

MEDIA RELEASE:

### **Local Prison Project wins National Award**

A pioneering education programme at a local prison has won a prestigious national award. The programme at HMP Spring Hill, between Bicester and Aylesbury, has topped a shortlist of ten projects to win the 'Activity' category in the National Aimhigher Awards.

Aimhigher is 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. The local Aimhigher partnership covering Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire has been working with HMP Spring Hill on the initiative.

Aimhigher MKOB Director, Jan Martin, says: "This is brilliant news. It's a tribute to the excellent work that's being done by the governor and his team, our project leader, Karyn Buck, who's played a huge part in setting up and running the programme, and to the prisoners who've shown the commitment needed to make it work for them. This is a formula that works and there is a great potential to roll this project out on a wider scale."

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. Each prisoner who signs up for the Aimhigher MKOB programme is allocated a mentor to help them look closely at the educational opportunities that are open to them, and to consider going to college or university once they are released. When the project was launched these were trained mentors from outside the prison. As part of the process of embedding the project, prisoners who have been through it have themselves been trained to become mentors. This is generally agreed to have been a major factor in the project's success. The prisoner and his mentor work on what's called a Personal Development Plan to explore ideas for his future, looking in particular at what part education could play in that. This might be building on existing skills or developing new ones.

This year, thirty six ex-offenders from Spring Hill intend to take up college, university or vocational training places – that's the highest number since the project began 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. Local education institutions are looking at ways to develop qualifications that can be accessed by prisoners.

Prison Governor, Brian Hiron, says: "The impact we believe this project is having on re-offending rates means that it is not only making a difference to the prisoners at Spring Hill but ultimately to society as a whole."

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.



As part of the project, the mentoring team help prisoners and ex-offenders to access university, college and vocational training. Their support has included helping people to overcome barriers, access housing and accommodation, and gain financial support. Karyn Buck, who's also a director of the Aylesbury-based training consultancy The Learning Ladder, says: "I'm thrilled that the project has won this prestigious national award. It will

give us even more momentum to continue to develop the project here and look at ways to roll it out in other prisons."

The national Aimhigher Award is the latest in a series of awards for the project. Earlier this year it won recognition in the prestigious LSC/BBC Big Skill Awards 2009. 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.

Aimhigher MKOB 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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