

Offenders and Nature schemes: using conservation and forest management in rehabilitation

The Forestry Commission (FC) has received national recognition and several awards for delivering cost-effective schemes that help individuals sentenced to serve time in prison or on probation to gain industry-relevant skills, work experience and the confidence to secure employment on release. In these Offenders and Nature (O&N) schemes, prisoners and probationers work alongside Forestry Commission staff or a Probation Supervisor on woodland sites, carrying out tasks such as creating and maintaining footpaths, coppicing, fencing sites, brashing, tree planting, small-scale felling and opening up dense vegetation to create more diverse habitats. For the most part, this conservation and forest management work would not otherwise be done because of resource constraints, but it is highly beneficial not only for the participants but also for the public and for biodiversity. O&N schemes have operated since the 1990s and several new initiatives have started in the past three years. To date, more than 1500 probationers and over 100 prisoners have participated.



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Background

Work by Forest Research is examining the range of impacts and outcomes of O&N schemes. This involves interviewing scheme managers, supervisors and participants and cross-checking findings with existing evidence. Increasingly, international research is revealing the range of positive impacts of contact with nature. These include impacts on physical and mental health, social and psychological development, reducing anti-social behaviour and facilitating social interactions (see Carter, 2007b).

Objectives

This research aims to:

- explore the contribution of working in a natural environment to facilitating social inclusion and ultimately reducing re-offending
- map and analyse the experiences of those involved (offenders, scheme supervisors, managers)
- assess the effectiveness of O&N schemes to achieve their objectives
- build the evidence base on the range of impacts and cost-effectiveness of O&N schemes

“You’ve done a good day’s work and you are pleased with that ... I love the way it [the O&N scheme] runs and I think it runs really well”

Male Prisoner, 25 years old,
38 days into the scheme

Methods

A mixed method approach is taken to address and investigate the range and depth of relevant information on vulnerable people getting involved in crime and on the provision of appropriate and effective support for offenders in desisting from crime while finding access to meaningful work. Methods used include:

- literature review
- FC-wide survey to gather information on past, existing and planned schemes
- selected/targeted interviews
- on-site focus groups with O&N scheme participants
- analysis of qualitative and quantitative data

Findings

Working outdoors in the natural environment is important to many (but not all) of the participants. Many emphasised the all-round health benefits of physical activity in the open air.

O&N schemes offer opportunities for learning conservation and forest management skills. The range of tasks demands a mixture of working independently and as part of a team; both provide useful experience and allow for testing and improving skills. Numeracy, literacy and other academic skills are less relevant to the work than commitment, enthusiasm and diligence in following demonstrations and instructions given on site by skilled staff. This is important, as many offenders have no or lower-than-average school qualifications.

Being part of the FC local workforce helps sentenced individuals to (re-)build a sense of self-worth and positive identity. As one participant put it: "It's nice feeling part of society again ... instead of being behind a wall or a fence where you are cut off from the rest of the world".

Obtaining useful skills and training helps participants gain access to employment on completion of their sentence. For example, in the Dartmoor O&N resettlement scheme, by the end of September 2008 17 prisoners had taken part in the project; many found employment or a training position within six months of release and ten are now in full-time employment. None, as far as we know, have been reconvicted.

Recommendations

The research identified five key principles in helping to reduce re-offending and make O&N and other schemes effective:

1. Providing opportunities for paid work in the community: more schemes that provide a transition from volunteering to a paid placement are needed. It is important for participants to be able to save money as having no money on release is a key factor in re-offending.
2. Improving employability through on-the-job skills and training: providing skills consolidation and work experience during a prison sentence, followed by a period of employment after release, is a key ingredient in assisting long-term employability.
3. Improving and extending the duration of meaningful work: short-term training courses and part-time work experience schemes are valuable but cannot deliver the same life-changing benefits of a longer-term (six months minimum), full-time work placement.
4. Offering a neutral and positive space: working outside in the natural environment has special qualities and impacts positively on well-being; it helps many offenders to reflect and make positive changes in their lives.
5. Becoming part of a team: many participants have not previously experienced the level of close teamwork and reliance on each other that is essential in managing forest environments. The ability of the supervisor to motivate, nurture skills, maintain a high standard of work, and be fair and approachable is essential, and often they will become a vital role model and mentor.

To secure the running of O&N schemes into the future, external funding is required, especially for schemes that seek to provide training and paid employment to assist the transition back into the community and into long-term employment.

Partners

Claudia Carter, Forest Research; Aaron Pycroft, University of Portsmouth. Knowledge exchange has been facilitated by the Offenders and Nature Steering Group, and we particularly acknowledge the contribution of the chair, Judith Hanna, Natural England.

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