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Doing things differently:
Step changes in skills & inclusion

National
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BLACK &
MINORITY
ETHNIC
LEARNERS

OFFENDERS &
EX-OFFENDERS

PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITIES

a **policy connect** activity

‘Those without skills
will be left stranded
economically and
divorced from the
mainstream socially’

KEY STATISTICS

The relationship between skills attainment, employment and reoffending is a complex one. However, the statistics clearly demonstrate that exclusion from the labour market significantly increases the probability of an individual reoffending. As the City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development report in its evidence to the Inquiry, the likelihood of reoffending is usually dependent on access to meaningful and sustainable employment.

As a recent Government Strategy paper notes, skills deficits are not the only barriers to employment and the social inclusion of offenders, and cannot be addressed in isolation from other difficulties which these learners face, such as substance abuse, homelessness and broken relationships.¹ As organisations such as CRISIS and Switchback comment: ‘Many ex-offenders need to be supported holistically to stabilise all areas of their lives, in order to bring about the necessary lasting change that results in sustained employment’. It is important to note that the offender population contains both BME and disabled people. The problems identified for these learners elsewhere in this report will again apply here.

Overview:

- 52% of male offenders and 71% of female offenders have no qualifications whatsoever²
- 48% of prisoners have literacy skills at or below Level 1 and 65% have numeracy skills at or below Level 1³
- 67% of offenders were unemployed at the time of imprisonment
- 76% of prisoners do not have paid employment to go to on release⁴
- Almost half of all prisoners say that employment (48%) and skills deficits (42%) are most important to their sentence plan⁵
- Almost 90% of prisoners under the age of 21 re-offend within 2 years and almost two thirds of adult prisoners re-offend within 2 years⁶
- 45,600 offenders were released from sentences of 12 months or more (including indeterminate sentences) in 2008⁷
- The total cost of recorded crime committed by re-offenders is estimated at around £11 billion per year⁸

1 HM Government, Reducing Reoffending Through Skills and Employment, p.6 (2005)

2 Home Office, Reducing Reoffending: National Action Plan, p.15 (2004)

3 Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, Skills for Life: Changing Lives, p.13 (2009)

4 HM Government, Reducing Reoffending Through Skills and Employment, p.12 (2005)

5 Duncan Stewart, Ministry of Justice, The problems and needs of newly sentenced prisoners: results from a national survey, p.17 (2008)

6 Learning and Skills Support Group of the National Council for Independent Monitoring Boards, Opportunity or not?, p.5 (2008)

7 Gordon Marsden MP to the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, Maria Eagle MP

<http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2010-01-07a.309218.h&m=1425#g309218.q0>

8 HM Government, Reducing Reoffending Through Skills and Employment, p.10 (2005)

ACCESS

Sentencing

The initial sentencing process itself can be a barrier to accessing vocational learning. As the Prisoners’ Education Trust states in its evidence to the Inquiry, prisoners serving short sentences are often not eligible for vocational courses within prison workshops as they will not have time to complete the qualifications offered.

Participants highlighted the importance of meeting the needs of offenders with short sentences through the consideration of education and training within the initial sentence planning process. As Geoffrey Wolfson, Trustee of the Prisoners’ Education Trust, told this Inquiry: “if employability is King, then there must be, as a condition in sentencing and as an essential part of sentence planning, a requirement to undertake an agreed programme in education and/or training”.

During this Inquiry participants also stressed the need for more short training courses for offenders serving short sentences with a focus on employability skills, such as CV writing and job application processes, as well as information on how to access training and employment services on release. As the Public Accounts Committee report concludes, there is a need to ‘develop evidence-based, intensive programmes, aimed at getting offenders serving sentences under 12 months into local employment on release or signposting them towards further training in the community.’⁹

Recommendation

The Ministry of Justice should further explore the inclusion of education and training programmes within the sentencing process, particularly for offenders serving short term sentences, including those who are on remand or licence recall.

