

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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the Grow Organisation UK Limited

cultivating futures

Pride & Prejudice

How we integrate ex offenders back in to the community



By Jacqui Starling

Introduction

This case study demonstrates The Grow Organisation's experience of integrating ex-offenders back in to the community. It describes how an effective model combines holistic, on-site personal development with visible activity in the community. It also describes some of the barriers we encountered. Accessing funding is the main barrier, closely followed by the lack of commercial employers and training organisations with experience of working with offenders and the challenges this can involve. In the current economic climate, employers are able to select the best candidates from the pool of applicants for any post and this leaves little room for those who have been removed from the labour market for a significant amount of time.

Work tasters and volunteering go some way to enabling ex-offenders to demonstrate their skills but it is important that providers understand the whole picture around why people commit crimes, how they need to be supported and why they may now be trusted.

Offenders often pursue self-employment (which can take the form of social enterprise) as a way of overcoming the selection process for getting a job, and the support offered to them needs to include established social enterprises providing specialist guidance on issues such as legal structures and measuring social impact.

Background

The Grow Organisation UK Ltd is a community focused social enterprise based in Norwich. We develop new business ideas in emerging markets to support local economic growth and to create opportunities for individuals. Our organisational aim is to reduce crime and re-offending, working in partnership with the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), prisons and support agencies. We provide training, work experience and employment to the long-term unemployed, offenders, ex-offenders and vulnerable groups through delivering general building trade and gardening services to elderly and vulnerable individuals in the community. We help individuals on our programmes to establish a solid work ethic, develop core values and access opportunities to a sustainable future. Ex-offenders work in teams on these contracts within the community. This helps to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour. Small niche providers, such as us, are the only opportunity for unemployed offenders in the area.

We work in the public and private sectors offering tailor made, cost effective and valuable services that have a direct benefit to the community and to individuals. Our customers like the way we do business, and we aim to develop our capacity so that we can meet the demand for services that align with their Corporate Social Responsibility commitments.

We are working with prisons to see if we can help them develop an internal enterprise to become a significant part of our supply chain for plants and trees. This helps build business awareness and could generate an income for the prison. If they make a surplus, it could be used to develop the business further and/or provide a bursary for those prisoners employed by the business on their release.

A recent Independent Monitoring Board's annual report published for HMP Norwich states that despite the commitment to improvement and the development of significant partnerships with employers, there is still not enough opportunity for all prisoners to take on meaningful employment or training. The report found that much of the work provided in the prison was

“mundane and archaic” and we believe that our work is an opportunity to develop tangible benefits for offenders working in a green environment which can contribute to positive outcomes both pre and post custody and can also develop business opportunities for the prison. The development process includes nurturing the individuals and helping them identify what personal strengths and weaknesses they have and offering targeted intervention to help them become successful whether they decide to work for themselves or enter paid employment.

Our experience: the Grow Organisation

We started to work directly with the prisons in 2011 to reduce prejudice towards serving offenders in the community and to cultivate a sense of pride for the offenders in their efforts and achievements. Our work teams deliver services to local authorities and housing trusts under contract and our additional customers include individuals, other public organisations and tourist attractions.

We wanted to achieve reintegration of offenders in to the community by building the confidence of everyone involved and the model we have set up includes participants going to work in our team kit so they are identified as part of our teams (who are known for including offenders) but are not ostracised by being segregated through the wearing of orange jackets under the rules of Community Payback. It is vital that our customers, staff and the local residents/community are committed to this approach in order to make it work. Some of the barriers we encountered were around public perceptions but we also had to overcome some resistance from our own workforce to working with offenders. Once they were able to see that the offenders we wanted to work with were just normal guys who had lost their way, and had recognised that and wanted to change, a partnership approach developed between staff and offenders to achieve something positive and to learn from each other.

We still work in partnership with the prison, however, as changes to the justice system have been implemented, we have seen a reduction in referrals and the communication channels have become increasingly slow and heavy on administration. This means that some offenders are unable to access our services whilst in custody as the paperwork takes longer than their custodial sentence. Our outcomes are frustratingly difficult to determine as prisons do not track this themselves and the offenders very often get as far away from “the system” as possible on their release. This makes it hard for us to prove tangible employment outcomes if the offenders choose not to stay in touch.

