

EVALUATION OF BLUE SKY DEVELOPMENT and REGENERATION

Summary findings

Submitted to Blue Sky Regeneration and Development by
ARCS (UK) Ltd

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Blue Sky Development and Regeneration is a subsidiary of the Thames Valley Groundwork Trust, and was founded in 2005 to help people coming out of prison to secure paid work. Its main aim is *"to help break the cycle of re-offending and achieve long-term benefits for society"*.

From October 2005 to December 2007 Blue Sky has been funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, the Henry Smith Charity and by the EXODUS Partnership. EXODUS is an EQUAL European Social Fund project led by the South East England Development Agency and operating in London and the South East.

ARCS (UK) was commissioned by Blue Sky Development and Regeneration to undertake an independent evaluation. The main aim of the evaluation was to assess the progress and impact of Blue Sky's work since its creation. The research involved a number of key strands including:

- collection and analysis of existing Blue Sky project documentation and data on all project participants,
- telephone and face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders and Blue Sky staff,
- telephone and face-to-face interviews with past and current Blue Sky participants,
- observational work at individual Blue Sky sites, and
- a review of relevant practice and research literature.

The evaluation took place during the period from September to December, 2007, and was delivered by a team of 6 ARCS staff members. Key findings from the research are outlined below, as summarised from the full evaluation report.

Key findings

The work of Blue Sky

- Those who become involved with Blue Sky are provided with temporary employment in grounds maintenance, which involves team-based delivery of site clearance, landscaping, grass cutting, hedge trimming and lawn maintenance services. Participants are also offered a range of other forms of practical assistance and support, ranging from assistance with housing issues or efforts to secure further training, to advice and day-to-day individual and motivational support.
- Respondents described the work as "real work", rather than something "made up to keep ex-offenders occupied for a while". This makes Blue Sky different from many other providers.

- Stakeholders and participants both described the key purpose of Blue Sky as being not only to provide some practical skills and a job history or work reference, but to act as a “stepping stone” into more stable and positive life circumstances.
- There was a strong focus in the feedback on the importance of inclusiveness, teamwork, individual support, and offering a route into stable employment for those ex-offenders who want to take advantage of that opportunity.

Blue sky participants

- Details concerning a total of 68 participants were included on the most up to date version of the project data-set provided to the research team during the research, and this material was analysed to generate a profile of Blue Sky participants.
- In terms of age, just under 60% of Blue Sky participants were under 30 when they started their involvement, with just over 7% being 40 or over.
- Most participants have been single (76.5%), White (72%), with no dependents (65%).
- Available details about participants’ offending backgrounds were limited, although 40% of Blue Sky participants were designated as PPOs (Prolific and Other Priority Offenders).
- 72% of participants were classified as drug or alcohol users, and a third are listed as having DAT treatment plans.
- Concerning the housing situation of Blue Sky participants at the point of project induction, 9 participants (just over 13%) were classed as NFA or homeless, 60% were living with family, friends or partners, and over half more generally could be regarded as living in “non-settled accommodation”.
- Project documentation and respondent feedback suggest that Blue Sky’s referral and assessment procedures are somewhat informal, but that they do include a focus on individual commitment and motivation to change.
- Information concerning referral sources indicated that the largest number of participants was referred by the Probation Service (43%), followed by 16% who were referred from prison.

Outcomes

- The research team was struck by the consistently positive nature of the feedback about the impact of the project on participants.

- Many participants claimed without hesitation that they would have been worse off if they had not had the opportunity to be involved with Blue Sky – 9 felt that they would certainly have been back in prison, for example, and 8 felt that they would simply have been unemployed if not for Blue Sky.
- Both stakeholder and participant feedback highlighted perceived beneficial outcomes for participants in terms of:
 - self-esteem,
 - confidence,
 - ability to stick to a work routine,
 - ability to work with others as part of a team,
 - communication skills, and
 - motivation.

- Comments such as the following were typical from project participants:

They are a lot more understanding than other employers. They go out of their way to help you - personally and professionally. They are your 'best friend'. If you have a problem, you can go to your team-leader and they will do their best to help you.

So really if I didn't have work with Blue Sky, I think I'd be in jail.

Blue Sky was the kick-start that I needed, particularly in terms of motivation.

I was getting to the point where I was thinking, 'I'll never get a job from here', so Blue Sky was a bit of saviour. In the end you just think, 'oh, I'll give up now'. I tried about six different places.

I didn't realise how much they do help us. They are really trying to help us, you know what I mean? I mean, you've got six of us on there and none of us are re-offending. None of us are going back to jail, so it's gotta be working, do you know what I mean?

- In terms of employment outcomes, the available project data indicated that about 48% of past participants were in full time employment at a point three months after leaving Blue Sky; this compares well with figures from other similar schemes.

- Not all participants completed their planned period of involvement with Blue Sky; just over 48% of past participants were dismissed, with the majority of these (26.9% of past participants) being dismissed for non-attendance, and just over 21% for misconduct, using drugs/alcohol or other reasons.
- Project data indicate that a majority of dismissals take place at a fairly early stage in each participant's involvement – 52% of dismissals to date have taken place by week 6, for example, and over 72% by week eleven.
- In terms of Blue Sky's impact on offending, the available information did not allow the evaluators to offer any credible estimates, although the project data-base did suggest that 13.5% of past participants were known to have been returned to prison at the time of the research.
- Longer term tracking and follow-up would be highly useful in allowing the project to assess a wider range of these impacts in more detail, and also to assess the cost-effectiveness of their work, given what is known more generally about the potential savings that can accrue from positive impacts on re-offending.

Success factors

- Feedback from participants and key stakeholders concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the project was again highly consistent, and a range of "success factors" was referred to including:
 - strong leadership;
 - good quality service delivery;
 - an ability to "get things done";
 - staff teams that are taken seriously by client groups;
 - the drive and commitment of the staff teams, and
 - proactive marketing, branding, publicity strategy.

Good practice

- The evidence collected during the research suggested that Blue Sky's practice is consistent with some of the key principles outlined in the "what works" literature, since it:
 - tries to adopt a holistic view of each participant and his/her needs and circumstances,

- designs individually tailored sets of hard and soft support for participants, which are usually multi-faceted,
- uses supervisory styles that are tailored to participants' own backgrounds and circumstances, and
- uses team-building approaches to strengthen social and group skills.