Institutional Limitations

The Inquiry found that the strict operational priorities of the prison regime can place practical limitations on learning. As noted in the latest Ofsted report, ‘prison activities are often arranged at times which clash with offenders’ learning schedules so that they miss sessions without prior notice to tutors’.¹⁰ Security constraints can also inhibit offender access to ICT learning resources. According to a survey by the Prisoners’ Education Trust, a large proportion of offenders said having access to the internet (62%) and a simple word processor (48%) was most important to making learning easier.¹¹ In some cases these limitations can prevent an offender from completing a course, particularly those participating in distance learning courses, as they may be unable to access an online examination.¹²

Participants to the Inquiry also noted a lack of incentives to encourage offenders to participate in learning. Bobby Cummines, Chief Executive of UNLOCK and former offender, noted that in his experience offenders who engage in learning in prison are sometimes paid less than offenders who engage in menial prison work: “You are penalised for trying to better yourself”. In addition, offenders who engage in learning

9 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, Meeting Needs? The Offenders’ Learning and Skills Service, p.5 (2008)

10 Ofsted, The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2008/09, p.55 (2009)

11 Prisoners’ Education Trust/ Inside Time/ RBE Consultancy Ltd, Brain Cells: Listening to Prison Learners, p.20 (2009)

12 Prisoners’ Education Trust, A Learning Matters Briefing: Prisoners, ICT and Learning, p.1 (2009)

can lose out on ‘wing privileges’, such as phone calls or access to the gymnasium, because their learning schedule does not coordinate with the strict prison timetable.

Participants also noted the vital role which individual Prison Governors can play in fostering this culture for learning amongst prison staff. A recent survey by the Prisoners’ Education Trust found that only 18% of offenders felt supported by prison officers in their learning.¹³ The Inquiry identified a need to support and incentivise learning through prison officers, who may want to support prisoner learning but do not have the capacity, knowledge or encouragement to do so.¹⁴ In addition, participants highlighted the useful role that offender peer mentoring can play in providing aspiration for fellow offenders to engage in learning, and highlighted the need to incentivise offenders to engage in such peer learning programmes. As Pat Jones, Director of the Prisoners’ Education Trust, said: “this is a very valuable activity with the potential to impact positively on attitudes as well as increase offenders’ experience of social inclusion”.

Participants said that skills provision should be better integrated with the operational priorities of the prison regime and that a culture change regarding the role of learning throughout the prison system is needed. As the OCR commented in its evidence to this Inquiry, ‘without a consistent institutional culture, learning and skills will continue to face an uphill battle’.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Justice should work towards a culture change within the prison system by making participation in education and training an integral part of the daily prison regime. Additionally, prison staff should be enabled to encourage offenders to participate in learning through the use of incentives such as wing privileges.

13 Prisoners’ Education Trust/ Inside Time/ RBE Consultancy Ltd, Brain Cells: Listening to Prison Learners, p20 (2009)

14 The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, ‘Wings of Learning: the role of the prison officer in supporting prisoner education’ (2005)

CASE STUDY

The Prisoners’ Education Trust

Since 1990, Prisoners’ Education Trust has been providing learning opportunities for offenders in custody to broaden their horizons and to focus on a more positive life on release, whenever that may come. Whilst the Prisoners’ Education Trust’s primary focus remains with providing funding for distance learning courses, including administering grants for those beginning Open University study with funding from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, over time the Trust has developed other projects which tackle key areas of interest, including peer mentoring for learning.

The Trust has developed and successfully delivered a peer mentoring programme in a number of Young Offender Institutions and has now also delivered the programme in twelve adult prisons. The programme consists of recruiting peer mentors, prisoners who have themselves been successful learners or who are showing a genuine interest in education, to provide support to other learners in prison. In order to equip the future mentors with the skills needed for their role, the Trust provides an NOCN level 2 peer mentoring course which can be regionally or nationally accredited. This will ensure that not only the peer mentoring sessions are delivered to recognised standards but also that the mentors get a qualification that they can use after release.

The Trust makes over 2000 grants to offenders every year

‘Robert’

‘Robert’ acts as a learning mentor for fellow inmates.

‘I got involved with the Learning Mentor Scheme to help other prisoners because when a teacher tries to help them the prisoners throw it back in their faces. I feel that when I mentor a prisoner, they are always respectful towards me because I know where they are coming from and I know how to get the work across to them.

‘I hope to achieve personal satisfaction through helping other people and I feel that I achieve this every day. When I go back to my cell I reflect on my day’s work as a learning mentor and I feel really happy within myself because I know other prisoners are back in their cells and nine out of ten are happy with their day’s work, which means I have been successful within my work.’

‘Mack’ is currently undertaking distance learning at degree level through the Open University.

He said:



I think it is a credit to the OU that just about every prison has access to their courses and everyone is welcome to study. I decided that now was the time to re-address my academic qualifications, and the thought of studying a subject I was genuinely interested in gave me a lift.

