The Skill Mill – Newcastle upon Tyne, England

DAVIE PARKS & ROB WHITE

The Skill Mill is a not-for-profit social enterprise providing employment opportunities for young people aged 16 to 18. Following two years of pilot work in the North East of England, The Skill Mill was established to provide high quality and cost effective outdoor work with high social impact. It is based primarily in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, but has ‘branches’ now and in the future in Leeds, Salford (near Manchester), Liverpool and Carlisle in England, and Tallinn in Estonia.

The mission of The Skill Mill is to undertake water– and land–based management, thereby helping to reduce local flood risks and improve the local environment. The Skill Mill also brings social and environmental benefits to local communities by involving local people directly in the delivery of services. The aims of The Skill Mill are to:

1. improve the flow of watercourses and contribute to the reduction of flood risk;
2. increase engagement, participation, employability and educational levels of the young people and move them closer to long-term sustainable employment;
3. reduce re-offending and increase community safety through engagement of ex-offenders in employment; and

4. demonstrate to others the importance of innovative thinking and the benefits of moving away from existing high-cost contracting to resolve water- and land-based environment-related issues.

The project is part of a broader integrated options approach to dealing with young offenders that involves government and non-government agencies.

An integrated options approach

Youth Offending Team (YOT)

The YOT is a statutory body under the authority of the local authority (not county authority), although the employees involved may be employed by county as well as local authorities. Each YOT is comprised of multidisciplinary members – police, health and education, and social workers operating as case managers. The work of the YOT centres around court-ordered interventions including reparation or police-recommended interventions pre-court. Offender progression begins with the police and courts, runs through a case manager, responsible for the assessment planning and intervention and also connects the young person with relevant external agencies and personnel.

The Newcastle YOT was approached by the Environment Agency regarding possibly “cleaning-up” local waterways. In response, the YOT organised sessions whereby young offenders would work for three hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon on watercourse tasks for between 12 and 20 weeks. To date, over 300 young offenders, almost all male, and between the ages of 16 and 18, have engaged in these reparation activities. They are provided with full safety and work equipment. For this cohort, recidivism (repeat offending) rates are lower than the national average of young offenders.

The Skill Mill

The Skill Mill emerged from this reparation program in response to a lack of effective progression routes. It is a non-government “social enterprise” meaning that half of its operational money has to come from non-grant sources – such as contracts with local entities, including the Local Authority.
Environment Agency and Northumbrian Water. It is governed by a four-member Board of Directors, advised by a committee of supportive businesses, agencies and universities. It has one key operational supervisor, who oversees four candidates at a time, usually drawn from the YOT reparation pool. The young people are paid minimum wage rates and are selected on the basis of a combination of attitude, skills, punctuality and vulnerability (that is, those already “work ready” are not selected; those who need extra assistance to find work are). They are employed on a six-month contract. The young people undertake water-work and grounds maintenance tasks (such as cleaning drains), and are awarded Level 1 Certification (national qualification) for basic competencies. The combined pre-Skill Mill offending is in the order of 300+ offences. After the first 18 months of the program, there were only two further offences reported for 12 youths employed.

**Selected agency jobs**

After completion of The Skill Mill contract, graduates have so far found jobs with the participating agencies of The Skill Mill. There have been three cohorts of four young people engaged in the program. To date, only one has not completed the program.

**Practice issues**

**Organisational**

The Skill Mill is essentially the same program as the YOT but involves the progression of the cohort of young people from YOT to The Skill Mill. The supervisor from YOT is in close contact with The Skill Mill, and the supervisor from The Skill Mill is on secondment from the YOT. The hosting of The Skill Mill is within the YOT premises, enhancing the transition from YOT to Skill Mill for the participants. Approval had to be sought for the Manager of the YOT to also be a Board Director of The Skill Mill, even though operationally and legally these are separate entities. A major concern has to do with workload and time allocations for staff across the agencies. The optimum Skill Mill team size is one supervisor to four young people.
The organisational logistics of The Skill Mill include:

- scheduling of work
- budget/payroll/invoices
- social media and website
- procurement/ordering (equipment, uniforms, vans)
- site reports and photos**
- keep samples of what is found in streams**
- social and cultural history
- art and heritage exhibitions

** analysis of contents of water courses and 1) links to local/community level input into the originating problem (e.g. tossing of waste and bottles), and 2) environmental offences (e.g. illegal dumping of waste).

