stigma
- Advancing financial justice, including insurance access and POCA reform
- Ensuring civic and social participation of people with criminal records

Unlock will also:

- Use participatory research and coalition-building
- Engage in strategic litigation where necessary
- Develop public communications to challenge stigma

The goal is to embed proportionality, fairness and recognition of change across systems.

## **Aim 3: Shift Power Through Lived Experience Leadership**

Unlock will deepen its commitment to lived experience leadership by:

- Embedding representation within all levels of the organisation
- Publishing a co-production charter
- Creating leadership pathways into decision-making roles both in the organisation and in the wider community
- Supporting public advocacy and coproduced research

This work recognises that:

- Lived experience is expertise
- Leadership must reflect diversity and intersectionality
- Power must be genuinely shared, not symbolic

The intended outcome is a shift in how knowledge, authority and decision-making operate within the justice sector.

## **Aim 4: Build a Strong, Ethical and Sustainable Organisation**

Organisational strength underpins all impact.

Key priorities include:

- Financial sustainability through diversified income
- Strong governance and risk management
- Investment in workforce wellbeing and development
- Embedding equality, diversity and inclusion
- Responsible use of digital tools and AI

Unlock aims to remain:

- Independent but collaborative
- Evidence-led and principled
- Trauma-informed and inclusive

This ensures long-term resilience and credibility.

## **8. Outcomes and Accountability**

Unlock's strategy is anchored in three core outcomes:

- 1. Individuals have knowledge, confidence and support**
  - Measured through service data and user feedback
- 2. Systems reduce stigma and unnecessary barriers**
  - Measured through policy change, institutional practice and public discourse
- 3. The organisation remains resilient and effective**
  - Measured through financial sustainability, governance and workforce wellbeing

Accountability to lived experience remains central. Feedback from those directly affected will shape evaluation and continuous improvement.

## 9. Values

Unlock's work is guided by a clear set of values:

- **Optimism** – belief in change and second chances
- **Inclusion** – commitment to equity and intersectionality
- **Authenticity** – integrity, transparency and evidence-based practice
- **Pragmatism** – focus on practical solutions alongside systemic reform
- **Courage** – willingness to challenge harmful systems and narratives

These values shape both internal culture and external impact.

## Conclusion

Unlock's 2026–2031 strategy represents a shift from incremental reform to **systemic transformation**.

By combining:

- Direct support
- Evidence-based advocacy
- Lived experience leadership
- Imaginative, forward-looking thinking

the organisation aims to dismantle the long shadow of criminal records and create a society where rehabilitation is meaningful and visible.

This strategy recognises that change requires persistence, collaboration and courage. It invites partners, policymakers and communities to work collectively toward a fairer system; one that recognises growth, supports reintegration and values human potential.