Should I hopefully complete the course and receive my degree, I am sure that it will prove invaluable when submitting my C.V. for jobs. A degree from the OU shows potential employers that the possible candidate is dedicated, committed, self-reliant and worth further investigation.

With the negative implications of having a criminal record, anything that can help must be something worth working for.



CASE STUDY

learndirect

Guy Pottle, 23, comes from a deprived area of Essex. Having left school at 16 with no qualifications, his experience of education had not been a positive one when he arrived at HMP/YOI Chelmsford in November 2006.

However, he soon caught the learning bug when starting at the prison's Every Step learndirect centre. He has since gained numerous qualifications with learndirect, including levels 1 and 2 in Numeracy and Literacy and levels 2 and 3 ITQ, a nationally recognised vocational IT qualification.

After growing in confidence he began mentoring other learners at the centre and has recently completed a teaching qualification. His hard work has led to a firm offer of employment from Every Step as a Skills for Life tutor.

His journey inspired him to write a book, published in 2009, called "With me Every Step of the Way - A journey of discovery and achievement". This has received praise from the Ministry of Justice.

Guy said:

"With learndirect you can go at your own pace and not have to worry about rushing. There's less pressure on you, because if you don't get it right first time, you can go back and repeat the section. The centre gives me a nice, quiet environment to learn in.

"I'm grateful for the support I've received throughout my learning journey. The Every Step team is like an extended family to me. They care about me as an individual and for me that's very important and encouraging.

"Learning continues to bring a positive change in who I am. I'm a different person now. It has allowed me to feel pride not only in my own achievements but others achievements as well".

Guy believes he has his tutor, Stephen Orbell, to thank for his success:



Stephen is a really great teacher. He gives me personal one-to-one attention, which I didn't really get at school. I've got ADHD, and Stephen understands what I need and supports me. Sometimes the learndirect courses can be a bit tricky, but Stephen is a really good teacher with everyone.



PROGRESSION

Higher Levels of Learning

The Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS) resources focus on the priority needs of the majority of offenders, with provision directed at ensuring prisoners reach Level 2 in literacy, numeracy and other basic skills. However, participants told this Inquiry that this limited provision does not address the wide ranging skills needs of all offenders. Some offenders are capable of achieving higher skills levels: according to Open University (OU) statistics, more than 1,000 prisoners are currently studying OU courses in prisons across the UK.

Participants noted the valuable role of voluntary organisations in filling these gaps in provision, as well as the importance of distance learning in providing offenders with a wider choice of opportunities through specialised providers. However, a survey by the Prisoners' Education Trust found that many offenders are unaware of these opportunities due to poor information and careers guidance.¹⁵ Greater awareness is needed within prisons of the full range of courses available, including Level 3 and above courses which may fall outside of mainstream OLASS funding, to ensure the needs of all offenders are met.

Recommendation

Careers information and advice services (CIAS) within prison should be made aware of the full range of learning and skills opportunities available, including those which fall outside the remit of mainstream OLASS funding, and promote these opportunities to offenders.

Churn factor

A major barrier to offender skills development identified during this Inquiry is the regular transfer of offenders between prisons. According to the National Audit Office, one third of courses started in prison are not completed, half of which are as a direct result of the release or transfer of prisoners, wasting an estimated £30 million annually.¹⁶ This problem also serves to reinforce the negative experiences of education which the majority of offenders encounter.

The development of the new OLASS core curriculum through the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) offers an opportunity to address this issue through the introduction of modular based progression routes. These 'bite sized' units enable learners to accumulate credits leading to a full qualification. Participants said that, when implemented, this should reduce the disruption to learning which transfer between prisons can cause, as well as help to motivate offenders through recognition of their incremental achievements.

Another barrier to learning progression noted during the Inquiry is loss of offender learning records during transfer between prisons. A recent Ofsted report attributed this problem to 'the lack of a coherent management information system'.¹⁷ Participants

¹⁵ Prisoners' Education Trust/ Inside Time/RBE Consultancy Ltd, Brain Cells: Listening to Prison Learners, p23 (2009)

¹⁶ National Audit Office, Meeting Needs? The Offenders' Learning and Skills Service, p.7 (2008)

¹⁷ Ofsted, The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2008/09, p.54 (2009)

welcomed the Virtual Campus initiative, currently being trialled in two regions, which allows offenders to access online learning tools and provides an up-to-date record of the learner's achievements. Participants said that as this new resource will be accessible throughout the prison system it should help to improve the continuity of learning provision. However, as June Marriott, Education Manager at HM Wormwood Scrubs Prison, noted: "if there are only 5 computers for 1200 prisoners then the Virtual Campus will be limited in its capacity". It is evident that this new learning tool will only be effective if there is continued investment in ICT resources.

