

Offenders and Nature



*Helping People -
Helping Nature*



NOMS National Offender
Management Service
Working together to reduce re-offending



Home Office
Custodial Estates



1. What are 'Offenders and Nature' schemes?

'Offenders and Nature' (O&N) schemes involve offenders working as volunteers on nature conservation and woodland sites, carrying out tasks such as creating and maintaining footpaths, opening up dense vegetation to create more diverse habitats, establishing ponds and building boardwalks. 'Offender' refers to anybody serving a sentence in custody or in the community. Those entering O&N schemes during their community sentence are often working for one or two days per week on the scheme, whereas those serving a custodial sentence tend to participate full-time in the last 6–9 months of their prison sentence. Prisoners participating in O&N projects are risk-assessed to ensure that they can be released on temporary licence.¹ O&N schemes are seen as reparative work that benefits the public, and that provides experience of teamwork, life and skills training to offenders, also boosting their confidence and self-esteem through the worthwhile and visible tasks.

O&N initiatives involve partnerships between at least one offender-management organisation and at least one natural-environment organisation. Successful partnerships between organisations require some understanding of each other's priorities, drivers and the policy context in which they operate. The following section outlines some of the main policy objectives that O&N schemes touch on, particularly in the complex and politically charged area of criminal justice and offender management.

2. How do O&N schemes fit into the current policy context?

Crime is one of the big social issues, alongside employment, health and education. The complex intermeshing of these and social inequalities, such as social exclusion and different forms of deprivation, form another big concern. Imprisonment is one method of punishing offenders for their crimes and protecting the public from further offences. However, imprisonment in itself will not reduce the likelihood of re-offending, and activities must focus on improving skills and employability, and removing the barriers that can impede successful rehabilitation.

The government's Public Service Agreement (PSA) for the criminal justice system aims to reduce crime and the fear of crime, and the associated social and economic costs. It also aims to reduce the likelihood of re-offending by those who have been through the criminal justice system and not changed their ways. The context for the focus on reducing re-offending is that around 60 per cent of convicted offenders are re-convicted within two years of completing their prison or community sentence. Particularly high re-offending rates are observed for young offenders aged 18–21, and male adolescents aged 15–18 (being 73 and 82 per cent respectively).² The influential Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) report, *Reducing Re-offending by Ex-Prisoners* put the cost to society of re-offending by ex-prisoners at £11 billion per year.³ That report emphasises the extent to which people with 'chaotic lives' and from backgrounds of deprivation (such as having been in care as children) fall into crime as a consequence of unemployment and lack of skills and qualifications. Prisoner literacy levels remain low: over 50 per cent of all prisoners are at or below Level One literacy – the level expected of an 11-year-old in reading – and 80 per cent are below this level in writing.⁴ Poor literacy and numeracy skills significantly reduce the chances of offenders finding employment after release. The cross-government Green Paper, *Reducing Re-offending Through Skills and Employment* aims to improve offenders' skills, reinforce the emphasis on skills and jobs for all offenders, and get more offenders into suitable employment.⁵ Other key factors for re-offending are breakdown of family relationships and homelessness, mental health problems, and addictions to drugs or alcohol.

¹ See <http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/adviceandsupport/beforeafterrelease/rotl/>

² Offender Management Caseload Statistics, Home Office, 2004.

³ Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) (2002) *Reducing Re-Offending by Ex-Prisoners*. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, July (<http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=64>).

⁴ Prison Statistics England and Wales 2002; SEU (2002) – see footnote 3.

⁵ UK Government (2005) *Reducing Re-Offending Through Skills and Employment*. Cm 6702. London: The Stationery Office, December (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/offenderlearning/uploads/documents/green_paper_reducing_re-offending_through_skills_%20and_employment_final_version.pdf).

The government is firmly committed to reducing re-offending and to achieving 10 per cent reduction by the end of the decade. This target is the primary objective of the National Offender Management Service.⁶

The then Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, in his speech 'Where Next for Penal Policy?' to the Prison Reform Trust in September 2005, reiterated the government's objective: 'We have to make preventing re-offending the centre of the organisation of our correctional services. We have to make reducing the number of re-offenders the central focus of our policy and practice.'

