

Reducing Re-offending in the North East

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A North East prison is the first in the country to pilot a new training programme aimed at helping offenders turn their lives around and make a valuable contribution to society.

The first group of inmates at HMP Acklington have completed the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funded course, which will enable them to work as cable jointers for utility companies. The men are hopeful that their newly acquired skills will help them find work when they are released and reduce the risk of them re-offending. So popular was the course that one of the men asked to stay in prison to complete the qualification rather than leave on his Home Detention Curfew release date!

Of the eight men who completed the course, aimed mainly at the telecom industry, two have been released, one of whom is in work and the other on work experience, and the others are looking forward to putting into practice what they have learned. One man, Gavin Kerr, is due to be released later this month after being in prison for 16 months and says while the course was hard work, he's confident that it will make a real difference to his prospects on the outside.

Gavin, 28, from Sunderland, was sent to prison for assault. He said that while he did commit crime when he was young, once he trained as a mechanic, he stayed out of trouble. The crime for which he is now in prison was, he says, a stupid mistake and when he is released later this month he wants to stay out of trouble.

"Doing this course has really improved my chances of getting a job once I'm released and ensuring that I stay out of trouble," he said. "I have worked in most of the workshops in the prison but this is the course that helps you actually get a job when you get out. Finding work will give me security and a sense of purpose. The course has also improved my confidence and ability to work as part of a team. The course was demanding and we had homework most nights but it has been really worthwhile. I was really committed to completing it successfully and am committed to making sure I don't end up back in here."

The eight men were recently presented with certificates at a presentation ceremony in the prison, which was also attended by Mitch Egan, Regional Offender Manager, Paul Willis, LSC, the training provider and a number of employers interested in becoming involved with the scheme. Gavin said that as a result of this, he may have an interview set up when he is released.

Elaine Llewellyn, HMP Acklington Head of Industries, said: "This had been a huge learning curve for all concerned. We thank the employers and trainers for giving HMP Acklington the chance to prove that projects such as this can be successfully undertaken by prisoners."

Energy and Utility Skills, the sector skills council for the utility industry, set up the programme after hearing from employers that there was a shortage of cable jointers nationally. They worked with Enterprise Plc, the utility company offering the men work experience on release.

Another of the learners, who doesn't want to be named, said he never expected to get into trouble and be sent to prison. "You get all walks of life in here and people with a variety of skills," he said. "There is a real stigma attached to being an ex offender and it is hard to get a job when you are on the outside, an important factor to helping you stay on the straight and narrow. Just because I have made one mistake, doesn't mean I don't deserve a second chance. I hope that this course has given me that."

The LSC is responsible for the new Offender Learning and Skills Service (OLASS), which brings together learning and skills for offenders in custody and in the community. The men received a number of qualifications including an NVQ Level 2 in Cable Jointing, Level 3 qualifications in Cable Testing and Fault Finding and Pole Erection and Overhead Cabling, NRASWA and also qualifications in health and safety and first aid.

Chris Roberts, Regional Director, LSC North East, believes education has an important role to play in reducing re-offending. He said: "Developing skills enhances the employment prospects of offenders, reducing the risk of them re-offending. Ensuring offenders are able to access education will ensure they are given the best possible chances to turn their lives around and will also help supply the region's employers with a skilled workforce."

The course involved 14 weeks of full time study and covered all aspects, practical and theory, of working on the BT cable network. As part of the course, the prison had to have two six metre telegraph pole erected in the prison for the practical work. Garry Budge,

Assistant Industrial Manager explained that there were several security issues that needed to be addressed before the work commenced due to the nature of the work and size of the poles but it has all been worthwhile. He said: "All the men on the course have worked really hard and made a big success of it. They all wanted to learn and see this as a real opportunity for them and a chance to make a go of life on the outside."

Stephen Rawlinson, Head of Communications for Enterprise, said: "Enterprise has been happy to be involved with this training programme. We are expanding and have a real need for skilled workers who are prepared to work hard - and that is what we believe we will get through this training scheme. The course was tailored to meet our requirements, which means that the men will be able to start work as soon as they are released. Our company is a great supporter of local communities and we want to provide opportunities for everyone, regardless of their background. There is a stigma attached to ex-offenders, but we do not see any reason why this group should be excluded from employment. They have served their time and we believe they deserve a second chance. In many cases, people who are given a second chance are more likely to work hard to take advantage of the opportunities available to them."

Gillian Brown, Regional Contracts Manager for Energy and Utility Skills, said the programme has been a huge success with recruitment for the next course due to start next month. She said: "The learner who now has a job is over the moon and feels that this is the start of a new career and a new life for him. This training programme provides offenders with a chance to make a success of their lives and thanks to employers coming on board, it can only go from strength to strength. We are planning to run another course next year to train General Network Operatives for utility companies"

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Notes for Editors:

The LSC exists to make England better skilled and more competitive. We are responsible for planning and funding high-quality vocational education and training for everyone. We have a single goal: to improve the skills of England's young people and adults to world-class standards. Our vision is that by 2010, young people and adults in England have the knowledge and skills matching the best in the world and are part of a truly competitive workforce. Established in 2001, we work nationally, regionally and locally from a network of offices across the country.

Media contact:

Regional Press Officers Ann Barnes/Laura Tiplady: t: 0191 492 6355 e: pressofficenortheast@lsc.gov.uk

Out of hours media contact Julie Calvert, Regional Marketing and Communications Manager at the LSC North East: T: 07710075118