

PROVIDING EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR OFFENDERS

GROWING SUSTAINABLE WORK INTEGRATION SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

A CASE STUDIES SERIES

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The views expressed in these case studies are those of the respective organisations and the publication of the case studies should not be viewed as an endorsement of these organisations and their work by the Home Office and Ministry of Justice. The data and statistics presented within the case studies have been locally collected and cannot be verified by the Home Office, Clinks and Social Firms UK.

Background

Low qualifications and lack of employment are recognised within the Government's strategy for *Transforming Rehabilitation* as key social issues related to re-offending.*

Some local areas have already developed social enterprises as one way to overcome barriers around the employability of ex-offenders. However at the time of writing there is currently very little that brings together learning or examples of effective practice to assist others in doing this.

Recognising this gap, the Home Office commissioned a short term programme of work undertaken in February and March 2013 by Clinks and Social Firms UK.

The programme set out to explore and assess the role of social enterprises in enabling both adult and young offenders to access training and employment opportunities. The results provide a body of work that will significantly contribute to cross-Government thinking about how to embed and support social enterprises working with offenders. The programme included two elements:

- The development and publication of this series of twenty Case Studies. The social enterprises featured in the case study series were invited, following a competitive application process, to write about their own experiences and insights into the opportunities and barriers confronting their development and sustainability.
- A Summary Report which brings together the key learning about developing and sustaining social enterprises offering employment and employability training to offenders.

Together they provide a valuable resource for newly established social enterprises, for those planning to establish social enterprises, for police, prisons and probation providers, for Police and Crime Commissioners, for local Integrated Offender Management (IOM) partnerships, and for policy makers.

These resources also complement previous work undertaken in partnership between Clinks and the Home Office aimed at increasing the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector's involvement in local IOM arrangements.

* Ministry of Justice. May 2013. *Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform*: www.justice.gov.uk/transforming-rehabilitation

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BLUE SKY REGENERATION & DEVELOPMENT
and
ROYAL BRITISH LEGION INDUSTRIES

a collaborative working project

VICTOR

Introduction

The VICTOR project was established as a joint initiative to support offenders with an Armed Forces background into sustainable work to reduce the likelihood of re-offending. It was developed and run by Blue Sky Regeneration and Development and Royal British Legion Industries, both of which are registered charities operating as social enterprises. The pilot project has been delivered on a small scale but has enabled us to identify ways in which we can work together in future to support this particular group of offenders, using our specific expertise. We believe that successful outcomes for the project beneficiaries are indicative of the effectiveness of this approach, its transferability and scalability.

Background

Blue Sky was established in December 2005 and since then has provided employment opportunities for over 700 individuals. Its mission is to reduce re-offending by offering jobs solely to individuals with a criminal record and to challenge negative perceptions about ex-offenders. In 2011 Blue Sky became 10 Downing Street's Charity of the Year and last year was awarded the Enterprise prize at the Third Sector Excellence Awards. Blue Sky undertakes contract work for local authorities and private companies involving grounds maintenance and waste removal and disposal, creating employment opportunities for the target group of ex-offenders. The organisation has teams operating through London and the South East, the West Country, the North West and Yorkshire. Many of the employees who join the scheme have chaotic personal lives; 20% are homeless and around 40% have had drug or alcohol issues. Only 15% of those who undertake a Blue Sky programme go on to re-offend; one quarter of the national average.

Royal British Legion Industries (RBLI) was established in 1919 to provide healthcare, housing, employment and training to Armed Forces personnel returning from the First World War. Almost 100 years on, it continues to provide the same range of services to Armed Forces personnel and is currently actively involved in assessment and training of individuals leaving the Armed Forces as a result of medical discharge. RBLI operates as a social enterprise manufacturing road and rail signs, wooden pallets and by-products and providing printing and mail house services. It has also delivered Welfare to Work contracts as a provider to the Department for Work and Pensions for over thirty years. RBLI specialises in supporting individuals with an Armed Forces background and long term unemployed people with disabilities and enduring health conditions.