In November 2005, the Home Office launched three 'Reducing Re-Offending Alliances' with the Civic Society, Corporate and Faith & Voluntary sectors, with the aim of involving a wider range of people and organisations in work to reduce re-offending. At the same time, a 'Community Payback' drive was launched to raise the profile of offenders' community-service work as restitution to local communities, and payment of their debt to society. Offenders and Nature projects offer placements that meet these aims. They have long been a main element in local probation and youth-offender programmes of community service, with a multitude of anecdotal accounts highlighting the schemes' positive effects. However, O&N initiatives currently lack formal evaluation, research and statistics concerning their extent and effectiveness. Pre-release resettlement programmes for open prisons were rolled out from 2000 onwards, and both the Forestry Commission and English Nature (which became part of Natural England in October 2006), among others, have become involved in piloting local partnerships. Some of these arose from liaison over the Prison Service Biodiversity Action Plan – the prison estate is one of the largest public landholdings, covering some 10,000ha, including seven internationally designated Europa 2000 and Ramsar sites, and 62 sites of local wildlife significance.

For the natural-environment sector, demonstrating the benefits that contact with nature and wild landscapes can contribute to wider society is an important part of convincing planners, policy-makers and the general public of why the natural environment matters. Both 'social justice' and 'environmental equality' are explicitly addressed in the government's *Securing the Future: UK Sustainable Development Strategy*, published in 2005, in response to research confirming that socio-economic deprivation correlates strongly with poor environmental quality, including lack of access to natural green space. This matters for individual and community quality of life and well-being. An increasing body of research indicates that contact with natural places supports both physical and mental health, aids social and psychological development by providing outlets for risk-taking and physical energy, reduces stress and anti-social behaviour, facilitates social interactions including team-working and informal sociability, and provides visible and worthwhile achievements.⁷

Natural-environment organisations want as many people as possible to experience, enjoy and benefit from nature. Many of the organisations interested in O&N projects own or manage nature reserves or recreational countryside, and work with a variety of volunteering activities – some motivated by looking after the landscape, others focusing on the education, skills, enjoyment, health or other benefits that volunteers gain from the activity. Thus, offenders' community payback schemes form part of a spectrum of environmental voluntary work, and of organisations' frameworks for managing volunteers.

⁶ *The Government Reply to the First Response from the Home Affairs Committee*, Session 2004–05, HC 193, 'Rehabilitation of Prisoners', Cm 6486, London: The Stationery Office, March 2005 (<http://www.archive2.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm64/6486/6486.pdf>), page 9.

⁷ For example: **Seymour, L** (2003) 'Nature and Psychological Well-being', *English Nature Research Report Number 533*, Peterborough: English Nature; **Cohen, M J** (2005) 'Counselling and nature: the greening of psychotherapy', *Interpsych Newsletter* 2(4) (<http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~expert/psychnews/ix.htm>); **O'Brien, E** (2005) *Trees and Woodlands: Nature's Health Service*, Farnham: Forest Research. **Pretty, J, J Peacock, M Sellens and M Griffin** (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, F E Kuo and W C Sullivan** (2002) 'Views of nature and self-discipline: evidence from inner-city children', *Journal of Environmental Psychology, Special Issue: Environment and Children* 22: 49–63. **Kuo, F E and W C Sullivan** (2001) 'Environment and crime in the inner city: does vegetation reduce crime?' *Environment and Behavior* 33(3): 343–367.

3. What makes O&N schemes so special?

Offenders and Nature schemes can address several of the underlying factors contributing to re-offending. Also, current evidence shows such schemes to be cost-efficient. Furthermore, they have positive impacts on all involved, as well as benefiting the wider public.

Causes of re-offending have been summarised as a combination of factors relating to:

- 1 poor education
- 2 lack of employment
- 3 drug and alcohol misuse
- 4 poor mental and physical health
- 5 problematic attitudes, thinking and behaviour
- 6 lack of life skills
- 7 inappropriate or no housing
- 8 debt and lack of financial support
- 9 poor or non-existent family networks⁸

