

HMYOI Ashfield - Continuously improving a programme delivered by Avon Fire and Rescue Service to develop employability skills and reduce re-offending

Summary of how this case study can be used

This case study examines how HMYOI Ashfield worked with the local Fire and Rescue Service to develop, deliver and improve a training programme. It describes how this innovative approach to delivery and quality has improved the employability of the young offenders and reduced re-offending.

It will support leaders and managers by demonstrating the advantages of collaborative working with employers such as the Fire and Rescue Service. It will also illustrate how the desire to continuously improve and overcome practical barriers can result in a programme that meets the needs of the young offenders.

The Establishment

HMYOI Ashfield is a private prison holding young male offenders aged between 15 and 17. It has an operational capacity of 400 (as at May 2007). The prison accepts remand and sentenced young offenders; the majority of whom are completing Detention and Training Orders.

Background

A chance meeting between a Crew Manager and a Fire Fighter working for Avon Fire and Rescue Service and a Prison Officer from HMYOI Ashfield led to the programme of learning described in this case study.

The Prison Officer recognised that the “lads at Ashfield would be really interested in hearing about fire fighting”. The Institution Managers realised that this would extend resettlement opportunities to the young offenders and the Crew Manager and Fire Fighter wanted to do some work for the benefit of the local community.

The very first programme involved two Fire Fighters running a Basic Introduction to Fire Skills on Thursday nights. Very few resources were involved; the fire fighters turned up with a car and four lengths of hose. The aim was to simply teach the offender learners the fundamentals of fire safety and how to use a hose correctly.

Approach taken

The review process identified that the fire skills programme was very popular with young offenders, but the arrival of new learners every week meant there was repetition.

Two new courses were therefore developed; Fire Skills and Cadet.

The six day Fire Skills course is intense with 70% classroom based theory and 30% drill yard based practical activities. The Crew Manager (Allan Middleton) works with prison staff to identify who should be enrolled.

There are high expectations of the young offenders on the course and they are removed for bad behaviour, inappropriate language or issues relating to attitude. The emphasis is on safety, the vital role fire fighters have in society and the importance of discipline. The course review process identified this as practice that helped the development of employability skills.

Offenders have to complete the Fire Skills course before they can attend the Cadet course on Thursday nights.

The courses were recognised outside of the prison. The Crew Manager (Allan Middleton) received the United Kingdom Public Service Award, the Butler Trust Award and Royal Fellowship to the Society of Arts in recognition of the work he was doing with offenders. In response, the Avon Fire and Rescue Service donated an engine which is still fully operational and in use for the programme to date.

Continuous improvement

Post sentence planning is now included in the programme. When learners become Fire Cadets, usually three weeks away from their release date, they are offered a mentor. The mentor is a current Fire Fighter who has not previously been part of the programme. He or she provides individual support and a community contact on release. If the offender is released to another area, a different mentor is appointed from the nearest Fire and Rescue Service to him.

Action to prevent offending is also included in the course planning. HMYOI Ashfield has been working with young people identified as being 'on the edge of exclusion' and has enrolled some exclusion learners onto the Fire Skills course. It is hoped that this will prevent them from offending by giving them a taste of what a custodial establishment is like and by developing employability skills. The Fire Skills course now runs on 80% offender learners and 20% edge of exclusion learners.

Partnership and collaborative working

This initiative has only been possible through effective collaboration and determination shown by those involved.

During the planning phase, the fire fighters' trade union was involved and both union representatives and the fire crew had to work with staff from the prison to resolve a number of practical issues.

Although Avon Fire and Rescue Service provided a fire engine, this did create problems. Fire engines are equipped with axes, cutting equipment and other resources that posed security risks. Through collaboration and close working with the prison security team, much of the equipment was removed. Since then trust and confidence in the programme has grown and as a result all of the equipment has been restored to ensure the accuracy and rigour of the learners programme. To meet security requirements some of the equipment is under lock and key.

Timescales and Resources

From the first visit to discuss the possibilities to the delivery of the first programme took two years. The Fire Skills course and Cadet Programme have now been running for 3½ years and during that time the various improvements have been made.

In 2006, Avon Fire and Rescue Service lent HMYOPI Ashfield a fully equipped fire engine with fire fighting and rescue equipment. The prison provides uniforms and fire fighting kit for the learners to wear while attending the courses

The staff at HMYOI Ashfield have an active involvement in choosing who takes part and provide support during the sessions.

Allan Middleton has been given office space within Ashfield including PC, telephone and other resources.

Impact

Approximately 300 young offenders have taken part in the Fire and Rescue Service programme over the 3½ years since its inception.

They have learnt some specific fire and safety skills such as being able to identify hazards and operate specialist equipment. In addition they have gained employability skills including confidence, a sense of purpose and an ability to follow orders and instructions.

For many offenders, the programme provided an aim and a credible career aspiration. For one offender it led full time employment with Avon Fire and Rescue Service.

Many offenders were able to access release on temporary licence (ROTL) opportunities offered to those who had successfully completed the programme delivered by the Fire and Rescue Service. These were either for long term work experience in various settings or representing the Fire and Rescue Service at events.

Lessons learnt – reviewing and improving programmes

- Even the most effective programmes can be improved
- A formal and structured approach allows for strengths to be identified as well as areas for improvement
- Involving partners in review and evaluation processes can help organisations accurately identify strengths and weaknesses and creatively generate solutions

Lessons learnt – engaging with employers

- Identify 'what's in it' for both the organisation and the individuals involved.
- Try to engage an employer that is interesting to the offender.
- Spend time planning to make sure the employer is prepared to work with offenders. This could involve the relevant trade union as well as the management and the individuals.
- Spend time planning to make sure any equipment or methodology fits with prison protocols.
- Be prepared to constantly review progress.

Lessons learnt – benefits of working collaboratively with employers

Working collaboratively with an employer can lead to offenders:

- developing useful, practical skills
- developing generic employability skills such as commitment, motivation and reliability
- becoming more confident and having a sense of purpose
- developing a credible and realistic career aspiration
- having a reduced risk of re-offending

Case study contact details

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Allan Middleton is on secondment from Avon Fire and Rescue Service, but HMYOI Ashfield pay all the ongoing costs.