

On 5 July 2012 Mike Batty, Jeff Evans, Steven Hume and Miriam Robertson visited the Minerva Project in Hull, which was the winner of the 'Public Sector Partnership Awards' category in the Local Government Chronicle Awards 2012, with the headline achievement of reducing reoffending among short-term (under 12 months) adult prisoners from 58.8% to 14.4%.

1. Description

1.1 The project was set up in the period autumn 2009 to spring 2010 with the backing of Hull Citysafe and £1.8 million of Working Neighbourhood Fund money, in the context of a calculation that the annual cost of re-offending for Hull was of the order of £60 million.

1.2 The project is delivered through the vehicle of a Community Interest Company, Minerva Social Enterprise, which is owned by the four key partners i.e. Hull City Council, HMP Hull, Humberside Prison and Humberside Probation Trust. The CIC Board is made up of

- a Magistrate
- a Finance Office from Hull City Council
- a Commissioning Manager from the PCT
- a Senior Probation Officer
- a Prison Officer at PO level
- Russ Waterman, the Project Director (a retired police officer and now employed by the City Council)

and has previously had a senior serving police officer in membership.

The CIC Board reports back to the Community Safety Partnership.

1.3 Two derelict industrial units owned by Hull City Council were made available to the project and were refurbished mainly by volunteers, with specialist trades (electrical and plumbing/heating) bought in, and was subsequently expanded to other sites, and now provides a broad range of services:

- Metalwork – including wrought iron gates for alleygating, but also fencing, furniture, planters, brackets etc
- Clearance – garden clearance and development, household clearances, disposal of waste
- Autos – tyres, exhausts, brakes, valets, services
- Office – new and used office furniture, office removals, office supplies, portable appliance testing etc
- Cleaning – commercial and domestic
- Construction – brick and brlckwork, plastering, paving, laminate flooring, fencing and trellises, door hanging etc.
- Cooking – sandwiches, hot and cold buffets etc.

1.4 The bulk of the work is done by volunteers who all have histories of offending, recruited from any prisoners aged 21 and over who have served below two months, initially based exclusively on males released from HMP Hull but now also 'recruiting' females. They choose how much work they want to do.

Those undertaking between 1 and 19 hours a week receive in return education, training, assistance with CVs etc.

Those working between 20 and 35 hours per week get a £25 fixed payment, a weekly bus pass and a £5 top-up card for gas or electricity. This package has been devised not to offset benefit entitlement and has been approved by DWP.

Volunteers who are arrested are required to 'stand down' for 4 weeks, and on a second arrest for 8 weeks etc. The project has made innovative use of interest free loans to volunteers to assist with payment of fines and other crises which would otherwise be likely to trigger re-offending.

1.5 There are now 10 full time employed supervisors, many of whom have 'graduated' from being volunteers.

1.6 All 28 full time staff have been given training in mentoring and coaching, and there is a big emphasis on personal responsibility ("what do you want to do?").

1.7 The project, having started with short-sentence prisoners, is now expanding into working with PPO/IOM clients.

1.8 There is a profit sharing system which distributes 5% of the profits made.

1.9 The project has a range of charges i.e.

community rate – free

charity rate – based on £8 per hour

commercial rate – e.g. for private landlord work

and is continually looking to expand into new areas e.g. refurbishing flats for the City Council.

Local construction companies buy in labour from the project and some volunteers have gone on to work for these companies. Larger firms have supported the project by providing materials and food at discounted rates (B&Q, ASDA) and providing jobs (DHL).

1.10 The CIC operates outside the procurement regimes of the partner agencies in an entrepreneurial way, and pursues its own funding. It is approaching self-sufficiency in terms of earned income and grants secured. It also earns income from research, consulting and evaluation.

1.11 The project is currently establishing a charity in order to make its tax affairs more efficient (the CIC is subject to company tax at costs of 20% of profits).

2. Evaluation and Commentary

2.1 All four visitors came away with a very positive impression of the project and enthusiasm to try to secure some of the same benefits for Stockton.

2.2 Clearly our circumstances are different. Stockton is smaller, less deprived, has a lower crime rate and does not have £1.8 million available, nor derelict industrial units.

2.3 However, the general style of this project could, in principle, be replicated in Stockton, on a smaller scale, and with adaptation to Stockton's circumstances.

2.4 Possible features of a Stockton version could include:

- (a) a targeted approach on a particular section of the offending population, e.g. young people and young adults in the 16 – 25 range
- (b) establishment of a CIC backed by an initial working capital fund, comprised of funding from the local partner agencies supplemented by bids to various national funding bodies in both the Government and charitable sectors, and possibly some support from local business interests
- (c) incorporation of a registered charity element from the outset, either by establishing a new charity for these purposes, in tandem with the CIC, or through a partnership with an existing charity.

2.5 Critical success factors are likely to include

- (a) strong commitment from partners;
- (b) identification of a project manager with the drive to take this forward; and
- (c) identification of supervisors with the right mix of technical skills in the area of work concerned, ability to teach, and commitment to the aims of the project i.e. crime reduction/reducing re-offending.

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