

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

Acknowledgements

The Home Office, Clinks, Social Firms UK would like to extend their thanks to all the organisations that participated in the programme by submitting an application or writing a case study. Thanks also to Nicky Stevenson who edited the case study series and wrote the final summary report, and to Bernard Lane and Simon Eglington (Home Office), Lesley Frazer (Clinks) and Michele Rigby (Social Firms UK), who oversaw and managed the programme.

elixirgroup.org.uk



Elixir Group – A Sustainable Enterprise

By Jennifer Kelly



Introduction

This case study presents Elixir Group's experience of running a social enterprise within the environmental industry, providing training and employment opportunities for offenders from all walks of life. It explores the organisation's experience of what makes an effective business, some of the barriers we have experienced in developing a sustainable social enterprise and how the organisation has built links with local businesses to provide further pathways into employment. This study will present our learning and experience to date and offer suggestions as to how other social enterprises could usefully build on this experience.

Background

Ben Donnelly, the founder of Elixir Group, was born and raised in one of Liverpool's most deprived wards. He was the eldest of six brothers and sisters brought up by an alcoholic parent, and during his childhood suffered mental and physical abuse. As a young boy he spent some time in foster homes and hostels, which created in him a strong determination to make a better life. However, his damaged childhood caught up with him and he developed drink and drugs problems as a teenager, leading to trouble with the law. By the time he was twenty-eight he was addicted to drugs and had a criminal record. Ben could not see a way out but his younger sister found him the support he needed. During his recovery he met many wonderful people struggling to find volunteering and employment, having the same history of past convictions and addictions.

Ben identified a real social need: there was a shortage of meaningful and practical volunteering, training and employment opportunities for offenders and people recovering from addictions. Elixir Group was established in 2008, from his passion to create opportunities for people with these problems. It was combined with a passion for the environment and reducing carbon emissions. The first twelve months were spent on research and putting together a business plan and in 2009 we began trading, securing our first employability contract from the Future Jobs Fund, the government programme operating at that time, employing ninety people from disadvantaged groups, including offenders, within the first three months. We went on to deliver a total of five hundred and fifty jobs until the Future Jobs Fund ended in 2011.

We spent some time exploring work that was suitable for people with no skills or low levels of skills. Bearing in mind the beneficiaries that we wanted to work with, these jobs also needed to be meaningful and to be able to provide opportunities to develop skills and to offer progression to higher levels.

During the business planning stages, we identified that although the country was on the brink of a recession, the environmental industry was set to grow. We researched numerous opportunities within the market and realised that no one in Merseyside was recycling PVCu window and door frames. Local companies were sending waste to landfill and this was not benefiting the organisations or the environment. Elixir Group was established to provide local waste management companies, councils, window companies and a range of other organisations with a simple solution to PVCu waste.

Based in a deprived community in Merseyside, our aim is to offer recycling services that benefit the environment and also play a major part in recycling people's lives through gaining meaningful employment and training. Today Elixir Group is well established within the plastics recycling industry, a highly competitive market, and is focused on creating opportunities for offenders.

Our experience: Elixir Recycling Facility

Elixir Recycling Facility accepts deliveries of PVCu window frames from all over the UK. This material is cut, cleaned and stripped of contaminants such as glass and metal before being fed into a mechanical shredding and granulating line. The end product of clean and decontaminated PVCu granules is sold within the UK market and used to manufacture new windows and other recycled plastic products. This commercial activity offers volunteering, training and employment opportunities to offenders. To date we have delivered employment and training opportunities to eight hundred offenders with 78% moving into further employment. The work experience provides offenders with pathways to further training and employment within a network of our commercial partners across the environmental, recycling, warehousing and logistic sectors.

These partners work with Elixir on commercial recycling projects, supplying or purchasing materials for recycling as well as recruiting from our trainees. Once a beneficiary has successfully completed their temporary employment contract and training programme, they can be referred within the partner network for further employment opportunities. Our commercial partners include a national waste management organisation, local skip companies and neighbourhood recycling centres.

Most beneficiaries are given temporary thirteen week or twenty-six week full time employment contracts, dependent upon the contract we are delivering. Referrals for jobs or volunteer placements come mainly from Merseyside Probation Trust or local prisons. During these contracts a bespoke, award winning training and motivational programme is delivered as well as an industry related qualification: a QCF level 1, 2 or 3 in Sustainable Recycling Operations which, combined with the work experience, means that the beneficiaries are ready and competent to move on with their career when they leave us to work with one of our partners. We ensure that a beneficiary is not recommended to a partner if they are not ready or are not committed to that job. Over time our industry partners have come to trust our referrals. Delivering a quality service is of great importance to us, as is developing long term relationships with our partners.

From the outset, our mission was to develop a commercially sustainable business with easy entry level job opportunities. These easy access jobs enable people who are disadvantaged in the labour market and have low level skills, to begin their journey in the working environment, gaining valuable transferable skills. Furthermore, and just as significantly, these jobs have a real impact on the self-esteem and confidence of the individuals, motivating them to continue to develop their career aspirations. As a direct result of the employment journey that begins at Elixir Group, offending rates are reduced by as much 93%.

From the beginning we have always had offenders as part of the core staff and supervisory team, including Ben our Chief Executive Officer, most of whom started on one of our volunteer or employment programmes. This creates trust within the new beneficiaries as well as inspiring them. Over 50% of the core team have an offending history, and after successfully completing the programme, have been offered permanent employment contracts and further training such as engineering NVQs, team leader training, train the trainer courses, management NVQs, environmental management NVQs and plant licences. The initial temporary contracts allow our management team to identify suitable individuals, and we will always recruit internally. Some of our employees have been with the group since the initial Future Jobs Fund contract in 2009. We also have a buddy system in place where a new beneficiary will be buddied up with a core team member, whom will mentor them, assisting with any work based or personal issues.

Our business was established specifically to create both social and environmental impact but the profit and commercial goals had to come first in order to create true sustainability. The board and key members of the team developed the values, vision and mission in a series of workshops and these are brought to life throughout the organisation.

Key learning

Elixir Group has a successful commercially sustainable business with clear cut social objectives. When establishing a social enterprise, evidence shows that most are set up from a passion to make a difference, but it is the commercial business idea which must be developed. We learned from first hand experience, never to be grant-dependent or to base a whole business around one specific contract. We started up with a contract from the Future Jobs Fund and did so with 100% success. However, although this contract was beneficial to us and contributed to the fast growth of Elixir, the business was not built around it and we had plans in place for the contract end in 2011. So for Elixir, the ability to adapt, to market changes, to new contracts and even a new government has proved invaluable.

The directors, both of whom are from a private sector background, were always committed to creating a social enterprise that was commercially driven, which would compete within the private sector. It is important that we offer a level of service to the public and private sector that is second to none.

We have learned the importance of raising awareness within the private sector of what a social enterprise is and the additional benefits we can provide through the supply chain. We send out welcome packs to new customers and suppliers, raising the awareness of the social impact that we bring about; we also send out certificates to partners, highlighting their support of the group.

Elixir invested in a public relations and marketing strategy over a twelve-month period, raising our profile across the public and private sectors, which proved extremely positive. It was important that the marketing strategy had different messages that the different sectors wanted to hear. Maybe most importantly of all when times are hard, it is the passion for the difference we make and the people we help that keeps us doing what we are doing.

