

annual review 2010



# transforming lives

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*“Believe you can and you’re halfway there.”*

– Theodore Roosevelt

Belief is a precious commodity for us all. It can be all too scarce amongst those who have been in prison. Perversely it may grow in custody only to evaporate on release when the realities of life outside become clear. That’s when hope dies and good intentions disappear.

In 2005 we decided that letting three-quarters of all prisoners meet unemployment upon release was a criminal waste, both of money and lives. Understanding that a job cuts the probability of re-offending by up to 50%, the solution seemed obvious. We’d set up a company that would focus all its efforts on employing ex-offenders. It wouldn’t ask someone else to do it. It would go and find commercial work itself; its own teams (staffed and led exclusively by ex-offenders) would fulfil these contracts to the same professional standards expected of the private sector.

That company was and is Blue Sky. We got going in December of that year with one crew-cab and four employees. Five years later, it has grown into an organisation which has since given jobs to nearly 400 people. That’s more than you’ll find in many prisons.

This review showcases what we do and how we do it. I hope fervently that it will inspire you to work with us.

**Mick May, Founder and Chief Executive**



*Mick May in discussion with Steve Finn,  
Senior Operations Manager*

**“Just look at Blue Sky. It’s the only company in the country where you need a criminal record to work there. That ex-offender may have a problem with alcohol, may be finding it hard to get a place to live, may have a child. That’s at least three government departments responsible for him. At Blue Sky, he’s got the focused attention of one place with the ideas and compassion to help him turn his life around.”**

– David Cameron, Prime Minister

# who we are

## A proper job with a proper company

In 2005 the concept of a company which only employed people with a criminal record may have appeared idiosyncratic, eccentric even. Five years on, with the prison system bursting at the seams and the government's 'rehabilitation revolution' under way, its time has definitely come. We are ready to meet the challenge.

It's self evident that a job is an essential part of breaking the cycle of re-offending. Anyone who has been unemployed knows well the boredom and lack of dignity that the endless hours breed. And it is but a short step to finding ways to fill the void, legally or otherwise.

Common sense is backed up by academic research. Having a job cuts the probability of re-offending by up to 50%. The barriers to employment are greater for ex-offenders than for most. Blue Sky was set up to address this obvious gap in provision.

A simple proof of Blue Sky's transformative effect is this: over five years only 15% of our people have re-offended – one quarter of the national average.

Like all good voluntary sector organisations, we remain motivated and focused on our earliest and sole objective: to ensure that we get as many people as we can into our own employment, and then subsequently into jobs with others for the long term. In this respect as in others, 2010 was a landmark year for us – for the first time the numbers taken on by Blue Sky in a single year exceeded the hundred mark.

**"I did all sorts of different crimes before I came to Blue Sky. Now I want to give something back. I like helping in the community, making it nice and clean for the kids. I never want to go back to crime. Never."**

– Kevin, Slough



# our commercial work - 1

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We provide commercially competitive teams to fulfil contracts for local authorities, other public bodies and private companies. We work primarily in grounds maintenance and the waste and recycling industries.

Our teams can be found in London and the South East, the South West, Yorkshire and the North West.



## Grounds maintenance

With more than a dozen contracts around the country, we maintain parks, open spaces, cemeteries, rights of way, allotments and housing association properties. In the last 12 months alone, we looked after over 2 million square metres of land.

We cut grass and hedges and undertake strimming, spraying and weed management. We remove leaves from streets and clear overgrown sites. We work with local community groups to clear untended gardens, in the process reducing the opportunity for burglary.

Since 2005 our work has helped local authorities win the coveted Green Flag for their parks – 9 and rising.

In the North West, Blue Sky has delivered site maintenance services for both the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission, in line with their commitment to using their environmental assets to tackle social exclusion.

## Waste and recycling

In West London, our recycling role has grown steadily. Last year in Hillingdon we helped divert over 130 tonnes from landfill every week – this is the equivalent of nine London buses and has improved the site's recycling rate from 26% to 83%.

Our success in this area has allowed us to diversify our service offering and we are supplying teams to work with some of the largest UK waste companies.



**“Blue Sky continues to be a pivotal part of our everyday business. They gain favourable and very positive reports and comments from clients, company management and colleagues alike.”**

**– Andrew Hawkins, Veolia Environmental Services**

# our commercial work - 2



## Bespoke, short-term contracts

Growing from our core business, we have found clients often have small projects which are difficult to assign or manage. The Blue Sky model fits this role perfectly, and we are developing what we term 'bespoke' work. For example, in Slough, we recently completed an assignment to paint over 500 garage doors.

