

Policy into Practice

Employment for ex-offenders: an innovative approach

The Forestry Commission (FC) has received several awards, and national recognition, for delivering cost-effective schemes that help ex-offenders secure full-time employment in the land-based sector. These practical schemes are changing lives and help offenders gain industry-relevant skills, work experience and the confidence to secure employment on release. They also bring real benefits for the community and the environment. With core funding, these schemes could operate across the UK and make a significant contribution to reducing re-offending rates.



Photograph by Angela Tomney

Being part of the team – Dartmoor Stage 2 Resettlement Scheme

What are the schemes?

Offenders and Nature (O&N) schemes involve sentenced individuals working 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. This conservation and forest management work would otherwise largely remain undone due to resource constraints, but is highly beneficial to the public and for biodiversity. Those entering the Forestry Commission O&N schemes during a community sentence are often working for one or two days per week, whereas those serving a custodial sentence usually participate full-time, preferably during the last 6–9 months of their prison sentence after having been granted release on temporary licence.

In most of the existing O&N schemes, offenders are unpaid volunteers providing reparative work that benefits the public. All schemes provide experience of teamwork, life and skills training, at the same time boosting confidence and self-esteem through participation in worthwhile and visible tasks and outcomes. The schemes introduce the forest environment to a wider audience through the direct action taken by the offenders and also via the improved access and amenity to the surrounding communities. For a summary of the scope and impacts of O&N schemes, see Figure 1.

Focus on employment

The Forestry Commission district in the Southwest of England (FC Peninsula), in partnership with Dartmoor Prison, is delivering a particularly successful scheme where O&N participants have the option of paid employment after successfully completing a 30-day voluntary work placement. The Dartmoor Rehabilitation Project developed and tested a resettlement concept that can be used as a template for use by other prisons and FC Forest Districts or other environmental and conservation organisations. This briefing paper summarises the lessons learned from this and other O&N schemes, the evidence of their impact, and provides a practical way forward for such schemes to become a mainstream approach.

Successful partnerships

O&N schemes involve partnerships between an offender-management organisation and a natural environment organisation, sometimes including several public sector and non-governmental organisations. There are often links with land-based training colleges or other organisations and individuals that can provide expertise. Successful partnerships between organisations require some understanding of each other's priorities, drivers and the policy context in which they operate. O&N schemes offer placements in line with the aims of the Home Office's Reducing Reoffending Alliances, the Community Payback drive and the cross-Government Green Paper *Reducing Reoffending through Skills and Employment*.