Whilst the majority of those who leave the Armed Forces make a very successful transition to civilian life, there are those who do not. Many of those who have problems are individuals with low educational attainment levels or who have served for less than 4 years and are therefore not entitled to any resettlement support. Other groups that require support are individuals who initially make a very successful transition but struggle to maintain this due to the onset of issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can take up to 15 years to manifest. Also, individuals who incur injuries during their time with the Armed Forces can experience residual problems which, over time, can prevent them from gaining sustainable employment.

Research suggests that around 5% of the prison population is made up of individuals with an Armed Forces background. There is a belief that the majority of those in custody are early service leavers (i.e. those with less than four years service) from infantry battalions. However, there are a number of pilot projects which have been established to interrogate the existing

data to identify whether early service leavers are more vulnerable to criminal activities than other demographic groups. Research suggests that the Army tends to recruit for infantry battalions in areas of high deprivation. The recruitment testing thresholds for this group are relatively low and therefore those recruited tend to have low basic skills and often come from dysfunctional family environments. The VICTOR project aims to contribute data to this debate.

Recently RBLI has identified a need to extend its services to groups that are often considered to be harder to engage and help. One of the groups identified was former Armed Forces personnel who have been in the criminal justice system.

Our experience: The VICTOR Project

RBLI and Blue Sky formed a partnership to enable us to share our specific areas of expertise and collaborate to work with ex-offenders who have an Armed Forces background.

The delivery model was based on a rolling programme of activity which provided around six months of employment and associated training to two or three clients at any time. Blue Sky, with our expertise in contract management and grounds maintenance work, employed the teams directly and provided management, training and employment focused support whilst the individual was employed. During the period of employment RBLI provided wrap around support for welfare associated issues. The work was provided through contracts with public sector organisations.

Our Business Development Teams started discussions with a number of local authorities across the South East with the aim of securing grounds maintenance work to provide employment for the VICTOR project teams. Medway Council agreed to facilitate discussions with Quadron, their grounds maintenance supplier, to encourage them to allocate some of the work to the VICTOR project. In early 2012 a Project Supervisor was recruited and in April 2012 VICTOR went live with the first team starting grounds maintenance work in the Medway towns.

Once the beneficiaries have finished their employment with Blue Sky, they then transfer to RBLI and attend a LifeWorks course. LifeWorks is a vocational assessment, self analysis and personal development programme which also provides employability skills. If they have not been effectively linked into longer work at that point, they work with RBLI's Work Programme team who undertake further employment support and job broking.

An example of how the two organisations collaborate to support individuals on the programme was when one beneficiary was on the brink of losing his home and therefore his job with Blue Sky. RBLI and Blue Sky worked together to ensure he was able to find alternative accommodation and remain in the area to continue on the project. This individual has now found permanent work which he will start shortly. He has also become an ambassador for VICTOR and will be working with RBLI to take forward a project to raise awareness of the issues that can face Armed Forces personnel when they leave the service, and increase their vulnerability and susceptibility to crime. We hope that we will eventually be able to take this service into prisons in order to work with offenders with an Armed Forces background as early as possible in order to give them something to aim towards on release.

To date this project has been relatively small however the outcomes in terms of learning and potential wider benefit have been significant. Of the original six individuals that

joined the programme, two are now in work, two are undertaking job searching and two have yet to complete the programme with Blue Sky. One project beneficiary said:

“Since being on VICTOR, I feel I have learned many new skills that I enjoy and hope to use in the future. Every day I carry out different tasks, which I now want to complete to my best efforts.”

Representatives of Medway Council, as the customers buying the service, have been delighted with the success of the VICTOR project:

“Can I just pass on many thanks to you and all the grounds maintenance crew at Gun Wharf for doing an excellent job around the building? I have had nothing but very good comments from staff and managers for the good work that the lads are doing.”