## Catering

We are always looking for new sectors which fit our business model and have recognised an opportunity with the catering industry. Our initial aim is to work in the "back of house" functions within corporate catering. In an area with a high level of staff churn, a Blue Sky team will provide stability of service. Our staff will benefit from training and will gain valuable experience and transferable skills.

**"We are now in our fourth year working together and Blue Sky goes from strength to strength, with their management and operational staff working alongside our own management team and operatives in a seamless manner."**

– Keith Rowe, Gloucester Enterprise



# quality of delivery

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Our operating model offers more than many of our competitors:

- We are cost-effective
- We deliver top-quality work
- We provide our own team-leaders to manage our people
- The team supervisor is your single point of contact

A typical Blue Sky team consists of three to six people with a supervisor. These are invariably ex-offenders, selected for their leadership and mentoring skills.

We have a simple view of the quality of our work. Our sole reason for existing is to employ people who have been in prison. We can only do that by finding and keeping commercial contracts. Look at it through our eyes: if we were to lose a contract we would have to lay off our team(s) and in doing so would fail in our charitable aims. If you engage us, you'll find us totally focused on delivering to, or exceeding, your specification.

**“The Forestry Commission is very pleased with the standard of work Blue Sky has been undertaking for us. They have impressed us with their quality of management, and with the professionalism and enthusiasm of the people employed by the project.”**

– Richard Topley, Forestry Commission, North West England





## More than statistics

Blue Sky is all about people. We see ourselves as a family; we like to understand and look after our employees.

Key to this is the mentoring role of our supervisors, themselves ex-offenders and ideally placed to understand the issues faced by our employees. As role models, they exemplify our values and encourage aspiration in our workforce.

Blue Sky does not treat ex-offenders as problems or as 'clients'; we do not create a one-way relationship with our employees. We offer support and mentoring but, crucially, we rely on and reward the skills and hard work of ex-offenders to run a real business, albeit with social purposes. Feeling part of this and being valued for their time and skills is crucial to the progression of our employees.

We employ some of the most marginalised people in society whom we coach and train. Many of our employees join us with chaotic personal lives. 20% are homeless, 42% have drugs or alcohol issues and many are in the process of rebuilding their personal relationships.

In addition, we are keen to reach out to those deemed the hardest to help. For example, over five years, 16% of those we have employed have been designated as prolific and other priority offenders (PPOs). PPOs are defined roughly as the 10% of offenders who commit the most crimes.

A job is the single most important factor in transforming the lives of ex-offenders. Our employees become more employable and better off financially. They also consistently tell us about the range of successes that being in work can trigger. With self-confidence and dignity restored, our employees achieve stability in their finances, health, housing and relationships. This allows them, often for the first time, to present themselves with pride to their families and to feel hopeful about the future.



**“Since working for Blue Sky, Matt has changed - he seems much happier in himself, his confidence is increasing all the time and he is altogether a much nicer person than he was before. Blue Sky is good for him, it has given him something to get up for in the morning and it is teaching him good work ethics, team building and new skills. I feel proud of him now, which is something I, as a mother, haven't felt for a while.**

**Thank you, Blue Sky.”**

– Lynn, Matt's Mum, Yorkshire

# training and mentoring

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Of those who have stayed with Blue Sky for a minimum of three months, two-thirds move into permanent jobs. This is no accident. Not only do our six-month contracts give our people a work history and reference but each worker receives a package of personalised support comprising a mixture of soft and vocational skills.

The skills learned at the early stages are around team working and are complemented by the work of a specialist in career development. Employees are helped with CV writing and guidance is given on how to disclose their criminal record.

Our philosophy is old-fashioned. We give people jobs and train them whilst they are with us. In the past year, over half our employees left us with an accreditation, tailored to their aspirations. Driving lessons are particularly popular: 24% of Blue Sky employees arrive with licences and 48% end their contracts with them. We have even arranged training for a prospective mole-catcher!

Other commonly delivered training has included:

- NVQs (e.g. amenity horticulture)
- construction accreditations
- health & safety qualifications
- pesticide appliance licences
- forklift driving certificates



Our high rate of progression into onward, permanent positions also relies on our high quality job brokerage with potential and actual employers. In this way we identify vacancies which can be filled by our team-members and ensure positive outcomes for both our workers and those recruiting them.

