

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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Aspire Oxford – Reducing Reoffending Through Social Enterprise



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Introduction

This case study presents Aspire's experience of developing a successful textiles recycling social enterprise to create high quality, rewarding employment and training for ex-offenders and disadvantaged people in Oxfordshire. Our aim was to create a social business informed by the interlinking triple bottom line: people, planet and profit. We wanted to develop a sustainable social enterprise with low initial start-up costs that would offer accessible and commercially robust work placement and training opportunities to anyone facing barriers to paid work. Operating alongside and complementing our existing enterprises, the textiles project needed to offer entry level opportunities with scope for trainees to develop a broad base of transferable skills. Our services are provided in low risk work environments that are physically and emotionally safe, in order to ensure that there are minimal triggers that could cause relapses and re-offending. We aim to support the delivery of accredited qualifications, offering multiple opportunities for partnership working across the private, public and third sectors. At the same time we will increase reuse and recycling and divert waste from landfill, appeal to and engage the public, build our local profile, enhance the Aspire brand and generate meaningful levels of revenue for our charity through high financial returns.

We are keen to open up learning opportunities for both established and start up social enterprises, to learn from fellow case study presentations and share our experience. Within this case study we will discuss the barriers and difficulties we have encountered.

Background

Aspire is an Oxford based social enterprise with charitable status. We support ex-offenders and people who have experienced homelessness, social exclusion and economic disadvantage to achieve positive change in their lives through access to employment and work focused training in real business environments. Our ultimate objective is to see individuals move from unemployment, offending behaviour, substance misuse and insecure housing to permanent employment and independent living sustained through recovery and reform. Aspire's success rate moving trainees into employment is three times the UK Work Programme average, with 71% of trainees still in work after six months. We estimate that our work saves the public purse over £1m annually.¹

This is achieved through a mixture of paid and unpaid, full and part time opportunities in one of five Aspire enterprises, complemented by external work placements. We offer placements in:

- Grounds maintenance and gardening
- Textiles, furniture and office waste recycling
- Removals
- Cleaning, painting and decorating
- Growing fruit, vegetables and flowers at our Heritage Kitchen Garden in Burford.

We have pursued strong working relationships with Thames Valley Police and Probation Trust, Bullingdon and Springhill prisons, delivering employability skills workshops and training events, employment advice surgeries and specialist back to work clinics in a range of locations. Our trainees attend specialist horticultural courses at Springhill and our services to the prisons include offering telephone interviews to serving prisoners entering our programme to streamline the placement process, enabling through-the-gate support.

Our work has received both countywide and national recognition including: The Guardian newspaper Charity of the Year award 2012; the Oxfordshire Business Awards' Charity and Community Award 2012; and the OCVA 2012 Partnership Award.

Our experience: Textiles Recycling Enterprise

Our textiles recycling enterprise was started in the summer of 2010, when a former Aspire trainee working in fashion retail, suggested that we consider textiles reuse, repair and recycling as a potential social enterprise activity. A review of the local market, textile values and sector growth projections encouraged us to proceed, and we developed a pilot project with a donations drop off point adjacent to our Heritage Kitchen Garden project based at Burford Garden Company in the Cotswolds. With their support and promotion, a regular supply of high quality clothing, shoes, books, toys and general household items was soon established, necessitating once or twice weekly collections by teams on location at the garden site. The donated goods were delivered back to our offices, to be sorted by volunteers and trainees, a fledgling recycling team.

The average period of unemployment for an Aspire trainee is 6.8 years, and the average work placement is two to three days per week for nine months. Trainees either apply for a placement independently or are referred through one of our referring agencies.

Aspire trainees spend every day delivering high quality commercial services and fulfilling contractual responsibilities. Trainees take ownership of their work teams, productivity and quality of service and appreciate the often ambassadorial role they have as representatives of our organisation, promoting it to diverse audiences. We promote trainees into supervisory and team leader positions wherever possible, retaining valuable staff for our own business growth while increasing the number of positive role models and mentors throughout our organisation.

In the first eighteen months of running this service, eighteen tonnes of donations were received generating £9,000 and the enterprise developed a momentum with clear potential for social, financial and environmental sustainability. Word of mouth was an invaluable ally during this period and we found ourselves increasingly being offered additional items, particularly furniture, alongside requests to provide house and office clearance services. A move to new premises in December 2010 gave us the space to receive and store a larger volume of goods, and as our stock grew and diversified we launched a weekly general goods market stall and online retail account, supplementary activities to the bulk onward sale of the majority of the textiles.

In May 2012 we approached Oxford City Council with a business plan to develop textiles recycling into a dedicated new enterprise. With support from the Single Homeless Strategy Group we secured £10,000 seed funding and purchased ten Aspire branded steel textile donation banks. We approached our network of public, private and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector partners including the Co-operative Supermarket, Dalton Barracks, Siemens and Unipart, and arranged location sites around Oxfordshire. All the donation banks included their own local community focused message boards, promoting the social, environmental and financial impact of donations from each bank. We emphasised the local aspect of our work, that all beneficiaries are in Oxfordshire and that 100% of the money raised from donations supports local Aspire trainees. In the first six months thirty-two tonnes of textiles were received and diverted from landfill, generating £16,000 revenue. The project was and continues to be tremendously popular with trainees, who drive collection vans, empty banks, run community recycling drives, sort, weigh and record donations, repair and resell high quality items (online and shop retail) and arrange the forward bulk sale of lower quality clothing.

In January 2013 we launched a new phase to this programme, partnering with local schools, colleges and community groups. A further £9,300 funding was secured for twenty additional banks, with required match funding raised through a mixture of community, corporate and major donor

fundraising. All host educational and community establishments will receive a 20% rebate on all the money raised from textile donations at their site, alongside quarterly environmental and social impact reports. Green Schools are promoting the project with Aspire. Ten new banks have been on site since June 2013 and we anticipate continuing growth and development of this enterprise.