Frank Akehurst, Medway Council

Key learning

The key learning factor from this project for Blue Sky and RBLI has been demonstrating the impact that working collectively can have in enhancing both the beneficiary experience and their success in achieving sustainable outcomes. Having two organisations that recognise the benefit of collaboration over competition has made a significant difference, not only in terms of the service provided to the beneficiary, but also in our ability to influence Medway Council to take a leap of faith and provide the catalyst for the project. Without this, Project VICTOR would have no growth opportunities. That said, the real insight that Blue Sky and RBLI have gained of each other and their working practices has enabled us to understand what types of opportunities would lend themselves to this model and what more we can do together.

The wider learning from this project has been in relation to our ability to find and engage with suitable beneficiaries. The success of the project would have been significantly enhanced through opportunities to engage with potential participants pre-release. It is extremely difficult to find veterans once they engage with mainstream services and statutory provision, as data relating to this group is inconsistent. Our recommendations are that the Prison Service should consider more engagement with work-focused support services and projects inside the prison and provide better information about projects like VICTOR that are available to this group of offenders on release. There should also be a more flexible approach to engagement with the Work Programme for groups such as this who have complex challenges to overcome in order to gain work.

A substantial lesson in terms of what we might do differently in the future stems from the significant delay in starting up the project due to our inability to engage suitable beneficiaries. For the initial project our aim was to secure the work and then engage the project teams. However, experience now suggests that as this cohort can be very difficult to source, we should run recruitment campaigns concurrently with business development activity.

Our experience also challenges some of the assumptions described above, in relation to former Armed Forces personnel in the criminal justice system. Evidence from the VICTOR project now suggests that the existing figure of 5% of offenders having a forces background may be a considerable under estimation, as most offenders will not disclose an Armed Forces background for fear of reprisal. Furthermore, although the VICTOR project is small at this stage, early indications are that the participants have been individuals who have long service records and who therefore did receive full resettlement packages on exit.

Recently Kent County Council (KCC) tendered for a new supplier of their Highways Maintenance services; this included supply, erection and maintenance of all road signs. KCC has stipulated within the tender specification that those tendering for the contract should try to include a social enterprise in their supply chain. This sort of initiative by a local authority is hugely significant in supporting the sustainability of social enterprises.

RBLI and Blue Sky firmly believe that it is both cost effective and more beneficial to our clients if we can prevent problems rather than cure them. We are involved in a number of projects from which we expect to learn how better to achieve this. RBLI is also involved in the Future Horizons Project, a pilot project to engage and support early service leavers from Catterick Garrison. We will be monitoring closely the evidence from this pilot to understand the likelihood of this client group entering the criminal justice system post discharge. The work undertaken by the VICTOR team is ideal for those with low educational attainment and/or learning difficulties and more could be done to utilise the VICTOR model to provide work post release or community activities to facilitate an early release. RBLI is also keen to pursue opportunities for better assessment of offenders in order to identify learning difficulties/disabilities and build appropriate action plans for support. This could provide clear links into projects such as VICTOR to enable offenders with an Armed Forces background gain the independence and sustainable outcomes they need to prevent re-offending.

We are now developing a number of business opportunities which have the potential to adopt the VICTOR model:

- Slough Borough Council has engaged the VICTOR model to refurbish street signs with the Commissioner for Neighbourhoods and Renewal teaming up with Blue Sky, RBLI and Enterprise to replace more than a thousand street signs
- The Kent Woodland Employment Scheme has been created to manage ancient woodland across Kent. The VICTOR model will be used to provide the labour force for coppicing and transporting logs with the scheme being utilised to provide specialist training to the VICTOR team members. RBLI operates a social enterprise which manufactures wooden pallets and by-products. Logs from the Kent Woodland Employment Scheme will be utilised by RBLI for production of wooden products.

We are currently in discussions with a number of local authorities regarding grounds maintenance works, beach clearing and waste management. We hope to be in a position significantly to increase the number of offenders with an Armed Forces background that we support into sustainable work through VICTOR.

In March 2013 Medway Council was visited by Chris Grayling, the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. At a round table discussion with the Minister, representatives from the VICTOR Project Team, RBLI, Blue Sky and Medway Council were able to present some of the lessons learned from the project and ask him to consider our recommendations for improvements to both policy and awareness that will not only help VICTOR to be more successful, but which would add value to other projects aimed at reducing re-offending.

