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Multi-agency and partnership working that provides support for offenders with barriers to learning: Thames Valley Probation

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### Brief description

This example shows how Thames Valley Probation employs multi-agency working to maximise opportunities for offender learning.

### Overview – the provider’s message

‘In 2006 when it was clear that funding for offender learning in the community was changing, we were particularly concerned that the changes would have an impact on specialist provision for offenders who would not traditionally access training or education. And with more significant changes to funding in 2009, we knew that we would not have the resources to be able to offer every offender learning across the large area that we cover. We recognised that we needed to bring together all the providers that were working across our area to try to maximize and build on what we already had’.



*Sarah Mayson, Bridge to Employment Manager*

### The good practice in detail

Many offenders have never been employed and most have little in terms of formal qualifications. Employment is one of the key factors preventing re-offending, but helping offenders who have a range of different needs to get back into learning across a wide and diverse area is a considerable challenge.

To improve the learning and skills provision available to offenders serving sentences in the community within the Thames Valley, the probation service took the initiative to set up the 'Thames Valley Offender Skills and Employment Partnership'. Providers and partners throughout the area working with offenders in the community were invited to be members. Agencies such as Jobcentre Plus, Next Step, the Skills Funding Agency and representatives from voluntary organisations such as 'Supporting Others through Volunteer Action' (SOVA) were also invited.

The overall aim was to support the delivery of employment learning and skills to offenders within the Thames Valley. The core functions were to:

- promote an awareness of the employment, and learning and skills needs of offenders
- secure the commitment of existing and new providers to deliver appropriate services and programmes for offenders, and creating a flexible and responsive approach
- address the barriers to learning for many offenders
- develop integrated employment and skills progression pathways for offenders that are of a comparable quality to those in the wider community.

## What have been the benefits of partnership working?

'The provision we had before we started the partnership was very fragmented with lots of providers duplicating provision', says Sarah. 'It was not sufficiently clear to us or to the providers who was delivering what and where.' The drawing together of a wide range of agencies and providers has created opportunities for us to work together and share experiences. New members to the group are well supported and many use links they have made in the group to identify funding to provide additional learning opportunities for offenders. Bina Burroughs from Oxford and Cherwell Valley College says that: 'I have found being a member of the group very beneficial; drawing on the experience of other members has enabled us to establish different funding streams to extend our provision for offenders. I have learnt a great deal from our regular meetings, I get an overview of the work carried out by other providers and, as a result, I am better informed about offender learning.' Michael Kenny, a link adviser with Thames Valley Probation adds that, 'regular partnership meetings help provide information about what's available throughout the area and have helped to maintain consistency and continuity of learning for offenders during difficult times'.

## How do offenders benefit?

Many offenders have few employability skills and have never been employed. They lack self-confidence and have low self-esteem. They feel they have failed within the education system and don't have the confidence to find ways to help them to develop the skills they need. Many don't have the confidence to go to college and consider themselves to be outside the traditional learning community. 'When we looked at the offenders we work with we found that approximately 36% had specific learning disabilities, or confidence or risk factors making them unsuitable to go to main stream provision,' says Sarah. 'Many had poor literacy and numeracy skills, were unable to work in groups and found it difficult to communicate. They needed high levels of support and encouragement to take the first steps in learning.'

By the providers working together, offenders are better informed about suitable provision. It enables targeting of specific offender needs and identifying the provider best equipped to meet these needs. Many of the providers work with offenders initially on probation premises where offenders feel secure and are not overwhelmed by a large busy environment. For

some offenders who are particularly vulnerable, a high level of learning support needs to be in place for there to be any chance of success. Support is tailored to meet a diverse range of needs and the partnership has facilitated high levels of individual support, particularly for offenders who were unable to access group learning. Lorraine Stewart from Milton Keynes College says that: 'The benefits for the more vulnerable offenders are huge. Offenders who have low self-esteem and would otherwise never engage with learning receive good support to help them to move on. Linking with the mentors from SOVA helps offenders to gain independence and opens up the range of opportunities in mainstream learning.' Kathleen Power from SOVA adds that: 'Much of our work with Thames Valley Probation is about providing mentors to support offenders. Being a member of the partnership has enabled us to target our support, linked to other providers, to maximize our resources and support offenders more effectively.'

### What are the key things that make the partnership work?

'The partnership needs to include all the key stakeholders who work with offenders in the area,' says Gina Reilly from Milton Keynes College. 'A willingness to work together to maximise resources is required as well as a shared understanding of the overall strategy for offender learning in the community. As a group we look at changes to funding and plan ahead. Members work together. We each have our own objectives to meet but we understand that, as a group, we are better placed to meet these objectives, there is less duplication and we can look at the area as a whole. Referrals within the group frequently happen; we don't see this being a competitive process. More experienced members help new members to look at how they can extend their provision to better meet the needs of offenders.'

### With so many providers working across the area how can you be sure about the quality of the provision?

Specialist providers run programmes for offenders who have drug or alcohol problems, women who are victims of domestic violence, and there are many other programmes that target specific needs. Ensuring that specialist support works is fundamental for people who already feel that they have failed in education and training. Feedback on the quality of courses comes from talking to the offenders. It can be direct to one of the employment workers or via offender managers or supervisors. 'Offenders are quick to tell us when something isn't working,' says Sarah. More formalised quality assurance is undertaken by looking at outcomes for offenders and how well they are achieving. Partners and providers receive regular updates at quarterly meetings.

## Provider background



[Thames Valley Probation](#) was created in 2001 and covers Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, which have a combined population of two million. Local employment ranges from agriculture and tourism to light engineering and information technology. Around 50% of offenders were unemployed at the time of sentence. There are 12 main office locations, employing 800 staff who manage approximately 8,000 offenders serving sentences in the community and supervise

around 1,500 offenders released from prison. It also serves 12 Magistrates' Courts and three Crown Courts.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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