Recommendation

The Government should continue to invest in the development and implementation of the Virtual Campus learning environment, and continue to develop online learning technologies and resources for prisoner skill development.

Joining up of provision 'through the gate'

During this Inquiry, participants highlighted the fragmentation of skills provision for prisoners. There is an urgent need to ensure a smooth transition from prison to the wider community, and particularly to ensure that there are opportunities for offenders to continue their skills development upon release. As the Inquiry into the Future for Life Long Learning says: 'if an ex-offender does not find a secure base - accommodation, employment and/or an established training place - within just three weeks of coming out, any previous investment in education and training is likely to be completely wasted... It would be perverse to invest more in rehabilitation programmes and leave it to chance outside the gates'.¹⁸ Participants identified the need for more effective commissioning and coordination of skills provision both within prisons and the wider community. Greater cross-departmental collaboration, as well as better collection and analysis of data on skills attainment, are needed to help address this fragmentation of learning provision.

The Inquiry found that coordination between prison and mainstream learning providers is often poor, resulting in a disconnect in skills provision between prison and release. This lack of collaboration means there are few support mechanisms to help ex-offenders access training and employment services in the wider community. Poor record keeping of skills attainment in prison further hinders the skills progression of offenders within mainstream institutions. As CRISIS remarked in evidence to this Inquiry: 'without detailed information about an individual and their progress in prison it is harder for services to identify any specific support needs'.

A report by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts calls for the improved transfer of data on the progression and employment pathways for ex-offenders both between prisons, and between prison and the wider community, and that this information be shared across all agencies to better monitor the impact of interventions.¹⁹ Malcolm Jenkin, Director of Interventions at the London Probation

Service, also commented on the need to "develop an offender tracking mechanism to monitor progression in order to better identify what type of skills training is the most effective at progressing offenders into sustainable employment".

Participants were optimistic about the role of the new MIAP system (Managing Information Across Partners), currently being trialled, and its ability to improve the transfer of data between prison institutions and learning providers, as well as between prison and probation agencies. However, the Prisoners' Education Trust raised concerns as to whether those courses which fall outside of the core curriculum funded by OLASS, such as non-accredited courses, will be included within MIAP. Participants noted that such courses can still equip prisoners with useful knowledge and provide evidence of their commitment to learning.

As well as greater collaboration between learning providers, participants in the Inquiry also agreed on the need for collaboration between Government departments to create greater continuity in skills provision for offenders. The new Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAA) will provide scrutiny of the way in which public bodies are working together to meet the needs of the people they serve, including contributions from HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted. As Geoffrey Wolfson, a Trustee of the Prisoners' Education Trust, told this Inquiry: "this provides an opportunity for the development of a forum between the relevant Agencies and Inspectorates to use this information to work together to more effectively commission skills provision for offenders".

Recommendation

A quarterly best practice sharing forum should be set up at the regional level between all relevant providers, including HM Prison Service, HM Probation Service, NOMS and OLASS. This forum should be an opportunity for providers to reflect on, and commission according to, the new Comprehensive Area Assessment reports.

¹⁸ Professor Tom Schuller, Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, Crime and Lifelong Learning Thematic Paper 5, p.39 (2009)

¹⁹ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, Meeting Needs? The Offenders' Learning and Skills Service, p.6 (2008)

CASE STUDY

The Virtual Campus

The Meganexus secure web based resettlement tool can now be used by learners from within prison. The Virtual Campus adheres to a top level security approved by the Ministry of justice. Based on the 7 pathways to resettlement (9 for women), the Virtual Campus offers learners the chance to access tools which assist them on their journey to integrate more easily into society and better prepare them for the labour market.

Home office statistics show that 60% of offenders who are released from prison re-offend within 2 years. Re-offending is expensive: it costs £146,000 to put someone through court and keep them in prison for a year. Having a job is a prime influence on reducing recidivism.

When a learner completes their registration onto the Virtual Campus, the system will automatically flag any job opportunities, courses and workshops that may be of interest to the learner so they immediately feel engaged. They can also search for any of these opportunities at their own leisure.