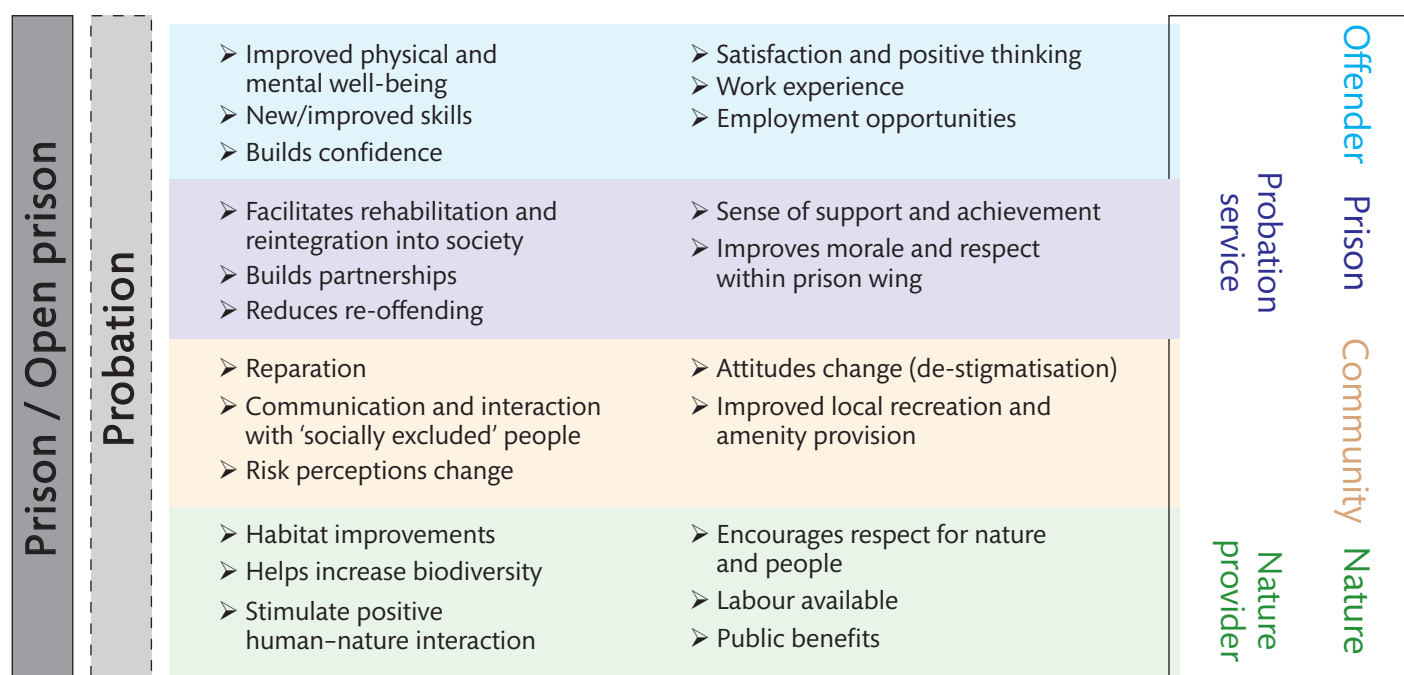


Figure 1: Scope and impacts of O&N schemes from a partnership perspective based on fieldwork, national survey and literature review

The FC's remit includes managing forests in a way that enables the public to experience, enjoy and benefit from wooded landscapes. Environmental voluntary work has been an important element in local probation and youth-offender programmes for many years; now the synergies and benefits of extending these schemes to paid placements are being recognised and developed.

Evidence

Work by Forest Research is examining the range of impacts and outcomes of O&N initiatives. This involves interviewing scheme managers, participants and supervisors, and crosschecking findings with existing knowledge. A growing body of international research supports the range of positive impacts that contact with nature can have on both physical and mental health, social and psychological development, reducing anti-social behaviour and facilitating social interactions.¹ Often, O&N scheme supervisors observe 'calming' and 'focusing' effects on participants; the offender becomes 'a different person'. Many participants comment that being on the scheme has helped them to think more clearly and positively and rebuild their confidence; they have started to develop a sense of purpose and meaning in their life. Such positive impacts are particularly apparent for those working full-time on a scheme and who become, and are treated as, members of the local forest craftsmen team. Days spent working outside also improve physical fitness and general feelings of well-being.

O&N schemes offer physically demanding work in green space. 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. Offenders learn basic 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. The work does not suit everyone, but has been found to be rewarding for those who enjoy hard graft and discover that they enjoy being and working outdoors.

The O&N schemes have been able to provide meaningful work placements and experience, and participants have improved job prospects after release.

For example, in June 2008, Lantra announced a deficit of 65,000 workers in the land-based sector.² Schemes that can provide a transition between voluntary and paid work, and that last beyond the end of the prison sentence are particularly important because the first few days and weeks after release are crucial in helping individuals back into life in the community.

The ability to save money to afford accommodation and have a rewarding job are two of the most significant factors in helping ex-offenders stay away from crime.

"My confidence has grown, it has grown a lot and I have lost weight which is good. I have realised that I enjoy working outside, whereas before I had never worked outside properly; [...] I just feel healthier in myself."

(Female Prisoner, after 11 weeks on an O&N scheme)

¹For example: Seymour, L. (2003). 'Nature and Psychological Well-being', *English Nature Research Report* Number 533. English Nature, Peterborough. O'Brien, E. (2005). *Trees and Woodlands: Nature's Health Service*. Forest Research, Farnham. Pretty, J., Peacock J., Sellens M. and Griffin M. (2005). 'The mental and physical health outcomes of green exercise', *International Journal of Environmental Health Research* 15, (5), 319-337. Kaplan, S. (1995). 'The restorative benefits of nature; towards an integrative framework', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15, 169-182. Faber Taylor, A., Kuo, F. E. and Sullivan W. C. (2001). 'Environment and crime in the inner city: does vegetation reduce crime?' *Environment and Behavior* 33, (3), 343-367. Carter, C. and O'Brien L. (2008). 'Identity-building in the woods: Re-connecting with nature for health and wellbeing'. *Ecos* 29, (2), 33-41.

²Anonymous (2008). 'Lantra campaign urges industry to tackle 65,000 worker deficit', *Horticulture Week*, 19 June 2008, p. 3.

