

SocialFirms UK

**Case Study for
Transition from Unpaid to Paid Disabled Workers**

Grounds and Gardens

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1. Background

In April 2005, 'Grounds and Gardens' took the positive step and started paying all the service users involved with the project. This was the culmination of many months of preparation, consultation and planning.

Grounds and Gardens is an employment unit run by the Brandon Trust as part of its day services package in Bristol. It currently supports and trains people with a learning difficulty in all aspects of garden maintenance. Three full time support workers, offering places to approximately 18 people attending between 1 and 3 days each, support the team. The unit was established in 1994.

Grounds and Gardens has been developing over the years with the support of various European, and similar, funding programmes, matched to local service level agreements, enabling the unit to develop its trading activities to a point where the step of employing all the service users was not only possible but in fact desirable

2. Aims

The aim of this piece of work was to seize the opportunity to map the development over time, capturing the major issues, the approaches taken and the lessons learnt as Grounds and Gardens adjusts to new ways of working and builds new relationships. Although this case study doesn't feature a Social Firm, Social Firms UK felt that the focus of converting unpaid service users to becoming paid employees was a valuable process to capture and share with others in the social enterprise sector. Many Emerging Social Firms, for example, around the country are currently tackling this important step towards achieving Social Firm status, and other types of social enterprise will also learn from the process.

In particular, the research sets out to track the following areas: -

- Service users becoming workers
- Support workers becoming colleagues
- Care provider becoming employer

It is becoming clearer that attempting to create Social Firms from existing day care and training projects is extremely difficult and finance, risk and culture play an enormous part in slowing the development. However it is not impossible and this report aims also to highlight what can be achieved from exactly that starting point, the sort of time scales involved and the extent to which the values of Social Firms can be met.

3. Methodology

Extensive consultation was carried out with service users, carers, and the staff of the Brandon Trust itself.

A short review of relevant literature including that published by Social Firms UK, Valuing People Support Team and the Bristol Learning Difficulty Partnership Board

A series of structured interviews with senior Brandon staff, support workers and service users took place over the course of 4 months. In this process, questions were posed to source both a diarised account of events as well as gather a selection of individual opinions on the processes of development.

Time was spent observing and working with the Grounds & Gardens team whilst they carried out their daily tasks.

Observation of the workers meetings

4. The Development Catalyst

Grounds & Gardens originally started in 1994 as part of a range of day care and training units run by Spectrum Day Service; later to be taken over by Brandon Trust in 1999.

From the outset there was a desire to see the transformation from an employment unit to a viable business following the Social Firm model. Thus Grounds & Gardens under Spectrum was distinctively different and not seen as a major part of the Spectrum organisation, being considered a separate entity knowing that it would at some point become a stand-alone business. The process took upwards of 3 years.

Upon moving to the Brandon Trust the status of Grounds & Gardens was somewhat different and it was again seen as part of a much wider provision.

Brandon Trust realised that it was in an awkward position when the National Minimum Wage (NMW) was introduced. In line with the experience of many training and day care projects, the introduction of the National Minimum Wage created some confusion as to what constituted a 'worker' and at what point they should be paid. The 'allowances' paid to the attendees fell short of the level set by Government. Initially, Brandon Trust felt it had to stop payment of expenses altogether.

For one of the managers within Grounds and Gardens the cessation of all payment was considered unacceptable and he then began a campaign at the end of 2002 to persuade the Board of Trustees at Brandon Trust that it would be of benefit to the organisation to pay the workers a minimum wage.

It was as a result of this particular manager and other key individuals pushing to get things done, convincing the Board that it was the right approach and learning through mistakes, that the goal of paying the Grounds & Gardens team a minimum wage was achieved.

5. Perspectives

Individual staff opinions developed and changed as the idea of turning Grounds & Gardens into a paid employer became a reality. A number of questions were raised in the early stages of development.

The **Operations Director** posed questions such as:

- Will it be financially viable?
- Do we (Brandon) want it to become a Social Firm?
- Is it right that Brandon should be paying its service users?

Human Resources directed similar questions towards the idea:

- What are the financial implications of offering a minimum wage?
- What about health and safety issues, are we (Brandon) clear about the training required if service users are to work more independently?
- With so many employees, what happens if we lose a number of gardening contracts? Temporary contracts are out of the question.
- Brandon's employment policy is not to make staff redundant, what happens if Grounds and Gardens fails?
- How do we make the recruitment fair?
- Where do new employees come from?
- Will the workers understand their commitments?
- How do we handle grievances?

Questions raised by **support workers** were based around time scales such as:

- When can we tell the service users they will be paid a real wage?
- How will all this work?

