

Young people gain skills to leave

Scheme targets young offenders most at risk of going into custody, giving them the opportunity to develop

PROJECT

The Skill Mill

PURPOSE

To provide employment for former young offenders, reduce reoffending rates and increase young people's life chances

FUNDING

Of 11 projects in England, three receive National Heritage Lottery Fund and local authority funding, while eight are funded through Social Impact Bonds backed by £3.8m over four years from the Department for Culture Media and Sport's Life Chances Fund, local authorities and social investors. The Skill Mill receives payments via these contracts if it successfully meets milestones such as reducing reoffending and securing jobs or training for young people. Organisations pay for services provided by The Skill Mill's young workforce.

BACKGROUND

Almost a third – 31 per cent – of young offenders in England and Wales reoffend, according to the Youth Justice Board. A criminal record makes it harder for young people to get work and more likely they will turn back to crime.

As youth offending team (YOT) manager for Newcastle City Council, David Parks was keen to find ways to break the cycle and in 2013 trialled a scheme offering paid work to help young offenders steer clear of crime and gain new skills.

The pilot project with the Environment Agency was a success and Parks went on to establish The Skill Mill social enterprise in partnership with the YOT in 2014.

The Skill Mill started working with Leeds City Council's YOT in 2015 and Durham County Council's YOT in 2017. It currently works with 11 local authority partners in England.



The Skill Mill's six-month work placements allows ex-offenders to develop employability skills in a supported environment

ACTION

The Skill Mill is targeted at the top 10 per cent of young offenders who have 11 convictions or more and are most at risk of going into custody. YOTs refer young people to the scheme, which offers six-

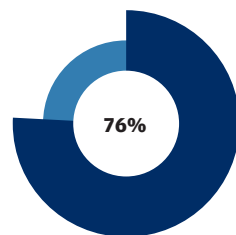
month placements for up to four young people at a time. "We target the ones no one else is going to touch," says Parks, now managing director of The Skill Mill.

The scheme allows ex-offenders to develop employability skills in a

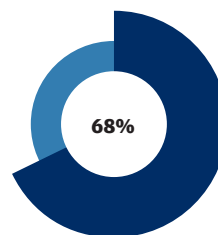
supported environment. Young participants work five days a week and are paid weekly. They earn the minimum wage for their age. During their placement, The Skill Mill encourages the young people to complete as many qualifications

YOUNG PEOPLE GAIN SKILLS AND STAY AWAY FROM CRIME

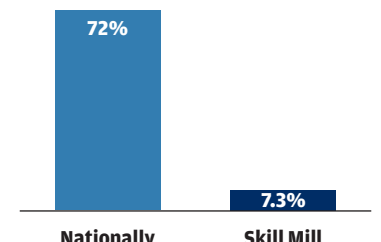
Data for young people employed by The Skill Mill since 2013



left their placement with at least one qualification



progressed into employment, apprenticeships or further education



% of young offenders with more than 11 convictions who reoffend

Source: The Skill Mill

crime behind

employability skills to turn their lives around

as possible. These can include Construction Skills Certification Scheme cards to enable them to work on building sites and health and safety certificates.

When the scheme started, most jobs were with the Environment Agency and involved clearing streams and other waterways or improving riverbanks. But The Skill Mill now works with a wide range of organisations offering manual jobs in areas including construction, maintenance and facilities management.

Parks says organisations that take part in the scheme are often impressed by the young people who come and work for them. "They just want to get stuck in," he says. Organisations not only benefit from employing young people who are prepared to work but can also meet corporate social responsibility goals. They hire The Skill Mill and do not employ the young people directly. "We take all the risk," says Parks.

When the six-month placement ends, young people are supported to move on. "We may be the only company in the world that gets rid of its staff every six months and starts again," says Parks. "It's probably the biggest weakness we have in that all the skilled people go, and that's a real challenge. But our partners know usually it takes a month for everything to click into place."

After the six months, the organisation aims to line up jobs for the young people. Some have gone on to work at the Environment Agency and Kier Group. "We say to young people there are no guarantees of a job at the end," says Parks. "But if you get stuck in, get your CV together, get some qualifications, then we will try to help you."

There is a pastoral element. The Skill Mill site leaders collect the young workers from a designated point every morning to drive them to their site and return them after work. The journey can take up to an hour. "That's a great time for the supervisors to engage with the team," says Parks. Supervisors are in contact with YOT social workers and report back on any issues. They also have access to case management systems and can flag up issues there. "If a young person is on an alternative to custody programme, they have to have contact with the social worker every day," says Parks. "Some of the young people we employ are subject to these conditions but the daily contact is devolved to us. That takes the pressure off the local authority as well."

The Skill Mill staff can also advocate for young people when they go to court. Parks says about 12 young people have had custodial sentences reduced to a community sentence after supervisors wrote letters to a judge with a character reference or accompanied them to their hearing.

Parks believes the physical work the Skill Mill provides, and the fact it is outdoors in nature, is beneficial for the young people's mental health.

"The young people are properly tired at the end of the day," he says. "When you put young people in that environment, it's just transformational."

OUTCOME

The Skill Mill has employed 398 young people since 2013. Only 29 have been re-convicted – a reoffending rate of 7.3 per cent compared with 72 per cent for

EXPERIENCE SKILL MILL HELPS LEROY BECOME ROLE MODEL FOR HIS PEERS

Leroy, 17, has worked for The Skill Mill for a year. After completing his six-month placement, he stayed on to work with team leader David Lebour. "David's been a big part of helping me move forward in life," he says.

Leroy went into custody more than a year ago after leaving secondary school. At the time his parents were going through a difficult break up. From the age of 13, he had been helping support his family financially through dealing drugs and had convictions for possession of drugs.

When he started at The Skill Mill, Leroy did landscaping, carpentry and joinery work and went on to achieve Construction Skills Certification Scheme accreditation. He currently works at a site where the team does maintenance work such as painting buildings. Lebour and the group are proud of the trust shown to them by the contractors in hiring ex-offenders.

"I love being in work and getting out of the house," says Leroy. "I just wanted to get things done and move forward in life. It helped me realise there's a place you need to reach if



Leroy gained qualifications at work

you genuinely want to have a good life. You just have to work hard for it, keep motivating yourself, and have a good structure."

He hopes to set up his own construction business in future and is completing as many qualifications as possible. "If I hadn't done this, I'd probably just have gone down a bad route, made money somewhere else, got into trouble," he says.

Lebour says Leroy has become "the most important part of my team". "When you've got Leroy backing the others up as a peer, he's more of role model than I am."

young offenders with more than 11 convictions across England and Wales, according to Ministry of Justice statistics. Of the 20 young women who have taken part in the scheme, none have reoffended.

In addition, 76 per cent of the young people left their placement with at least one qualification and 68 per cent have moved on to jobs, apprenticeships or further education.

Challenges in the job market have made it harder to support young people into employment in recent years with 49 out of 92 moving into jobs or further training since August 2020.

Parks believes the project has generated huge cost savings for wider society by helping young people stay away from crime. Based on the idea that just one

young person's reoffending costs the public purse about £116,000 per year, he estimates the project has saved upwards of £22m since 2020.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Parks is currently looking for further central government funding to continue the projects after the Social Impact Bond contracts end next year.

He would like to expand the approach to other local authorities. "A Social Impact Bond should demonstrate good interventions that work and good outcomes for money – and we've done that," he says.

By Gabriella Jóźwiak

If you think your project is worthy of inclusion, email supporting data to derren.hayes@markallengroup.com