O&N schemes are usually able to address the first six factors listed above. They offer work experience outdoors, in green space – a considerable change from the inside of a prison and the many indoor-based training schemes. Some offenders and supervisors observe a ‘calming’ and ‘focusing’ effect in volunteers. Some O&N schemes explicitly apply ‘ecotherapy’, which uses working in natural environments to support people with addiction problems and/or mental-health issues, specifically drawing on the capacity of nature to calm, heal and inspire.⁹ O&N projects use small teams which usually complete hard physical tasks with highly visible effects, such as ‘tidier’-looking and more open landscapes that allow local people and visitors to enjoy lovely views or benefit from, for example, a new path that is suitable for wheelchair access. Different plant and animal species can also benefit. Most tasks require close working between two or three people, ensuring that the work is done well and without endangering anybody. This also means that offenders have to follow health and safety guidelines closely and are valued and respected colleagues in their own right. Days spent outside working in all weathers also improve physical fitness. Participants must be committed and reliable and get used to full-time work routines. This can be in stark contrast to a day inside prison or to being on a training scheme in a workshop or factory. Of course, the work does not suit everyone, but those who get selected, or want to try it, often not only learn new skills but more importantly feel that they can do something that they enjoy and which is also appreciated by others. Many of the benefits and impacts that have been observed in current O&N schemes are summarised in Box 1 (see page 6).

O&N schemes can provide an intensive programme of learning and skills – a mixture of general and specialist skills that suit land-based employment. Writing and numeracy skills are less prominent and thus their lack is not a barrier to becoming a good volunteer. Some volunteers realise that this type of work would suit them in the longer run and apply for college courses, apprenticeships or jobs in the same field. After successful completion of a voluntary placement, some O&N schemes offer short-term job opportunities for ex-offenders and these are particularly useful as a stepping-stone to gaining further credentials and eventually gaining employment and rebuilding their lives. Once having secured a job or training place, housing also becomes more affordable and easier to acquire. For offenders, good working relationships with scheme supervisors and employees also usually include informal mentoring and the acquisition of life skills. The experience of different conditions, policies and rules from those inside a prison may also help some offenders to (re-)adjust to the requirements and context of employment and life in the community after having served their custodial sentence.

⁸ For example: SEU (2002) – see footnote 3.

⁹ For example: **Burls, A** (2005) ‘New landscapes for mental health’, *The Mental Health Review* 10(1): 26–29; **Hall, J** (2004) ‘Phoenix House Therapeutic Conservation Programme: underpinning theory’, *English Nature Research Report Number 611*, Peterborough: English Nature.



☺ Teamwork between Forestry Commission staff and an offender from Dartmoor Prison. Photograph by Angel Tomney.



☺ Happy to have this work experience. Photograph by Angel Tomney.



☹ Volunteering in sleet and rain. Offenders from Winchester Prison working in Dodsley Wood. Photograph by Ben Phelan, FC.



☹ Work carried out by offenders from Springhill Prison on an O&N scheme with English Nature. Photograph by Natural England.



☹☹ Work by offenders from Winchester Prison at Stoke Park Bluebell Trail. Photographs by Ben Phelan, FC.

Box 1: Impacts and benefits of 'Offenders and Nature' schemes (developed by Hazlitt and Carter, 2006)

'Nature provider' organisations	Prison and offender management	Offender/ volunteers	Community	Environment
Ability to carry out work that is desirable but not done due to lack of resources (staff time unavailable or contractor costs high)	The prison delivering effective rehabilitation and reintegration opportunities to prisoners	Opportunity to test structured approach to working	Areas are made lighter and brighter (improved feeling of 'security')	More diverse woodlands and habitats
Work completed to a high standard (due to enthusiasm and hands-on approach; more finished and refined look by using hand tools)	Large step forward for prisoners nearing end of their sentences, being granted Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to work outside prison	Opportunity to improve mental well-being and self-esteem through regular physical outdoor activity; also affects emotional stability and ability to adjust to life's demands	Improved 'aesthetics' of woodland and nature conservation areas (areas 'looking tidier' is appreciated by most, though not all)	Increased populations of common and rare fauna and flora due to active conservation-management practices
Ecosystems improved through targeted management of habitats to favour diversity	Offenders carry out reparative work – repaying debt they owe to society	Chance to experience restorative effects of woodlands and green spaces	Improved accessibility, better-maintained paths	Restoration of neglected habitats
'Investing in People': providing an opportunity for disadvantaged people to gain work experience and training in the land-based employment sector	Offenders have the opportunity to gain experience in a commercial but supportive environment, improving their employability after release	Opportunity to improve physical fitness and experience; other benefits of outdoor work (fresh air, pleasant surroundings)	Increased sightings of birds, butterflies and other attractive fauna and flora due to active conservation-management practices	
Nurturing a potential future workforce and volunteer base	Enabling offenders to develop personal skills (communication, team-working, endurance/stamina, decision-making)	Chance to develop personal and interpersonal skills in a non-prison environment (with supervisor, fellow workers, site visitors)	Experiencing positive outcomes of 'punishment' system; form of 'reparation' and 'reconciliation'	
Increasing public awareness of investment in social forestry, nature conservation and public access to green space	Duty of care to prisoners in terms of providing a healthy environment and staying in good health	Develop team-working skills, awareness of health & safety issues, and safe approach to working in potentially hazardous environments	Experiencing offenders as 'working people' and 'fellow human beings' (part of restorative process)	
Broadening type and increasing number of people using woodland and conservation sites	Building trust between prisoners and prison staff (offenders being reliable and willing to work and thereby gaining respect)	Opportunity to develop decision-making skills while also having to receive and follow through instructions from others	Seeing people care for their local habitats and areas of recreation and amenity	
	Positive thinking and experiences of prisoners; can affect other inmates and send a message of hope and opportunity	Learning new (transferable, technical) skills and possibly gaining certificate/ qualification through training	Movement towards more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable outcomes	
	Likelihood of re-offending lowered; hence successful rehabilitation and cost savings	Offenders being introduced to a range of potential jobs and further training opportunities		
	Multi-agency/partnership working with governmental and voluntary bodies to improve learning and skills of prisoners (in line with the government's 2005 Green Paper, 'Reducing Re-Offending Through Skills and Employment')	Feeling physically tired after a day's hard work		