For the **service user**

- Would we be paid more or less than when they were paid expenses?

Questions would also come through their **parents and carers** over concerns about loss of benefits.

Unfortunately, none of the groups were able to see the perspective of the other groups and this led to slow progress in the initial stages. The groups did not appear to be heading in the same direction. This resulted in a degree of frustration, especially at ground level.

6. The Process

The process began with what has now been described as the submission by the Employment Services Manager of a rather simple business case. From this, members of the Board were able to pose a number of important strategic questions. This level of scrutiny served to help fill the significant information gaps.

The Supported Employment Co-ordinator and Administrator were instrumental in developing and carrying out the important process of consultation with service users

and carers including undertaking the task of tackling the benefits issues. Critical to this were the close links developed with the Welfare to Work Co-ordinator from Job Centre Plus and dealing with the various recruitment and selection tasks.

The Welfare to Work Co-ordinator agreed to offer her assistance and carry out a 'better off analysis' for all the service users. The Supported Services Manager felt that this role was a tremendous help. An instance arose, for example, when one worker was due to work 20 hours a week, therefore losing one benefit, and the Welfare to Work Co-ordinator was able to organise for provision of working tax credit to compensate for the loss. The Welfare to Work Co-ordinator was on hand offering advice and producing calculations throughout the whole process right up to the point of finally offering the workers actual wages.

From the outset of the developments, employment or vocational profiles were developed with the service users. These were converted into an accessible format and included an employee's aspirations, any training undertaken, 1-1 sessions and would act as a CV should an employee wish to move on to open employment

Interestingly, after the processes described, every one of the service users wanted to be employees and after a 'better off' analysis, all were financially better off.

Once it was decided that Brandon was going to pay the Grounds & Gardens team the recruitment process began. Job descriptions compiled by the managers were converted into an accessible format. To supplement the job descriptions, photographs were added of the service users at work in their daily tasks. This gave a strong visual image of the work and responsibilities involved. Further follow-up was carried out on a one to one and group basis

People were shown how to complete an application form (again made in accessible format). The accessible job descriptions were shown and time was taken to ensure job roles were understood. Each individual member was taken through a series of sessions on how to perform in an interview, likely questions, what to wear, good and bad answers, the importance of punctuality etc. Mock interviews then took place prior to the actual interviews.

The interviews were split into two parts:

- Questions and Answers
- Practical Tasks

During the actual interviews support was offered to the members, although some members preferred to tackle the interviews on their own. The managers formed part of the interview panel and the rest of the Grounds & Gardens support workers were there to take the members through the practical section of the interview.

At the same time every member had to undergo a CRB check (Criminal Records Bureau), which proved problematic given the various documents required. In some cases, individuals did not have the standard required proofs and so alternatives had to be arranged and approved prior to the checks being completed.

7. Access to Work

An important element was the need to find extra support capacity at least in the short term to enable the newly appointed staff to settle into their new role. This was achieved with Access to Work. Individual assessments were made for each worker to establish the level of support. The support hours were 'pooled' to allow the support to be given by one individual.

The opinions and issues raised by senior management, support staff and Grounds & Gardens workers were often similar in detail. The following collectively ties together answers to a number of key questions.

8. Key Findings

Why Do It?

First and foremost the Grounds and Gardens team wanted it. For the work they were doing, they were not being paid a proper wage.

However prior to this happening Brandon realised it was in an awkward position in paying Grounds & Gardens service users 'expenses' given that these fell below the minimum wage. The manager did not want to prevent his workers from receiving a wage and thus began the campaign to pay them the minimum wage.

Also it was felt that the step to open employment was too large for most people with a learning difficulty using Brandon's services. By turning Grounds & Gardens into an employer, a stepping-stone was created.

Keys to Success

a. People

For many, one of the key reasons for the success was having the right people in the right roles. The project's implementation, processes involved and planning were all important, but as with many projects, the key personalities and 'drivers' were paramount. In Grounds & Gardens there were the passionate, energetic and driven people that kept the project going during the many months it took.

There were also senior individuals who posed the important questions around such topics as financial viability and logistical issues. There were a number of doggedly determined people at ground level who constantly and consistently pushed for things to be done.

Lastly and possibly most importantly there was an articulate user group (the Grounds & Gardens team) who desperately wanted a change to their working environment and were determined to have their way. The development of 'workers' meetings previously had provided a forum for service users to discuss issues and to provide feedback to the developments and changes that inevitably occur over time.

In this way they were well placed to provide a collective voice with regard to Grounds and Gardens.

