

Pictured: Sven de Cauter and Karyn Buck

Pioneering Buckinghamshire Prison Project is a 'Big Skill' Winner

Two key members of a pioneering prison education programme have won recognition in the prestigious LSC/BBC Big Skill Awards 2009.

In the latest recognition for the Aimhigher mentoring programme at HMP Spring Hill near Aylesbury, project leader, Karyn Buck, won the Learners Champion Award. Karyn is a Director of the Aylesbury-based training consultancy The Learning ladder and a consultant for Aimhigher Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Sven De Cauter – himself an ex-offender and now part of the team delivering the Spring Hill project – was highly commended in the Skills for Work Award category. The Big Skill initiative is organised by the Learning and Skills Council in partnership with BBC East, to recognise people from the region who have improved their own life or the lives of others through learning.

Spring Hill is a Category D Open Prison whose job is to prepare prisoners for their release by focusing on accommodation, employment and vocational training. The Prison is working with Aimhigher MKOB to encourage the 1300 prisoners who come through the gate each year to look closely at the educational opportunities that are open to them, and to consider going to college or university once they are released. Aimhigher MKOB set up what's called a peer mentoring programme at Spring Hill to highlight the education options each prisoner has and offer advice and support on how to get there.

Aimhigher MKOB Director, Jan Martin, says: "We're delighted both for Karyn and for Sven. As part of her work on this project, Karyn has helped more than 30 people to access university, college and vocational training. Her support has included helping people to overcome barriers, access housing and accommodation, and gain financial support. Karyn is dedicated to the project and an inspiration to everyone she meets. This initiative has been so successful because of her pure determination, hard work and commitment. She is always positive and able to find solutions when many others would give up

"As an ex-offender himself, Sven has undergone a huge transformation over the last year. He has trained as an Aimhigher Mentor and is running that specific part of the project on his own. He is very focused and has managed to overcome barriers, time constraints and personal challenges with such a positive attitude that he is inspirational to others. He is now completing a counselling Diploma at Aylesbury College, has started a Business Administration NVQ and been accepted on a Foundation Degree at Buckinghamshire new University starting in September 09. In such a short amount of time he has achieved more than most people achieve in a life-time.

During a recent European Social Fund project, the prison kept in touch with ex-offenders after they'd been released. The re-offending rate for those involved in the project – that's the percentage of offenders who commit further offences on leaving prison - was under 6%. That is around one tenth of the estimated national average figure, and senior prison staff believe that its support programme on work and education is a major factor. The Aimhigher MKOB initiative is part of a wider education and job planning programme at Spring Hill called Employment Links.

The Big Skill awards are the latest recognition for the HMP Spring Hill mentoring programme. It was 'Highly Commended' in the Partnership Practice category in the 2008 national Aimhigher awards, having earlier been named as 'Organisation of the Year' in the MKOB Mentoring for Progression Awards.

This year, 17 ex-offenders who've been through the programme at Spring Hill have taken up college or university places thanks to the Aimhigher MKOB project – that's three times the number last year and the Prison continues to build on its success. A study centre has been set up, sponsored by the Prince's Trust, and the Prison is working alongside local universities, colleges and training providers together with agencies such as Jobcentre Plus and the St Giles Trust. Prisoners hear talks from college and university representatives about the opportunities available to them. Local education institutions are looking at ways of developing qualifications that can be accessed by the prisoners.

Aimhigher MKOB is part of a national government funded project which supports and encourages young people and adults who have potential and who are from under-represented groups, to consider and progress to higher education. Its partners include three universities, six colleges and 22 schools, as well as training providers, information, advice and guidance services, councils, economic and learning partnerships, employers, adult and community organisations, lifelong learning networks and a number of other local organisations in the MKOB region.

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