

Dartmoor Rehabilitation Project

Opportunities, experiences and skills for prisoners



A unique partnership between HMP Dartmoor and the Forestry Commission has given low risk offenders the opportunity to improve and enhance local woodlands as part of a pre-release resettlement programme. The three stage pilot project has been developed alongside prison officers, and prisoners themselves to offer participants invaluable skills, mentoring and work experience that will contribute towards a smoother transition back into community life. By improving their employment prospects, increasing their confidence and reducing the possibility of re-offending upon release, the scheme is making a real difference to the offenders' life opportunities.

objectives

To deliver a rehabilitation programme with HMP Dartmoor allowing selected offenders to work with Forestry Commission personnel at woodland sites.
To provide offenders with 8-12 months work experience and transferable land management skills that will enhance their employment prospects.
To offer offenders the opportunity of experiencing the restorative physical and mental effects of being outdoors in the natural environment.
To help offenders re-integrate into the community on release.
To increase biodiversity around the rivers and streams of Dartmoor's woodlands.

actions

Selected offenders are assessed by HMP Dartmoor and issued a Release on Temporary License (ROTL), and a place on the three stage programme.
Stage one: 30 days voluntary work with the Dartmoor field team participating in practical forest management tasks, combining unpaid work experience with nationally accredited training in specialist skills such as clearing saws.
Stage two: paid work experience and skills learning scheme (minimum of six months).
Stage three (from 2006): ex-offenders who have performed well during stage two are offered up to three months full time employment with the Commission on release.

achievements

To date nine prisoners have taken part in the project and been released. Of these, eight are now in full time employment, e.g. running a gardening business, working in tree surgery, and the fishing and water industries. The development of stage three resulted from one prisoner's experiences of not being able to find work, and becoming disillusioned about his prospects as his sentence came to an end. Due to his excellent performance with the Forestry Commission during the pilot stage, he was offered a short-term contract on release to give him more time to find permanent employment. Initially the contract was for three months and then extended to six to cover a vacancy, at the end of which he left to go to a full time job. He remains in full time employment.
Seven kilometres of streamside in the Dartmoor forests have been opened up by participants on the scheme, significantly enhancing biodiversity and improving the landscape.

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. 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.

A similar FC-partnered initiative is being offered to offenders at HMP Winchester.

quotes

"Can't do without it! The scheme really gives prisoners the opportunity to gain full-time employment working in the community, learn technical skills and, more importantly, life skills. The pay scheme is unique in the prison." Dave Crawford, HMP Dartmoor.

"Thank you for the opportunity it has given me in life that I may not have had. My time with the Forestry Commission has changed my outlook to life and work. I really believe for the first time I have a future." Ex-offender, HMP Dartmoor.

"If we stop one person re-offending then it has been worthwhile." Panel member, Dartmoor Sustainable Fund.

partners

HMP Dartmoor

funding

Total Project:	£202,526
Forestry Commission	£78K
Dartmoor Sustainability Fund	£15K
Devon Renaissance (South West RDA)	£72K

lessons learnt

A key factor in the scheme's success has been the enthusiasm and dedication of the Forestry Commission team in mentoring offenders, building confidence, team working and developing practical skills. A full-time supervisor is crucial.

A second key factor has been the quality of prisoner selection.

The scheme is most effective when the total number of prisoners engaged in Stage two is three.

Participants granted early parole or tagging have to leave the scheme prematurely which needs to be factored in, as it can affect the opportunity to provide a full training programme.