The Virtual Campus caters for learners of all abilities. The automatic CV builder has two options. One of the options caters for those with low literacy levels. This means that they can fill in a series of tick boxes and a CV will be created for them which is saved to an eportfolio of work which they can take with them from prison to prison or onto probation.

The Virtual Campus has partnerships with the key OLASS providers across the UK and has recently formed a partnership with the Open University (OU) to allow learners to complete online courses within prison. The 'Openings' courses will be available for the first intake of learners in March. The learner can also save assignments or any other documents to their eportfolio so they can continue learning outside of prison.

Learners have the ability to communicate to advisors and tutors through our secure relay messaging functionality. This allows offenders to have the support that they need to succeed. There are over a 1000 learners on the Virtual Campus and for many of these people the experience has been transformational.

Feedback from a learner using the Virtual Campus from prison:



I have looked at the different jobs on the VC and was really surprised to see that the jobs were not just casual or low level, many of them are really good jobs that with the right qualifications I now know I could do. Using the VC has given me a lot more confidence in myself and my abilities. I went through the barrier tool with my adviser and it got me thinking about things that I would have not given much thought to before.

I have started to address some of the things that I didn't do so well. I am confident that I will not have to come back to prison because it has shown me that there are other ways to learn new things and I am hoping to go to university when I get released.



EMPLOYMENT

Employability

The skills deficit is not the only barrier to employment for ex-offenders. The Government skills strategy published in 2005 notes that 'if training for offenders is to lead to jobs, it must match employer needs and local job opportunities'.²⁰ However, the high unemployment levels of ex-offenders would suggest that most do not possess the skills required by employers.

This Inquiry found that the types of vocational skills offered within prison are limited, reducing the career pathways available to offenders. OLASS provision funds courses from the core National Qualification Framework. However, this can restrict learner choice by limiting the provision of other more highly specialised vocational courses which employers or trade bodies may value.

Participants also told this Inquiry that there is a lack of variety of vocational training offered in prisons, and that the capacity of the HM Prison Service vocational workshops is not currently able to meet demand. This can result in the clustering of skills training for offenders within particular, usually low skilled, sectors which may not align with labour market demand. The Prisoners' Education Trust argues for 'more investment to create training in 'white collar' areas such as multi-media and graphic design or project management work'. It is clear that offenders need access to a greater variety of training and vocational workshops to help increase their employment opportunities on release.

Participants told the Inquiry that Government performance targets can result in learning providers placing an emphasis on the accumulation of qualifications, rather than the employability of the offender. As the UKCES notes, 'not all successful skills acquisition involves acquiring qualifications and not all skills are equally valuable'.²¹ As a result, 'soft skills' such as punctuality, communication and the ability to work in a team are largely neglected. However, a survey by the CIPD found that employers place these skills above relevant technical qualifications.²² Participants recognised the importance of ensuring that offenders have opportunities to develop their overall employability as well as gain formal qualifications.

Employer Engagement

Employer preconceptions about offenders and poor employer engagement in the development and delivery of learning for offenders also act as barriers to employment. As evidence from the Switchback programme says, ex-offenders: 'often find it difficult to access employment that is not part of a scheme specifically set up for ex-offenders with sympathetic employers'. The Inquiry identified the value of work trials and work placements in addressing such attitudes, as they provide an opportunity to expose the employer to the offender, helping to address any preconceived assumptions. Unfortunately, as Ofsted reported: 'In many cases...offenders are unable to gain work experience because of the limitations of release under temporary licence arrangements'.²³ Therefore, it is important that such opportunities are expanded.

20 HM Government, Reducing Reoffending Through Skills and Employment, p.6 (2005)

21 UKCES, Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK, p.37, (2009)

22 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Employing Ex-Offenders to Capture Talent, Figure 7 p.11 (2007)

23 Ofsted, The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2008/09, p.54 (2009)

The Government Strategy of 2006 emphasised the importance of engaging employers in offender learning, but relationships between prisons and employers are still poor with few employer led training initiatives.²⁴ Some of the successful training initiatives identified during this Inquiry are those with direct relationships between local employers and prisons. For example, the employer Timpson runs a shoe repair workshop within HMP Wandsworth which provides offenders with training and real work experience, with a view to employment on release. However, as the Prisoners' Education Trust told this Inquiry, labour market demand is volatile and prisoners are often released in areas different from those in which they served most of their sentence. In these cases a focus on skills led by local employer demand may not always be most effective in enabling access to employment.