Responses of foresters and conservationists working with young offenders include: 'The description of the person when we took them and what they were like with us did not match. They worked well and were reliable'; and 'You could tell a difference in them from when they started and when they finished working with us.' Some offenders bring back relatives after their release to show them their work. Anecdotal evidence and internal appraisal of O&N projects suggest that they can have many profound and subtle impacts that benefit the offenders, the host organisation, the offender-management institution and society at large, as indicated in Box 1. In the longer term, a more formal appraisal of such schemes would seem prudent, not just in economic terms but also in their capacity as a 'social service'.

In terms of financial costs, national statistics¹⁰ show that a re-offending ex-prisoner is likely to be responsible for crime costing the criminal justice system an average of £65,000. The total cost in legal fees and court costs of imposing a further prison sentence is estimated at £30,500, with the costs of actually keeping each prisoner within prison averaging £37,500 per year. Recognising the importance of a regular income and financial buffer on release to reduce the chance of re-offending, one O&N scheme operating between the Forestry Commission and Dartmoor Prison (see Section 5 for more details) decided to pay participants. The scheme offers the minimum wage with some incentive payments for good work and returning evaluation forms to increase payment to a basic Band 7 salary (around £12,000/year in 2006). Including budgets for purchasing protective clothing, tools and equipment, transport, training, supervision and mentoring, project management and planning, and health and safety auditing, total costs per offender are around £17,500 per year for participation in the scheme. This is just over a quarter of the costs of the £65,000 incurred for an individual reoffending.

4. Existing barriers and potential problems

While O&N schemes offer many opportunities and benefits, there are also constraints relating to prisoners, how offenders are managed, geographical location, public perceptions and how the media covers such issues and any problems.

Many offenders might benefit from doing physical work in small teams in natural environments, but only a small percentage of offenders will be judged suitable and safe to participate in such schemes. Only non-violent young offenders and Category C and D prisoners (i.e. those living in varying degrees of open prison conditions) are considered suitable by the Prison Service. Another fundamental requirement is that green space where work is needed should be reached within 30–40 minutes from the offender institution, otherwise required staff time and travel costs render the scheme inefficient. Often, suitable prisons and resettlement units may not be close enough to the area needing work done.

Work placements and learning are furthermore often hindered by one side effect of overcrowding, referred to as 'churn' – shifting prisoners between detention facilities.¹¹ Overcrowding affects over half of all prisons in England and Wales, with an occupancy level, based on official capacity, of 106 per cent according to the most recent Home Affairs Committee report.¹² The Prison Service has admitted that high population pressures disrupt rehabilitative provision. According to the current Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers:

'... at every level of the prison system, overcrowding is having an effect on the ability of prisons to deliver rehabilitative programmes. In spite of additional resources, the movement of prisoners and the gap between the number of prisoners and the spaces available are making it very difficult to provide sufficient positive activity for enough prisoners.'