This has been valuable learning for us as we are constantly told that our programmes contribute to the reduction in re-offending, and we know that individuals leave us with practical knowledge, interpersonal skills and motivation, in particular:

- Building self esteem
- Building confidence
- Integration back in the community through visible restorative justice activity
- Taking pride in (and responsibility for) improvements to the local community and the environment.

In terms of identifying progression pathways in to employment, our programme looked at the attitudes of employers to offenders, what influenced employers and what changed their receptiveness to employing an (ex) offender. We also looked at the attitudes that offenders have towards employers.

The main issues that employers had were:

- Fear of crime on the premises
- Personal aversion to certain crimes
- Feeling that they won't know the whole story
- Negative responses from their customers
- Feeling unsupported if something should go wrong.

The main issues for offenders were:

- Being segregated or picked on
- Not being given a fair chance to prove themselves
- Feeling unsupported if something should go wrong.

There is common ground around the need for support in the workplace for both parties, which is our next key area of development.

Key learning

Our key learning points have been easy to identify and they underpin our belief that we have the right strategy and model for the outcomes we seek to achieve – whether these are hard outcomes for the criminal justice system or soft outcomes for the offender. All of the learning points are replicable by other organisations. Offenders are human, which means that the learning will always be fluid and rarely from a text book. These are our conclusions on what we learnt that makes a difference.

Self-esteem for one person may be wearing clean clothes, for another it is the ability to support their family financially. We should not make blanket assumptions about what makes people proud of themselves.

Identifying transferable skills and how to utilise them – it is important to be creative; if an offender has been a persistent burglar, they could be the best person to advise on security! Officers working in the Prison Industries and service providers such as A4E will put together a summary of the offender's training which helps us see how these skills can be utilised in different roles or sectors. Employer perspectives on this, in an advisory capacity, can be invaluable. We have discovered that virtually all skills are transferable - it is a question of how to make them fit into the job market in a way that attracts employers.

There are many aspects of life in custody that are appealing to employers, such as: regimented time-keeping; the ability to respond to authority; high standards of work; attention to detail – attributes that many mainstream job seekers lack. Employers can generally expect great loyalty from ex-offender employees and appreciation for the opportunity, especially where in-work support continues through Probation Trusts or other Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations.

We have also learned about different aspects of what causes offending behaviours and this is an important part of our work, for example:

- **Putting together a holistic package** – each issue needs to be identified, addressed and supported. A close working partnership with the prison's Reducing Re-offending team is very important, and provides the link to other agencies that form part of the offender's journey

- **The distinction between core traits and learned behaviours** – ways in which the individual has adapted from their peers or the environment that have contributed to who they are and how they think
- **Identifying triggers and diversions** – what made this person offend, how can their attention be diverted when that temptation arises again? Family Liaison Officers can help with this.

What would we have done differently, knowing what we know now? We would have done the same thing earlier and approached the senior prison staff directly to ask what they needed, rather than relying only on what other support agencies told us.

In order for our work to become easier, the policy on commissioning employability interventions has to change. Prime Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) providers are not offering the approaches that educate offenders in the way employers want. There should be more collaborative working (the Children's Services Common Assessment Framework is an excellent example) so that organisations are not doubling up on interventions nor leaving essential gaps.

There is also a need for a shared approach to enable providers to access data to support them in measuring the value of their interventions. So many organisations fail to produce hard evidence because there is insufficient tracking of the individual participants. Whilst it may not be the administrative responsibility of the justice system to collect this intelligence, unless tagging or probation is implemented, there are other agencies that do have data such as the Department for Work and Pensions. The data sharing protocols are so stringent and inflexible that there is no capacity for positive information sharing and this creates problems in measuring the effectiveness of any individual action.

However we do need to identify how we obtain the information that would translate these soft outcomes to hard evidence and how we measure social impact. We recognise that. If this is difficult for us, there must be others who are struggling as well, no matter how valued their work is. This is of particular significance when looking at the evidence required for various funding streams and outcome based contracts.

It is clear from our work within the prison that whilst functional skills and vocational training are available, they are not mandatory. Offenders in custody often cannot see the benefit of training until they are Released on Temporary Licence (ROTL) or in a post-release work placement - by which time the opportunity for training has passed them by. This illustrates the need for employability initiatives delivered in prisons – delivered by agencies that are not perceived by offenders as just an extension of prison staff, as this does not engage them.

All of these changes would mean that social enterprises could deliver targeted, accessible and informed projects that impact directly on identified needs, which would make the outcomes we achieve more robust and assist with future income generation.

