

Count me IN!

Source talks to Joe Feeley of IN Environmental Services – a community-based social enterprise that employs local people and ex-offenders to clean and green grot-spots and open spaces across Merseyside.



Q How did IN Environmental Services get started? The project began in 2002 in Liverpool 8. It aimed to fill the gap in street cleansing left by mainstream service providers; to work on the sites they're not obliged to deal with – such as grot-spots where the landowner is absent. We wanted to bring back confidence and belief in the Dingle. A lot of short-term schemes had come here, only for green spaces to revert to dereliction when the money ran out.

Q How did you personally get involved? Gerard Murden, INclude Neighbourhood Regeneration's managing director, held a series of community forums explaining what INclude would bring to Liverpool 8. The burning question for most residents was 'what's happening with street cleaning and fly-tipping?' It didn't matter if you built the Fourth Grace in Liverpool 8, people were more concerned about the state of the streets.

My name kept popping up because I was both a local lad and the council's environmental lead officer, responsible for street cleansing, refuse collection and ground maintenance. Gerard Murden put his vision to me, a 35-year plan to regenerate Liverpool 8. He asked me to run a three-man operation in parallel with my council job – which was great for me, a hit squad to solve my problem areas.

Q Where does your workforce come from? We employ local people aged 18-26. In the Dingle, many of that age group can't read or write, or have a criminal background, but that doesn't detract from what they can do if they're given

responsibility. With the type of work we do, they can learn the skills as they go along. Our only requirement is that they're local and they're keen. We recruit through word of mouth, if communities know someone who fits the bill, we'll interview them. My focus is on getting people on the first rung of the ladder and building their confidence.

Q How does your training programme work? Trainees work here for up to a year, gaining skills in all forms of horticulture. They know that if they're shining like a star early on they can be promoted to supervisor, or plucked out for permanent employment. We act as a 'feeder club' for mainstream service providers in the area, who know that our trainees have the right attitude for work. We start work at 8:30am, but most lads are here at ten to eight.

Recently we've expanded to cover other parts of the city and beyond. We've recruited locally, and brought those people to Liverpool 8 to train them up to our standards. We'll swap them back one by one, until we've got all local people working in their own areas.

Q Why is it so important to you to employ a local workforce? If you have familiar local faces in the crew, they're less likely to be targeted by undesirables. If my team are out in the evening and see a would-be fly tipper going to one of our sites, they're straight over to say 'Whoa, we don't accept fly tipping here', because they know they'll have to clean it up tomorrow! They end up policing the area in the evenings. People tend to respect an area if it's maintained and cleaned regularly.

Q What's been your biggest success story? Some of our trainees come here with quite a reputation. One lad looked very familiar to me. I know lots of people round here, but there was no connection. After the interview I asked where I recognised him from. He was shy and reluctant to talk to me, his chin firmly on his chest, looking through his eyebrows, and he said 'I was on the front page of the Echo the other night with an ASBO'. He's now in my top three workers, one of the people I have standing up in front of an audience talking about our work. He's a professional who can make decisions and take responsibility. It's a huge buzz to see someone blossom like that.

Q What's the best thing about your job? Helping to turn people's lives around, and being in the privileged position of having a say in how this area – where my family and friends live – has changed for the better.

Recently we've expanded to other parts of Liverpool, the Wirral, Sefton and Southport, and we're looking after Speke & Garston Coastal Reserve. The chance to make an impact along that waterfront is the bee's knees of my career. People may try to thwart us, but each and every day we go out we put in 100 per cent effort.