(House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2005, p.18)

Few O&N schemes so far have experienced reluctance or even opposition to placing offenders as conservation volunteers on public land. Some staff supervising or working with offenders are initially nervous and apprehensive. Some people naturally treat others as their equals and have good mentoring skills; others need time to adapt their approaches and management styles. Similarly, some residents near O&N schemes have voiced their concern and disapproval.

¹⁰ Figures taken from SEU (2002) – see footnote 3.

¹¹ <http://www.reform.co.uk/website/crime/criminaljusticesystemsperformance/prisons.aspx>.

¹² House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2005) 'Rehabilitation of Prisoners', First report of Session 2004–05, Volume I: Report, together with formal minutes, HC 193, London: The Stationery Office; published 7 January 2005 (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmhaff/193/193.pdf>).

However, in all such cases, both staff and communities have been won over and observed the substantial positive effects O&N projects have had on offenders and the local environment. Health and safety provisions, as well as risk assessments, are integral to such schemes, but despite these preventative steps the work carried out can be dangerous and misjudgements and accidents may occur just as in any other area of work. There is sometimes apprehension about how the media may respond to an incident, and most existing schemes don't actively seek media coverage or only selectively accept requests.

Despite many encouraging stories and experiences, and requiring relatively little money to run such initiatives, some O&N schemes are threatened by cuts in budgets, especially to guarantee the post of the supervisor/mentor, training for offenders and transport from and to prison. With prisoner numbers higher than actual capacity, most funding for O&N initiatives comes from non-prison public and charitable sources. In the absence of 'hard evidence' and longer-term impact studies on the outcomes of O&N schemes, together with their high political charge, some funders are reluctant to allocate monies to establish and secure the efficient and safe working of such initiatives. To date, all the schemes have done well – thanks to committed and inspired individuals.

5. What schemes exist now?

A range of public, charitable and voluntary organisations are involved in supporting Offenders and Nature schemes. Seven O&N initiatives are featured in this section, to demonstrate the breadth of activities and their geographical spread, and to draw attention to their specific contexts and emphases.

5.1 Dartmoor prisoner resettlement initiative

In January 2004, the Forestry Commission (FC) agreed to take on two prisoners for voluntary work experience as part of the HMP Dartmoor Prisoner Resettlement Programme. Dartmoor Prison at Princetown, Devon, is a Category C training prison which since 2003 has operated under a Service Level Agreement (SLA), and has a Stage 1 and 2 Resettlement Unit. The two prisoners worked as an integral part of the Dartmoor field team participating in a wide range of practical forest-management tasks. From an early stage this proved a popular arrangement with the prisoners, HMP Dartmoor and FC. Following this, FC England agreed to provide Stage 1 Resettlement Programme opportunities incorporating a varied programme of (unpaid) work experience combined with nationally accredited skills training in specialist skills, particularly clearing-saw work and use of chainsaws.

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 available to the offender only on release (to help break the vicious circle of 'no job, nowhere to live and no money'). After the first three-year trial period, the second three-year programme will have an additional stage, for those offenders who are interested, to continue work with the Forestry Commission after release. The steps are thus:

- 1 suitable offenders are selected by HMP Dartmoor Resettlement Unit
- 2 prisoners complete between four and six weeks of voluntary work with the Dartmoor Forest Beat team and their individual suitability for further work experience is assessed (Stage 1)
- 3 entry into the Stage 2 resettlement scheme of paid work experience and skills training (typically six months in duration)
- 4 the offender is then released, with the benefits of money in a bank account, new skills and an employment reference
- 5 an optional three-month employment contract with the FC is offered to ex-offenders who have satisfactorily performed during Steps 1–3 above; this option will be available to start immediately following release

By the end of March 2006, nine prisoners took part in the project; all of them found employment or a training position within the first six months of release and only one was accused of an offence but received a

'not guilty' verdict. An important by-product of this initiative has been the environmental benefits resulting from over 7 kilometres of streamside biodiversity improvements. Funding for the scheme has been provided by Dartmoor National Park Sustainability Fund, Forest Enterprise and Devon Renaissance, a not-for-profit partnership of the private sector, local authorities and community-based organisations.