A template that works: the Dartmoor O&N Resettlement Scheme

In January 2004 the FC agreed to take on two prisoners for voluntary work experience as part of Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Dartmoor Prisoner Resettlement Programme. Dartmoor Prison at Princetown, Devon, is a category C training prison with a dedicated Resettlement Unit. The two prisoners worked as an integral part of the FC Dartmoor field team, participating in a wide range of practical forest management tasks. From a very early stage this proved a popular arrangement with the prisoners, HMP Dartmoor and the FC. FC England then agreed to provide stage 1 resettlement programme opportunities, incorporating a varied programme of (unpaid) work experience combined with nationally accredited training in specialist skills, particularly in using clearing saw and chain saws.

In July 2004, HMP Dartmoor secured Home Office approval to provide a stage 2 Resettlement Programme. Along with more personal freedom inside the prison, stage 2 offers the opportunity for participants to earn a regular wage for work undertaken. Money earned is then retained in a dedicated account for the prisoner, administered by HMP Dartmoor and only available to them on release; this helps them break out of the vicious cycle of 'no job', 'nowhere to live' and 'no money'.



Chain saw training and experience opens up job opportunities. The safe use of power tools is part of the Dartmoor O&N Scheme

Since 2007 an additional stage was added, offering a three-month employment contract, for those offenders who are interested in continuing work with the FC after release.

By the end of September 2008, 17 prisoners had taken part in the project; many found employment or a training position within the first six months of release and 10 are now in full-time employment. An important by-product of this initiative has been the environmental benefits resulting from over 8 km of streamside biodiversity improvements.

The scheme receives financial support from Dartmoor National Park Sustainability Fund, the Forestry Commission and Devon Renaissance until April 2009.

Key principles

How the schemes are run and what participants gain from them are both important factors for success. There are five key principles that have helped the Dartmoor Resettlement Scheme and other FC O&N schemes to be effective:

Money: Receiving a wage for work undertaken outside the prison creates a real workplace situation; being able to save money is important since lack of resources on release is a key factor to trigger re-offending.

Employability: Providing skills consolidation and work experience during a prison sentence, followed by a period of employment after release, is a key ingredient to assisting long-term employability.

Duration: 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.

Natural environment: Working in the outside natural environment can have special qualities and impacts; it helps many offenders to reflect and make positive life changes.

Colleagues: Working as part of a small team is essential in managing forest environments. Many participants have not previously experienced this level of close team work and reliance on each other. 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 provide a vital role model and mentor.

Barriers

Despite the existing evidence and recognition of the many benefits of O&N schemes, they face an uncertain future.

The principal barrier and constraint is **funding**, especially for schemes that seek to provide training and paid employment to assist the transition back into the community and into long-term paid employment (see Figure 2). Existing government funding for offender rehabilitation is only accessible to the charitable, voluntary and faith sector, so public sector initiatives such as the FC's O&N schemes rely on short-term grant support.

There is also a **cultural barrier** with some funders and organisations being reluctant to pay prisoners a salary for their work. However, our experience suggests that schemes providing a smooth transition between rehabilitation in prison and employment on release are successful. The first three months following release are critical to re-offending habits.

The **limited number of stage 2 licences** reduces the scope of paid resettlement schemes. For this type of scheme to be widely adopted there needs to be a greater opportunity for category C and D prisons to have stage 2 Home Office licences.

Vision and next steps

Within the Dartmoor pilot area, work in progress seeks to create a public/private sector partnership of committed employers to provide more stage 2-type schemes. With core funding, O&N schemes could operate across the UK and make a significant contribution to integrating ex-offenders into mainstream society and reducing re-offending rates. Central government support would assist public sector employers to provide paid employment for suitable individuals while they are still serving a prison sentence, and to guarantee a 3-6 month employment contract on their release (see Figure 3).

Item	Cost
Payment to participants – maximum 3 paid participants (£12,500/yr)	£37,500
Protective clothing – 6 sets per year at £250/person (safety boots, waterproofs, gloves, helmet and chainsaw trousers)	£1,500
Tools and equipment – chainsaws and clearance saws at £2,100. Eight weeks' hire of wood-chipper at £3,500	£5,600
Vehicle – annual hire charge of 4-5 seater vehicle, plus mileage	£6,000
Training – NPTC certificated 5-day training courses for 6 participants: chainsaw use at £700/course, clearance saw use at £300/course, wood-chipper use at £250/course	£7,500
Daily supervision and mentoring – daily supervision, training, risk assessment and transportation of offenders by FC squad leader; 50% of time plus on-costs	£31,320
Project management, monitoring, planning and Health & Safety auditing – 50 days per year from Area Forester at £150/day plus on-costs	£11,850
TOTAL COST	£101,270
Total cost per participant (average 6 per year)	£16,878.33

Figure 2: Annual costs of the Dartmoor O&N Resettlement Scheme. Items in red highlight the Forestry Commission's contributions.

