

Winchester Prison Rehabilitation

An 'Offenders and Nature' Initiative



A partnership between the West Hill Resettlement Unit of HMP Winchester and the Forestry Commission has enabled pre-release offenders to participate in an 'Offenders and Nature' initiative. Working at local woodland sites in South West Hampshire, offenders gain technical knowledge, invaluable life skills and work experience, while helping to enhance the natural environment for local communities to enjoy. Participation in this scheme will significantly contribute towards a successful re-integration back into community life and reduce the chances of re-offending.

objectives

To deliver a three year project with HMP Winchester allowing selected offenders to work with Forestry Commission personnel at woodland sites.
To provide offenders with work experience and the skills needed to enhance their employment prospects.
To offer offenders the opportunity of experiencing the restorative effects of being outdoors in the natural environment to enhance their physical and mental well-being.
To help offenders re-integrate into the community upon release, and reduce re-offending.
To improve access and enhance woodlands for local communities within a 40 mile radius of Winchester.
To improve biodiversity through habitat restoration and enhancement.

actions

Employment of a works supervisor on a three year fixed contract.
Provision of motor manual training courses for participants.
Provision of transportation from HMP Winchester to and from work sites.
Provision of tools, safety equipment and protective clothing.
Assessment of prisoners for their suitability and the issuing of a Release on Temporary License (ROTL).

achievements

Eight offenders worked on the scheme in the first year, for a total of 280 days. Work has been completed in five woods (Windmill Copse, Micheldever, Dodsley, Stoke Park and West Wood). Participants constructed 400 metres of all ability access trails, brought one hectare of overgrown hazel coppice back into management and improved over three kilometres of road and ride edges. Participants reported improvements to their fitness levels, a sense of well-being and better sleeping patterns; they enjoy being outdoors and feel happier 'doing something worthwhile'.
Work, much of which would not otherwise have been completed by the Forestry Commission, has been carried out to a very high standard. There has been good interaction between participants, FC staff and the public, and improved relationships between prison officers and participants.

background

The 'Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan' (NOMS, 2004) states that prison sentences alone are ineffective in rehabilitating the majority of offenders. Of those prisoners released in 1999, more than 59% were convicted of another crime within two years, with 37% back in custody on another sentence. The cost of re-offending by ex-prisoners is at least £11 billion per year. A number of factors contribute to re-offending: poor education, lack of employment, drug misuse, poor health, lack of life skills, debt, lack of housing and a poor family network.

A supportive social network, a home and a job are key to reducing re-offending. In preparation for release into the community 'Offenders and Nature' schemes offer prisoners the opportunity to work within physically and mentally restorative natural environments. Participants acquire new skills, learn to work as a team, increase their sense of self-worth, gain valuable work experience and in some cases generate a cash sum, as at the Forestry Commission's Dartmoor project. The scheme also enables offenders to 'pay back' society by improving access for the community and enhancing biodiversity. Upon release offenders have an increased chance of finding employment and securing a home, and the opportunity of participating fully in community life.

Currently, offenders at Winchester Prison are offered voluntary short-term placements but it is hoped that with increased funding the Forestry Commission will be able to provide an extended training programme, qualifications and an apprenticeship scheme.

quotes

"The first week or so hit you hard, you're so out of condition, but you soon get your fitness back."

"The best job in the prison."

"You forget you're in prison when you're out here."

Scheme participants

partners

HMP Winchester

funding

Total Project: £200k
Forestry Commission (£100K)
HMP Winchester
Hampshire County Council

lessons learnt

Prisoners are granted a ROTL before taking part and must be risk assessed. The strict criteria have meant that fewer have participated than originally proposed.

Often a ROTL is granted close to a prisoner's release date, which limits the time they have on the scheme and makes it difficult to offer specialist training.

There is potential to develop training within existing forestry training schemes; however the cost and necessary restrictions might make this impossible.

Promoting the scheme to a wider audience would help towards challenging public perception of offenders and rehabilitation and raise awareness of the benefits of the scheme both to offenders and society as a whole.

Evaluation will play an important role in the scheme's long term viability.