Contacts: David West (FC), Peter Verney (FC), Dave Crawford (HMP Dartmoor)

5.2 Forestry Commission South-East England and Winchester Prison initiative

As in many other initiatives, the first contact here came from the prison management, requesting the development of a scheme similar to the Dartmoor one. It took just over a year of planning and negotiations to set up a project with a memorandum of understanding in operation outlining rights and responsibilities of the participating partners and financial and in-kind contributions to the running of the scheme. The first placements started in early 2006, after the recruitment of a supervisor in charge of the day-to-day running of the scheme, training and mentoring the offenders, and making sure that health and safety procedures are adhered to. The original plan was to have six to eight offenders who would work full-time for six to twelve months, receiving training to use clearing saws and chainsaws. However, HMP Winchester's resettlement unit was unable to find more than five suitable offenders to participate in the scheme and only two continued working for six months (health, policy and drug issues caused the drop-outs). Due to staged resettlement practices, offenders are allowed to work outside Winchester prison only in the last six to eight months of their custodial sentence; thus placements would generally last a maximum (rather than minimum) of six months.

The first two volunteers used hand-held tools, and this was found to favour a softer and more traditional approach to forest management. Currently, links with Sparsholt College and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) are being developed to offer accredited skills training, such as in using and maintaining chainsaws. Enjoyment, mental and health benefits are felt to be important elements of O&N placements even if prisoners do not choose a career in the land-based employment sector. During their voluntary work, the offenders became more confident and gained a more positive outlook. However, some carry with them a great deal of frustration and many problems, and, despite multiple gains from participating in an O&N scheme, personal issues may remain unresolved. Thus, O&N schemes are one part of a wider rehabilitation programme which also includes help for offenders to work through problems and find ways to deal with difficult situations.

In terms of ways of working and forest management, the use of hand tools would not be normal practice as the labour time needed for the work is cost-intensive and now usually regarded as a luxury that neither the Forestry Commission nor a contractor would provide. Here, however, it meant that, with relatively little training, a lot of work could be carried out at low risk to the workers (with hand tools being less dangerous than chainsaws) and with a neater finish to the work. The immediate appreciation by the public of the work done helped to maintain motivation. This positive view of the work as worthwhile was also carried back into the prison, and the offenders gained the respect of prison staff for the effort and stamina required to carry out this work.

Contacts: Nick Hazlitt (FC), Ben Phelan (FC), Wendy Entwistle (HMPS)

5.3 Natural England's¹³ 'Working with Prisoners' initiative

English Nature's work with prisoners started in 2003. Inmates from HMP Springhill helped at Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve (NNR) in Oxfordshire and established a tree nursery in the prison grounds. In November 2003, at Barton Hills NNR in Bedfordshire, prisoners from Springhill Open Prison at Grendon Underwood came to erect fencing in the first of a series of regular work sessions. In 2004, one prisoner worked at Aston Rowant NNR for 40 days towards an NVQ in environment conservation. Another scheme operates at the Ribble Estuary NNR working with inmates from HMP Kirkham in Lancashire on plans for brownfield land within the prison.

Contact: Dominic Harmer (NE)

¹³ English Nature from October 2006 became part of 'Natural England'. Natural England was formed by bringing together English Nature (EN), the landscape, access and recreation elements of the Countryside Agency (CA) and the environmental land management functions of the Rural Development Service (RDS).

5.4 Natural England's initiative with Phoenix Futures

English Nature's partnership with Phoenix House — a substance misuse charity — began in 1997. Clients from Phoenix House (now Phoenix Futures) in Sheffield engaged in work at the National Nature Reserve (NNR) at Lathkill Dale, repairing drystone walls, walling in an area to re-establish a meadow, fencing and repairing footpaths and steps. In 2004, the partnership was extended to cover the Castle Eden Dene NNR in Upper Teesdale, undertaking a variety of tasks on the site under the guidance of a facilitator. Both sites are experiencing excellent results in terms of conservation therapy for the Phoenix Futures clients and excellent-quality work for Natural England on its NNRs. Evidence is being gathered by both organisations to underpin the value of the conservation therapy programme. A study has been conducted on the feasibility of the concept and the scheme as a useful blueprint to roll out within the partnership and for guidance and discussion to other organisations doing similar work or looking to venture into it.

