

**Tackling Drugs in WorcesterSE – The magazine of Social Enterprise West Midlands
Issue 03 – Summer 2009**

**Breaking the cycle of crime
Is social enterprise the key?**

Re-offending prisoners are a huge expense to the taxpayer, yet many ex-offenders find it difficult to get the training and employment opportunities they need to get a job and stay on the right side of the law. Social enterprises could be the answer, and the West Mercia Probation Trust is eager to work with them. SE reports.

Many social enterprises provide employment and training opportunities to those disadvantaged in the labour market and this has captured the interest of organisations working with offenders. The West Mercia Probation Trust is one such organisation - it already has links with social enterprises across the West Midlands, and is keen to forge more.

The Trust operates across Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire. It supervises offenders who have been given a community order by the courts as well as those released on licence from prison. It seeks to protect the public, but also exists to rehabilitate offenders and delivers a range of behaviour programmes and specialist support services to help people stop committing further offences.

One way in which the Trust aims to reduce re-offending is through the employment of community link workers. They carry out holistic assessments of offenders, looking at education, training, employment, housing, and debt and motivation issues.

The trust is also eager to help offenders secure training and employment opportunities, and like many other probation services across the region, believes that working with social enterprises will help it meet this aim.

Chandry Mistry, Employment Development Officer at West Mercia Probation Trust, says: "West Mercia Probation became a Trust on 1 April 2008. As a Trust we have greater independence and flexibility in the way we deliver services to meet local needs. We want to work with social enterprises locally that can help us support our task of offender management and reduce re-offending.

"Re-offending costs the taxpayer thousands of pounds a year and this doesn't make commercial sense. We believe that by helping individuals to realise their potential and get back into the labour market, we can not only benefit them, but also their families and their local communities.

“For many offenders, crime becomes the norm and offending behaviour works like a revolving door. When leaving prison, if they have no prospect of gaining a job or qualifications, they get back into debt and re-offending.

“We work to combat this by helping individuals gain qualifications and training, and change their behaviour and attitudes. We aim to offer a seamless progression into work experience placements then employment and this is where social enterprises can help”.

The Trust has secured training, placement and employment opportunities with social enterprise Pack-IT in Hereford. It is also working with 7Y People and is in discussion with Adullam Homes Housing Association based in West Bromwich. “We’re looking to create links with further social enterprises across the West Midlands,” says Chandry,” to help us offer more opportunities for our clients. We believe that social enterprises are ideally placed to lead the way in supporting ex-offenders into work because of their commitment to social values and community benefit. We would like any enterprises interested in our work to get in touch”.

The Trust has recently helped to set up a social enterprise in Shropshire called 2nd Avenue, which is mainly run by four former offenders whom the Trust has helped to rehabilitate. The enterprise, which is currently in the process of securing premises to operate from, will act as an employment agency for people with criminal convictions and will help them to start their own self-employed businesses. It will also aim to line up work for ex-offenders with employers and, ultimately, it is hoping to break the cycle of re-offending and make it easier for ex-offenders to become valuable members of their local communities.