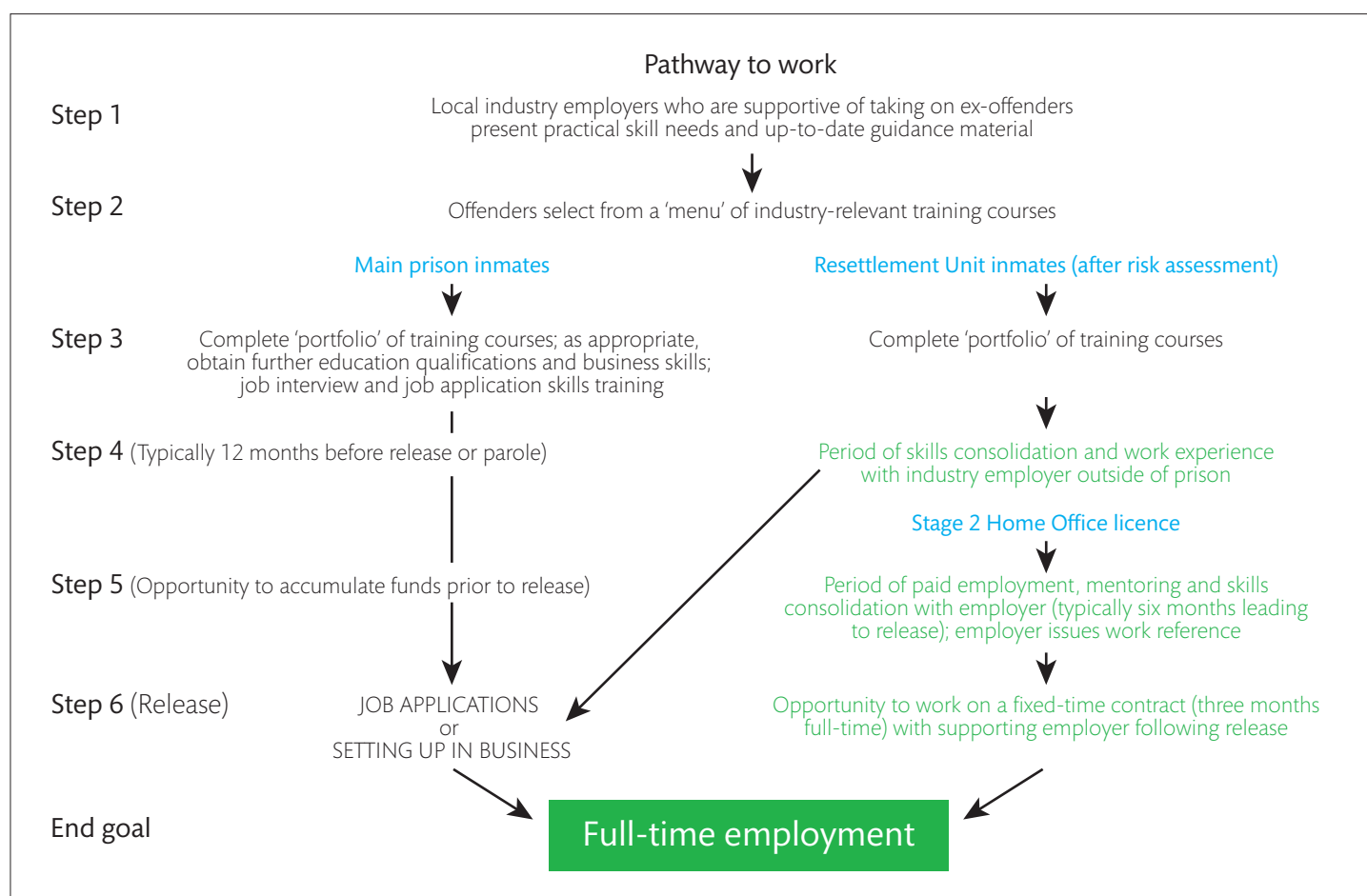


Figure 3: Pathway to work. This model builds on the Dartmoor Rehabilitation Scheme, achieving full-time employment for 58% of its participants to date

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