Contacts: Alan Pearsons (NE), Jon Hall (Phoenix Futures)

5.5 North West England – prisoner resettlement

Natural England, the National Trust and the Forestry Commission have been involved in setting up a pilot project with Haverigg Prison, a Category C prison, in Cumbria to carry out conservation and forest management work on different sites belonging to the initiative's partners. The Forestry Commission is interested in trying to evaluate the project formally and has provisionally contacted researchers from the Healthy Setting Unit at the University of Central Lancashire about this, and is discussing this step with the prison. The Government Office for the North-West was involved at the start and is interested in spreading this approach to other prisons in the region. There have been some practical problems for the prison, such as pressure on inmates going out to bring back prohibited items such as alcohol or drugs.¹⁴

Contacts: Penny Oliver (FC), Keith Jones (FC)

5.6 Forestry Commission participation in 'Project Scotland'

Galloway District of the Forestry Commission Scotland obtained funding from 'Project Scotland' to offer volunteer placements and training to young disadvantaged, marginalised and academically low-performing young people. The scheme started in October 2005. While it is not actively targeting offenders, young offenders are eligible to apply to the scheme. Recruitment and mentoring is carried out by Volunteer Centre South Ayrshire. Young people sign on as conservation volunteers for at least three months and have the option to stay for a whole year. The objective is to help them gain work-based skills and qualifications to enhance their employability in the land-based industry sector, and more generally increase their confidence, raise their self-esteem and help them become active citizens. Volunteer squads include old-age pensioners, people with a range of disabilities and the Project Scotland youngsters.

In addition to learning about path creation and management, tree-planting, chemical weeding, tree-felling using chainsaws and similar forest- and land-management skills, there is also an emphasis on opportunities for volunteers to participate in team-building activities such as mountain-biking, playing football and paint-balling. In the first year of operation, about 20 young people participated with less than 10 per cent dropping out during 'taster week'. Those having successfully completed their first six months can apply for a grant of up to £1,500 for personal development (often used towards getting a driving licence and purchasing a chainsaw kit, or attending an overseas conservation camp). The first year's volunteers included a wide range of personalities, but those behaving violently or involved with drugs were removed from the project. The scheme is now in its second year, and has had 38 young people participating to date.

Contacts: Stan Corcoran (FC), Lyndy Renwick (FC)

¹⁴ The Dartmoor initiative has addressed this issue by not allowing offenders to carry personal mobile phones and not allowing them access to a vehicle. For emergencies, FC staff members have access to a mobile phone and vehicle, and so far this special rule has been accepted and worked well in practice to avoid offenders on external placements being used as drug dealers/carriers.

5.7 Forestry Commission, Northants District – young offenders and probationers

Offenders from Young Offender Institutes and the Probation Services attend regular work groups at Rockingham Forest and Kesteven Forest, with the Forestry Commission and partners including a coppice contractor. FC is looking to develop the project, and considering mountain-bike courses, anti-drugs workshops and related training facilities in joint partnership with the Northamptonshire Young Offenders Team and the wider public. FC personnel are also considering the establishment of a social-training woodcraft workshop and linking work with a sawmill facility to provide basic skills to excluded children and other disaffected youngsters to help them into work programmes.

Contacts: Cheryl Joyce (FC), Jo Roberts (FC), Kevin Stannard (FC)

6. Conclusions

Existing O&N schemes have offered opportunities for learning new skills, obtaining qualifications and facilitating personal development for many offenders. Feedback from offenders, scheme managers and local communities has been extremely positive and supportive, with few serious obstacles encountered to date. The most commonly expressed concern is a lack of financial resources to secure apt and enthusiastic scheme supervisors and cover transport and training costs for the participants. Negotiations to set up and formalise a scheme have often taken a year or more, and with some better guidance and start-up help this lead-in time could be reduced to a few months – though each project may have to add its own local arrangements and solutions rather than just following a standard template.

There is a striking lack of in-depth analysis and evaluation of the current schemes. While some informal interviews or questionnaire-type evaluations have taken place for most initiatives, there is no in-depth qualitative and quantitative research on the performance and longer-term outcomes. The use of standardised start, mid-term and exit questionnaires, as well as in-depth interviews with participants and managers, could add a richer, more precise and substantial evaluation of the costs and success rate of O&N schemes in reducing re-offending, and also review their impacts on health, well-being and personal development, plus identifying any other key impacts they have on (ex-)offenders' lives.

Further information

At the request of Her Majesty's Prison Service (HMPS), in 2003 English Nature started hosting an informal network of organisations engaged or interested in running Offenders and Nature programmes, to share information and experiences, provide mutual support and develop understanding of what works. Members of the steering group representing some of these organisations, as listed below, are happy to act as initial points of contact for enquiries.