Also of utmost importance was input from partner organisations.

b. Successful Product

By the time Grounds & Gardens wanted to become a paid employer, the service was already out there and successful. In other words it would have proved a very different, if not, impossible ask if it weren't for the fact that risks were dramatically reduced by having an existing trading activity. The quality of the product was important too, with so much competition in the gardening maintenance sector the team had to offer a service as good as or better than the rest.

9. Issues/Problems/Obstacles/Barriers

a. Planning

Most individuals mentioned that the hardest thing of all was learning how to change from one to the other, from Emerging Enterprise to Social Enterprise. What at first seemed a simple task, turned out to be far tougher to accomplish than expected. With no prior experience, the whole organisation had to learn on the spot.

More than one person mentioned as a word of advice; 'make sure you know what you want and why you want it. Not every emerging social enterprise or training unit should become a Social Enterprise or Social Firm. Ask yourself whether it's relevant and whether everyone is behind the idea'. Also as one senior manager mentioned: 'It's not necessarily appropriate for every training unit or emerging enterprise to have being a Social Firm as their ultimate goal.'

Towards the end of the project, everyone agreed that planning had improved. At the start, however, there had been a lack of control and direction which people attributed to insufficient knowledge and experience. With the benefit of hindsight most senior management would have organised things differently from the outset.

In other words, remember who you are and what you're trying to provide, it is not always relevant to make the change.

b. Time

The length of time it took to implement the change was certainly a contentious issue for most. Many people had their own opinions as to why it took so long but for the most part the main reason was lack of experience causing delays whilst people learnt from mistakes and developed a plan as they went along.

c. Business planning

On discussion with senior members it was felt that the initial plan was far too simple and a little naïve. However a lot was learnt from that initial submission and it provoked important questions around the missing elements. Largely it was felt that everyone, from the most junior to senior, was un-aware of the risks involved.

Some individuals suggested that too much time was spent transferring information up and down the chain of command. This was perhaps an unavoidable outcome, given Brandon's size. A suggestion from one of the staff was that, in the early stages of development, all the key players at ground and senior management level should have met around a table to thrash out ideas and develop a structured plan. Targets were not set initially but, again, most felt this would have aided the speed and development of the project.

d. Finance

The initial business case made Grounds & Gardens look like it would not be a viable entity financially. This raised many concerns and slowed down the process. Advice from all concerned to others is that, from the outset, a vast majority of your time should be spent on the construction of a proper business case, with risk management and proper forecasting playing an important factor.

e. Business advice

During the development of Grounds & Gardens both the Co-operative Development Agency and Social Firms South West were available to provide much needed advice.

A group of MBA students from the University of the West of England carried out a report on the various social enterprises within Brandon including Grounds & Gardens but most people felt there was little benefit gained from this exercise.

In hindsight, It was felt by some that the project could have benefited from more extensive external business advice from the beginning.

10. Future Development and Measures

Most people had their own ideas about the future of Grounds & Gardens. Most people also agreed that, while there were some measures in place to monitor its development, there was scope for more.

Current measures can be divided into two parts: organisational and individual. At present, all Brandon services are subject to monthly and yearly monitoring as a requirement by their purchasers. This requirement also acts as a means of monitoring the progress of Grounds & Gardens. The manager of the unit and his line manager

meet on a monthly basis during which an assessment of Grounds & Gardens is discussed. Feedback from worker meetings is also fed up the line to senior management.

From an individual perspective every employee is given an employment profile that includes an individual's aspirations, details of one-one meetings, training undertaken etc. Four meetings occur with their manager throughout a year.

11. Conclusions

This brief study emphasises the fact that to convert a day services project to a Social Firm is a complex journey. The payment of wages to former service users is one part albeit a significant one. However we can quickly see that such a journey cannot be made without the goodwill and commitment at all levels of the host organisation. Senior Management, staff and service users need to work together to enable organisational change to allow this process to happen.

It also takes time. There is often no quick fix when dealing with larger organisations. Policy, process and culture take a long time to adapt. New approaches are needed to address new problems and these do not come off the shelf. This will involve finance, human resources and other key departments.

Support is vital. Not only throughout the organisation as we have seen but from external agencies. Be this business development support, financial support or support for organisation change, it is important that outside help is sought. There is also a significant need to consult with service purchasers, parents and carers as well as to engage with statutory bodies such as Job centre plus.

Now the steps to paying wages to all have been taken, ongoing change will still be needed. Adaptations to existing induction processes to all staff will need to be opened up, staff training provisions and employee conditions etc will all need to now reflect the new employees support and access requirements. All this is currently being developed.

It is a brave move and one that needs applauding especially as there are so few answers easily available to many of the issues that arise. A situation that will continue, hopefully, the journey towards full trading status is made.