**Social/cultural**

Personal relationships are at the heart of projects such as The Skill Mill, and it is the qualities and skills of supervisors that matter most in developing these. Supervisors need to be able to work with young people, have an interest in the environment, have the ability to undertake manual labour and have good organisational and people skills. It is essential to have a “driver” for the program and vision for the overall project. This means being able to view it both as a progression, and as having the interests of the young people (not the program as such) in mind. For example, a job for the young person is more important than completion of The Skill Mill contract. It builds upon a foundation of a longstanding and statutorily supported “multidisciplinary” environment, where different people work together under the same mandate to achieve common goals.

Particularly in regard to working with young offenders, there are inevitably going to be issues pertaining to compliance and breaching. The Skill Mill has adopted an “out-reach” model, where the agency goes out to the young person, and listens to what the young person has to say, before deciding what to do. It is acknowledged that measures have to be taken to ensure the allocation of the right case manager to suit the young person and to address their personal problems. Attention is also given to agency difficulties and the variety of
means/solutions/responsivity required or possible before breaching, as such, occurs. There is a tension between allowing multiple chances (e.g. lateness or missing days) versus real-life demands (e.g. punctuality and attendance at work), and in relation to the notion that the young people are being paid as an incentive to participate.

**Capacity building**

The historical grounding in the YOT and associated legislation provides a platform for innovative offspring such as The Skill Mill. Issues include the importance and vulnerabilities of reliance upon key driver(s), and funding limits and shortfalls in terms of what could be done. There is need for the development of an environmental niche for the work undertaken and a need to develop alternative areas of work and skill development and job opportunities (beyond that of waterworks repairs, cleaning and rejuvenation). There is the threat that austerity funding will shrink government-provided contracts and jobs in the future.

More evaluation is needed with respect to several emerging trends and issues pertaining to the growth and continuity of The Skill Mill model. One area of interest is evaluation of the franchise process if and when the model starts up in other locations such as Leeds, Carlisle, Liverpool and Tallinn. Scrutiny is needed of the concept of “transfer”, of how policies and procedures can be adopted in different locations, and what structures and processes are available in each locale. In part, some of the questions raised here relate to the nature of “private company” versus “social enterprise”. In technical legal terms, franchise agreements depend upon the status of The Skill Mill as a Limited Guarantee Company (which would provide greater autonomy, a hub role and registered intellectual property such as a trademark, ‘The Skill Mill’) or as a social enterprise and thereby constituted as a Community Interest Company (thereby subject to the CIC Regulator and having to provide an annual report). Issues as to whether or not the Environment Agency is moving toward a community engagement and social responsibility contracting model, and how to obtain preferred provider status, are also relevant here.

Attention has also focused on the use of “recidivism” as a measure of success.
Typically, recidivism is defined as conviction for offending behaviour within two years of initial criminal justice intervention. However, the “desistance” and “restorative justice” literature refers to more holistic measures that might also be utilised in evaluation:

- better relationships
- re-connecting with family and institutions
- engagements
- networks
- job ready/enjoying work
- social role modelling
- life changes

Evaluation techniques, methodologies and conclusions differ greatly depending upon what is being measured and for what purpose.

The Skill Mill attempts to transform the lives of communities and individuals with sustainable, low-cost environmental benefits. As part of its mandate, it undertakes general construction (walkways, access ramps), waterway construction (digging channels), waterway clearance (general litter, plant litter), waste clearance (household, industrial, commercial), mapping of invasive species (Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam), mapping of protective species (water vole, otters, birds), habitat vegetation management (habitat building) and flood defence work (sandbag wall construction).

In undertaking substantial projects for communal objectives, the participants – young people, supervisors and engaged local residents and businesses – all gain a better appreciation of the other and the positives that result from giving something back to the community.

Authors

Davie Parks is an Associate Partner of the Centre of Offenders and Offending at Northumbria University and a founding Director of The Skill Mill Limited.

Rob White is Professor of Criminology at the University of Tasmania and a pioneer in the field of green criminology internationally.