**“Blue Sky has helped change my life. All of my family and friends are proud of how mature I’ve become, and how responsible I am.”**

– Hayley, Gloucester



# a job means everything

“Work,” said the great Victorian social commentator Thomas Carlyle, “is the grand cure of all the maladies and miseries that ever beset mankind.”

I read about Carlyle when I was in prison serving twenty years of a life sentence and I could see around me how true his words were even in that unpromising environment. Work, real work, was scarce in prison. But the majority of people in there preferred to work when there was a choice. Whether it was just sweeping and mopping landings, or sitting at a bench in an assembly workshop fitting components together with mind-numbing repetition - at least they had a job. And they had pay. Average earnings were around £7.50 a week - a pittance by any measure - but it was a wage. I saw how people strove to get better jobs, to go from landing cleaner to office cleaner - or perhaps to gain promotion in the workshops to “quality control.” With few exceptions people all around me wanted to be employed and, if there was a chance of engaging in training for higher work skills with industry-respected qualifications, there were always long waiting lists for the few places available.


For all the apparent eagerness to work amongst those in prison however - and bear in mind a large proportion of prisoners have poor work histories before prison - once the gates were opened, no matter how motivated to succeed in a crime-free life, the limited work opportunities for an ex-prisoner make the chances of success negligible. Despite the efforts and aims of associations like Business in the Community most employers remain sceptical about the merits of taking that chance. A lack of opportunity to work is in fact one

of the main reasons for the high rate of re-offending amongst ex-prisoners, which is where the ingenuity and value of Blue Sky comes in.

This wonderful organisation specifically caters for people coming out of prison who want to work, but who need some real work experience in order to demonstrate to potential future employers that they are worth taking on. Blue Sky provides a real working environment and a real working experience - with real wages. Blue Sky also offers training opportunities that otherwise would not be available. As a patron I have visited numerous Blue Sky teams. The work being undertaken was hard and often dirty, but the employees I met, without exception, were content, satisfied and optimistic. And what struck me most was the dignity in their manner, in their conversation - especially when they spoke about the future.

Thomas Carlyle also said, “Let each become all that he was created capable of being.”

– Erwin James, Guardian columnist and Blue Sky Patron



“Blue Sky has helped me to gain skills and confidence that I didn’t have before. It will also make it easier to get another job.”

– Ashley, Bristol

# big horizons

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In a feature article published by The Times on July 1st 2010, I sang Blue Sky's praises for its "hands-on work of gritty, grotty but real employment of ex-cons". The blunt phraseology was part of a longer paragraph in which I also praised the Secretary of State for Justice, Kenneth Clarke, for enlarging the world of rehabilitation beyond NOMS.

These two descriptions – one positive, one pejorative – provide a useful picture of the re-offending problem and the most realistic solution to it. Blue Sky has a crucial role to play in the realistic solutions department.

As informed observers of the Criminal Justice scene well know, repeat offending is the system's most intractable problem. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of released prisoners return to their bad old lives of crime, even though a great many of them leave prison with genuinely good intentions of going straight.

What turns a good intention into a return to offending? Lack of a job is one key to this failure. Or to put it more optimistically, employment for released prisoners is a tried and tested way of reducing re-offending.

Ex-offenders are often good workers but poor job finders. Their chances of getting interviewed for vacancies are slim once they disclose their records. A further obstacle is that they tend to lack the people skills and the recent employment experience that would improve their chances of getting hired.

Blue Sky has an answer to these problems. First, it prioritises ex-offenders when offering jobs. Secondly, the jobs themselves are in those "gritty, grotty but real" areas



of work which are eminently suitable for men and women who genuinely want to fight for a second chance.

Second chances don't come easy, but they are available in low cost parts of the labour market such as waste management, park landscaping, grass cutting, grave digging, and maintaining buildings. Blue Sky has built an important corner in this market, much of which is delivered in partnership with local councils.

If only central government would cajole more of these local authorities into doing "intelligent procurement" – i.e. awarding contracts to organisations that do the work and reduce re-offending – then all concerned would be winners.

National government, local government and Blue Sky are natural allies in this mission. A partnership for progress that's designed to reduce offending should be their goal. At present Blue Sky has scored well by demonstrating that, among the ex-offenders who have been their employees, repeat offending falls to 15%. Quite some improvement on the 65-75% re-offending norm.

But to move Blue Sky into the Premier League of employing, let's say, 2,000 ex-offenders a year instead of its present 150-200, will require enthusiasm and exhortation at Ministerial level. So watch this space – with real hope!