Participants in the Inquiry identified the valuable role which job brokers can play in helping to encourage employers to recruit ex-offenders, as well as in matching ex-offenders with employment opportunities in the area in which they are released. A participant in the Inquiry noted: "businesses are generally more responsive to approaches from fellow employers when considering recruitment of an ex-offender". This view is supported by evidence from a survey, conducted by the CIPD, in which 42% of businesses said that they would be more inclined to employ an ex-offender if they had access to networks of employers who had previous experience of this.²⁵ Therefore it is vital that exemplar employers champion the cause and promote best practice within the business community. Government should lead by example, by incentivising local authorities to use ex-offender job brokers when commissioning, for example, seasonal labour.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Justice should explore the expansion of release on temporary licence for work experience and work trials, and set up an employer network where exemplar employers can share best practice of recruiting and employing ex-offenders.

In addition, the Inquiry noted the critical role which reformed offenders who act as mentors can play in providing aspiration and support for offenders through their initial transition from prison into work. The Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning stresses the contribution which 'drawing on and respecting the experience of reformed offenders... can make to helping others to leave crime behind'.²⁶

24 HM Government, Reducing Reoffending Through Skills and Employment: Next Steps, p.3 (2006)

25 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Employing Ex-Offenders to Capture Talent, Figure 10 p.15 (2007)

26 Professor Tom Schuller, Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, Crime and Lifelong Learning Thematic Paper 5, p.28 (2009)

CASE STUDY

Blue Sky Development and Regeneration

Blue Sky is a social enterprise whose sole aim is to get ex-offenders into permanent jobs. As such it is probably the only company in the country for whom a criminal record is a pre-requisite for a job.

Blue Sky maintains municipal parks and open spaces. A typical Blue Sky team will have up to 5 team members on 6-month contracts, under the supervision of a permanent supervisor, invariably an ex-offender too. Currently, Blue Sky is operational in the Thames Valley, West London (Hillingdon and Ealing), the South West (Bristol and Gloucester) and has a franchise in Manchester. In its short lifetime Blue Sky has provided jobs to 200 people, making it one of the country's most prolific employers of ex-prisoners. Just over 46% of its recruits leave to a permanent job, and the re-offending rate among its alumni is lower than 14%, against a national average of 60%.

Tony Williams

Tony Williams is 35 years old and has been working as the Blue Sky Supervisor in Ealing for the last two years. From a young child to the age of 30 Tony was involved in a wide range of offences, culminating in robbery, to support his drug habit. As such he was registered as a Prolific and Priority Offender (PPO) and going back and forth to prison had become second nature. On leaving prison in September 2005 his probation officer told him about Blue Sky and from there Tony was interviewed and given a job as a grounds maintenance operative in Slough. During this time Tony was supported to get a bank account and a driving licence. The contractor, Slough Accord, were so impressed with the standard of his work and his level of commitment they offered him full-time employment when his six-month contract with Blue Sky ended.

After a couple of years working for Slough Accord, Tony reapplied to Blue Sky to work as a supervisor and mentor. During the summer months, Tony supervises a team of up to ten ex-offenders with sole responsibility for the grounds maintenance of the cemeteries in the London Borough of Ealing, working in partnership with Veolia Environment Services (UK) Plc. In addition to employment, training has been an important component in helping Tony to succeed. Since working with Blue Sky he has completed accredited training in First Aid, Ride on Mowers, PA1-PA6 Spraying Licence, Care of Cemeteries Training Scheme (COTS) in addition to all the "soft skills" he has learnt along the way.

As Tony said:



Blue Sky has helped to sort my life out. It has helped me to understand things better, like the benefits of saving money and having a job. It has helped guide me away from crime and drugs. I had skills before I started breaking the law, but in that way of life you forget about the basic stuff. Blue Sky helped to pick up the pieces, almost like starting from scratch, re-learning them. Blue Sky has helped change my life; it's the only thing that ever worked for me. I've been on other programmes, but they haven't worked.

You've got to be motivated, got to want to change your life. Blue Sky offers the help and gives you every opportunity but you've got to help yourself as well, put your part in. Also, attendance and being on time is very important, as well as the standard of your work - it's a proper job after all.

I'm now really enjoying my role as a supervisor - helping others facing the same issues as I did. I cannot believe I have not been in trouble for all these years and I feel whole again and optimistic about the future.