The success of the textiles recycling enterprise has allowed us to increase the numbers of trainees we support and expand the scope of training and accredited employability qualifications we are able to offer. In 2011 Aspire supported one hundred and fourteen trainees, 62% of these had recent histories of offending and 94% did not re-offend. A further 75% of trainees were in recovery from substance misuse, with 87% maintaining successful recoveries. In 2011 forty trainees moved into paid work. In 2012 we supported one hundred and sixty trainees, a 40% increase on 2011. Of these 71% had recent histories of offending and 98% did not re-offend. A further 64% of trainees were in recovery from substance misuse, with 93% maintaining successful recoveries. In 2012 our success rate moving trainees into employment was three times the UK Work Programme average. In the first three months of 2013 we moved eleven trainees into full time work and off all welfare benefits. We project that over the next three years the textiles recycling enterprise will provide work placement and training opportunities for a further sixty trainees, divert over two hundred and thirty tonnes of waste from landfill and generate vital revenue for our business to continue to deliver these benefits.

Key learning

The success of all Aspire enterprises begins with the positive, confident and proactive organisational ethos embodied across our staff and trainee enterprise teams. All communications promote the excellence of our trainees and enterprises. A culture of change and possibility informs all our operations with our continual belief in and emphasis on the resilience, resourcefulness and resolve of current and potential trainees.

The recycling work was our first in house enterprise and proved to be a valuable addition to our work placement portfolio, offering indoor, environmentally informed, retail focused activity with flexible working hours. This became a valuable opportunity as many individuals applying to Aspire were not looking to work in the predominantly outdoor based, manual work teams that formed the core of our enterprise activities.

An unanticipated outcome of this project has been our ability to offer more flexible work placement hours to women and men with parental or caring responsibilities that often clashed with the 8.30 a.m. departure time of the grounds and property maintenance teams.

Additional barriers faced by each ex-offender include the internalisation of damaging stereotypes and assumed lack of opportunity and prejudice in mainstream society. A range of structural factors compound this, such as poor quality, often chaotic and unstable housing conditions, poverty and debt, anxiety about future prospects and dependants and the physical and mental health problems that can follow poverty, homelessness, substance misuse and institutionalisation. We address these through peer support, mentoring and a visible presence of former service users and trainees within our staff team. We also believe that operating all enterprises with a mix of trainees from a diverse range of backgrounds brings additional strength, so that someone in recovery from mental health problems works alongside a persistent and prolific offender, someone else rebuilding their life after domestic violence, an adult with learning disabilities, an older person with a long history of street homelessness and a young person working to overcome antisocial behaviour.

The recycling project has also allowed us to work more closely with Thames Valley Probation Trust, in particular through the Community Payback unpaid work programme. We believe genuine partnership working is essential, and have an extensive referral network to develop strong links with city and county council departments, local police, probation and prisons, funding bodies and a range of corporate partners large and small. It is equally important to have an active presence at multiple agency and business events with staff and trainees attending forums, steering groups, committees, conferences, workshops and networking events, promoting a truly collaborative and co-operative approach to participation. We approach all potential joint ventures with the genuine desire to create mutually beneficial partnerships. For example, we are pursuing grounds maintenance contracts with a local supported housing project as this presents an opportunity to engage tenants as potential trainees and for potentially disenchanted long term unemployed tenants to see demonstrable evidence of real opportunities to access employment.

As this case study shows, corporate, public sector and funding support has been essential to the success of this enterprise. All major capital costs have been covered by external grant funding and charity fundraising, allowing the enterprise to move towards financial self-sufficiency. It should be noted that this case study assumes the existence and financial health of our core charity and allied enterprises, and the major infrastructure support provided to any pilot enterprise project. When we started this recycling enterprise, all our procedures from trainee referrals, interviewing and risk assessments to HR systems, branding, website, marketing materials, insurances, payroll, vehicle provision, premises and so forth, were operational, reducing the risks involved in setting up a new enterprise and minimising unanticipated costs.

We have however, encountered barriers in the form of a variety of public policy initiatives, in particular the negative impact of compulsory participation of ex-offenders on the Work Programme, irrespective of an individual's engagement and success with a specialist supported employment provider such as Aspire. Individuals who have self-referred to us and are flourishing, are regularly required to attend A4E or Maximus work programmes under threat of benefit sanctions if they fail to comply. This interrupts their attendance on educational and training courses, delays the attainment of qualifications, reduces their availability for work placements and, of most concern, can trigger a detrimental shift in attitude, reducing trainees' long term success.

Overall, our experience is that social enterprises need to have minimal initial start up costs, offer low skilled but varied entry level work, operate in low risk environments and offer high financial returns. They should engage trainees'/ex-offenders' employment and training interests and ambitions and support accredited qualification delivery. It is also beneficial to appeal to the public, raising the profile of this work, promoting the brand and offering a variety of attractive corporate partnership opportunities in line with Corporate Social Responsibility targets. It is vital to remain commercially robust, ensuring the delivery of high quality services and gold standard work placement experiences. This can be achieved by working in partnership with allied enterprises and having clear, accessible social, financial and environmental outcomes.

1. We have reached this figure using the Department for Communities and Local Government's Evidence Review of the Costs of Homelessness (2012): www.gov.uk/government/publications/costs-of-homelessness-evidence-review. Using these figures we estimate that we save a minimum of £50,000 for each long term unemployed, homeless, and ex-offender person who moves from Aspire into full time, permanent work. We have not done a full analysis using a tool such as Social Return on Investment but are very keen to do so.