– Jonathan Aitken, author, broadcaster, columnist, lecturer, campaigner for prison reform and Blue Sky Patron

**"The simplicity of their model, the focus on using employment as the central theme to engage those at risk of re-offending, and their ability to address wider issues and root causes through mentoring, housing support and other personal support makes Blue Sky stand out."**

– Iain Duncan-Smith,  
Secretary of State for Work & Pensions



IN 2010 BLUE SKY MAINTAINED AND IMPROVED OVER 2 MILLION SQUARE METRES OF LAND

# intelligent procurement

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## Intelligent procurement and social return

The vast majority of our commercial income each year comes from smart procurement by the public sector.

Blue Sky is emphatically not an agency, though it does represent an alternative to agency labour. This part of the labour market is large, approximately one million in size, and the public sector is the largest user of its services.

Many of the jobs are low-skilled in nature. This benefits Blue Sky. Our new recruits are economically active within a couple of hours. Further, the work is suitable for all, from those with the lowest levels of educational attainment to university applicants. There are still manpower shortages in the country, notably in the sectors where Blue Sky operates. Often this is due to the nature of the jobs; the wages often seem scant reward for the early start and arduous toil. However, employment to an ex-offender is about much more than a pay packet.

So these sectors are good for our employees. They also benefit local communities. How much better is it to have known troublemakers working in local parks than selling drugs in them? And local authorities tell us that we win the contracts because we can match or improve on the quality available elsewhere.

Here's a further thought. If we had more contracts we could employ ex-offenders in more places at a cost no greater than the council or housing association would pay anyway. So, in taking on Blue Sky, the public sector gets

two things for the price of one:

- provision of essential maintenance or waste services
- the rehabilitation of some of society's most costly members (in effect for free)

Were the Government to use this procurement route more widely and as efficiently as some wise and far-sighted local communities, it would, in a very short space of time, create thousands of job opportunities for ex-offenders. This alone would spare it the cost of several prisons, in other words hundreds of millions of pounds. This is the definition of "intelligent procurement".

**"You can just see the self-esteem and confidence beaming out of the Blue Sky team. The whole point of Blue Sky is to ensure that ex-offenders don't slip back into the life that got them into prison in the first place. With Blue Sky they get the work and they actually become more included in society."**

– Alan Johnson, Shadow Chancellor

**"Knowing that I have a reason to wake up in the morning makes me tick. I've managed to become a senior recycling operative at Harefield and the responsibilities I've been given by Blue Sky are something to be proud of."**

– Ross, Harefield





# a year in pictures

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*In autumn 2009, Samantha Cameron visits Blue Sky in Manchester.*



*It's business as usual for Blue Sky in Bristol during the coldest winter for 31 years.*



*During the General Election, Alan Johnson visits a Blue Sky team in Slough.*



*In June, Blue Sky wins the Charity Award, collected by Steve Finn.*



*In July, Blue Sky opens for business in Yorkshire.*



*Blue Sky welcomes Lee, its 350th employee, in September 2010.*



# finances and funders



## Finances

### Income & Expenditure (£,000)

Income	2009-10	2008-09
Contractual income	£619	£392
Charitable grants	£328	£238
Government commissions	£131	£168
<b>Total</b>	<b>£1,078</b>	<b>£798</b>

Expenditure	2009-10	2008-09
Contractual costs (team, wages, etc)	£579	£379
Training & general project costs	£135	£181
Permanent support staff costs	£271	£168
Administration & overheads	£89	£67
<b>Total</b>	<b>£1,074</b>	<b>£795</b>
Reserves	£80	£76

## Thank you

### Thank you to all our funders and supporters, particularly to:

- The Ajahma Charitable Trust
- CHK Charities Limited
- Department for Work and Pensions
- Drapers' Company
- The Dulverton Trust
- Esmee Fairbairn Foundation
- The Henry Smith Charity
- Impetus Trust
- J Paul Getty Jnr Charitable Trust
- KPMG Foundation
- Lankelly Chase
- Lloyds TSB Foundation
- The Mercers' Charitable Foundation
- NOMS CFO/ESF
- Queen Anne's Gate Foundation
- The Rayne Foundation
- The Tudor Trust
- The Wates Foundation

“Now I have a permanent job. Without Blue Sky I know things would have been much different. I know I would not have made it this far without falling back into the cycle of crime. Again – thank you.” – Dave, Manchester



“ I never saw a man who looked with such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue which prisoners call the sky. ”  
from 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' by Oscar Wilde



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