Claudia Carter, Forest Research, e-mail: claudia.carter@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Claudia is a researcher in the Social and Economic Research Group, interested in environmental decision-making and policy, and human–environment interactions. Since summer 2006, she has been collecting information on O&N schemes in the UK and abroad. Claudia has an academic as well as policy-and-practice interest in the topic, and plans to develop monitoring and evaluation tools to gather evidence on costs and the wide range of impacts of O&N schemes.

Judith Hanna, Natural England, e-mail: judith.hanna@naturalengland.org.uk

Judith is a social science principal scientist with Natural England. Her focus is on social benefits that can be gained from a healthy natural environment, especially in relation to major social policy objectives such as social inclusion. Judith worked with a variety of environmental and social organisations before joining English Nature/Natural England.

Nick Hazlitt, Forestry Commission, e-mail: nick.hazlitt@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Trained as a forester, Nick manages the West Hampshire Beat in the South East England Forest District. He manages a small team based just outside Winchester, committed to enhancing our woodland estate and improving conditions for access, recreation and biodiversity. Nick trained at Sparsholt College and now has strong links with the college as the Forestry Commission supports various elements of its education and training programme. Before joining the Forestry Commission Nick worked as a forestry contractor and has personal experience of the physical and technical challenges, and the benefits, of working 'in Nature'.

Alan Pearsons, Natural England, e-mail: alan.pearsons@naturalengland.org.uk

Alan is the health and environmental specialist within the Social and Economic Evidence team in Natural England. His role is to gather, analyse and disseminate evidence to provide advice and expertise to improve understanding about the relationship between people and the natural environment, to demonstrate the social, economic and health benefits of bringing people and nature closer together. This encompasses developing effective programmes of physical activity for health and rehabilitation with marginalised groups, including the Phoenix Futures programme and the prisoners' programme.

Alec Potter, Home Office Custodial Estate, e-mail: alec.potter@hmpr.gsi.gov.uk

Alec leads the Sustainable Development Team for the Home Office Custodial Estate and is responsible for policy for the public- and private-sector Prison Service as well as the Youth Justice Board estate. Alec also promotes and publicises environmental initiatives across these estates, producing an annual report. Specific lead areas of responsibility are biodiversity, social issues, waste & recycling and construction.

Phil Thomas, Home Office Custodial Estate, e-mail: phil.thomas5@hmpr.gsi.gov.uk

Phil's main areas of responsibility are biodiversity and social issues across the public- and private-sector Prison Service as well as the Youth Justice Board estate. Phil specifically leads on the Prison Service Biodiversity Action Plan, Nature and Community projects, Environmental and Countryside Legislation and the management of Protected Species and Priority Habitats, liaising with a central partnership of Natural England, RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts and BTCV.

Tracey Tohill, National Offender Management Service, e-mail: traceymaree.tohill@justice.gsi.gov.uk

Tracey works for the Partnerships Unit in the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), where she has responsibility for policy on improving employment prospects for offenders, and for promoting the Reducing Re-offending Corporate Alliance, which seeks to engage employers in this agenda. Tracey has been seconded to the Partnership Unit from the voluntary sector where she has managed Employment, Training and Education contracts within Probation and HMPs.

Helen Townsend, Forestry Commission England, e-mail: helen.townsend@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Helen is the Social and Community Programme Manager within Forestry Commission England. Her role is to provide advice and expertise for the development of government policy on the wider societal benefits of trees, woods and forests and to develop programmes of delivery through the use of the public and private forest estate and through partnerships.

Forest Research will publish a more comprehensive review of the literature, Offenders and Nature schemes and relevant organisations in early 2008. The steering group, in liaison with other key staff members and contacts, is also planning to compile a practical handbook for setting up and successfully running O&N schemes; this is likely to be published in late 2007.

Publication and contact details

This publication was written by Claudia Carter of Forest Research, with contributions from Judith Hanna (Natural England).

Enquiries relating to this publication should be made to:

Claudia Carter (Project Leader)
Social and Economic Research Group, Environmental and Human Sciences Division
Forest Research, Alice Holt Lodge, Farnham, GU10 4LH
Tel 01420 526191, Fax 01420 23653, e-mail claudia.carter@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Photo credits, front page: The three small photos show activities under the Winchester HMP-FC initiative, taken by Ben Phelan, FC. The photo on the right features work of the Dartmoor HMP-FC initiative, taken by Angel Tomney.

First published March 2007; revised August 2007