

### Our environment has a crucial role to play in sustainable recovery. **James McCartney** looks at environmental conditioning, rehabilitation and the workplace

**COGNITIVE NEUROSCIENCE PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE** in the recovery process, and I'm intrigued by the evolution of organisational culture that can enhance consciousness, perception, memory and learning.

Neuroscientists have long understood that the brain can rewire itself in response to experience – a phenomenon known as neuroplasticity. This conjecture states that the structure of the brain's neural network changes during an individual lifetime in response to external stimuli, experience and activity. Therefore environmental conditions are critical to the whole process of reprogramming the mind and key to sustainable recovery and long term success with some of the most complex drug and alcohol misusers, many of whom have become programmed by a negative culture that has stifled their development.

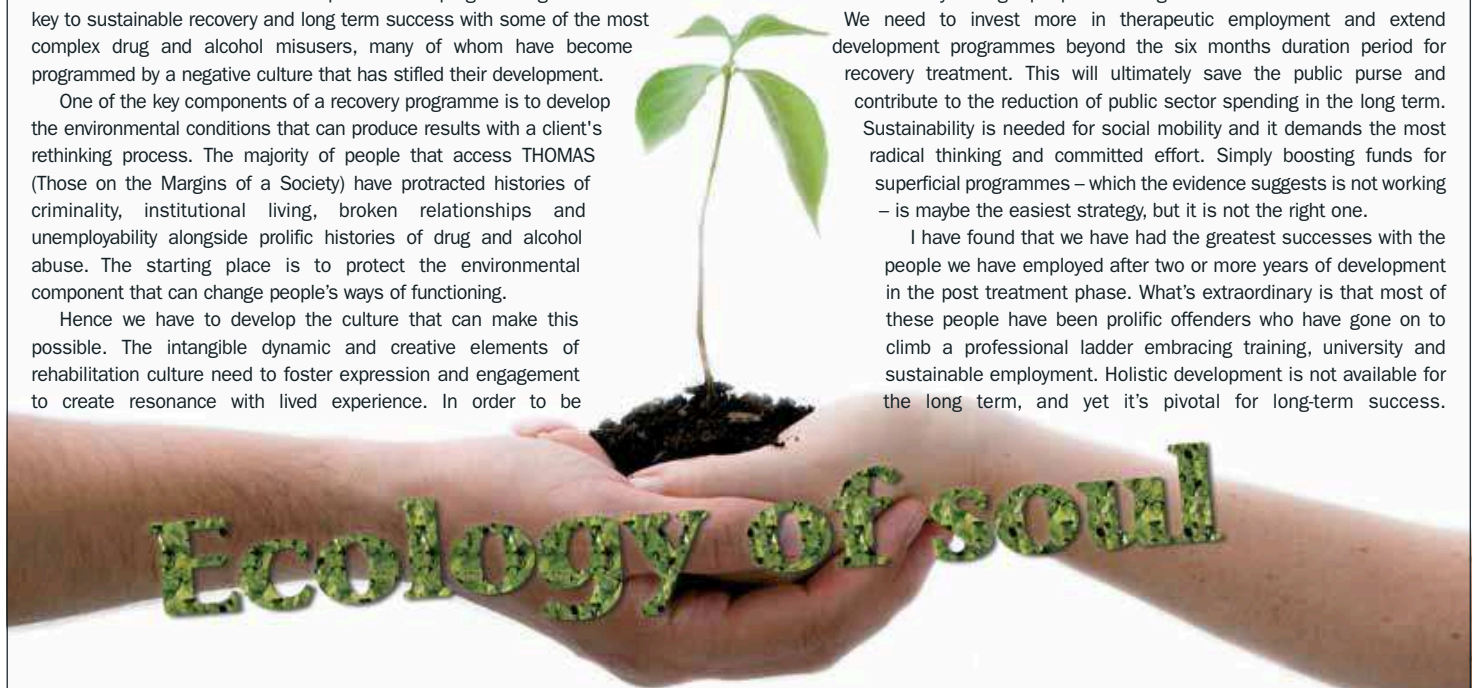
One of the key components of a recovery programme is to develop the environmental conditions that can produce results with a client's rethinking process. The majority of people that access THOMAS (Those on the Margins of a Society) have protracted histories of criminality, institutional living, broken relationships and unemployability alongside prolific histories of drug and alcohol abuse. The starting place is to protect the environmental component that can change people's ways of functioning.

Hence we have to develop the culture that can make this possible. The intangible dynamic and creative elements of rehabilitation culture need to foster expression and engagement to create resonance with lived experience. In order to be

How do you begin to prepare someone for work when they have spent most of their late adolescence and early adult life institutionalised within the prison system, coupled with an operational functioning anaesthetised outside the prison walls with drugs and alcohol? The process of change can be a long drawn out event and it takes skilled workers to have a strategic understanding of organisational cultures and the impact they can have in making or breaking people on the road to sustainable recovery. However, social intelligence can be profoundly developed when cultivated by the right people in the right culture.

We need to invest more in therapeutic employment and extend development programmes beyond the six months duration period for recovery treatment. This will ultimately save the public purse and contribute to the reduction of public sector spending in the long term. Sustainability is needed for social mobility and it demands the most radical thinking and committed effort. Simply boosting funds for superficial programmes – which the evidence suggests is not working – is maybe the easiest strategy, but it is not the right one.

I have found that we have had the greatest successes with the people we have employed after two or more years of development in the post treatment phase. What's extraordinary is that most of these people have been prolific offenders who have gone on to climb a professional ladder embracing training, university and sustainable employment. Holistic development is not available for the long term, and yet it's pivotal for long-term success.



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developed, the client needs to engage with a change culture that can give him or her an accurate account of positive and negative functioning.

Early negative life events influence the cognitive pathway of perception, impacting on how people receive and process knowledge. The challenge for us in a residential setting is to produce a culture that can act as a mediator between past and present, creating new intelligence for reprogrammed functioning. With over 20 years experience of working with socially excluded people, I have long argued that we have insufficient developers of people within the recovery setting. People use terms like 'recovery coach' but it's far removed from my understanding of recovery coaching. These people operate more as project workers, counsellors or others so entrenched within the drug treatment world that they are cut off from the wider developmental intelligences needed for sustainability within the workplace. So when people enter the work environment they are ill prepared for the minefield of toxic emotion that can trigger people back to negative ways of functioning.

Organisations embedded in the development of the people they serve gain the confidence and trust of each individual in a unique and personal way and continue to work with people in their rethinking process, converting reprogrammed functioning into long-term memory for sustainability.

Reprogramming the subconscious mind with the right environmental conditioning strengthens the retrieval process and makes change possible. Placing people in the wrong environmental conditions – and the workplace is full of them – can trigger unconscious sources of emotion and functioning, not yet reprogrammed, leading people back to a life of addiction and offending. Ecology of soul is needed, where we begin to understand the deep and holistic relationship between the worker and the work environment. It is about how this relationship is experienced, and the meaning we make of our lives as workers. Individual and collective energies in the workplace can be transformational but also destructive.

As we develop our service users our ultimate aim is that they can enjoy social mobility – greater opportunity for all, moving from disaffection to a meaningful and liberated life of empowerment and sustainable employment. For many, tackling their drug and alcohol addiction is just the beginning of a long process that involves a radical change of functioning. The government's employment programmes can have the most sophisticated training available, but if we fail to carry the multidimensional aspects of the human person with us, our service users become like wasps around a jam pot, ready for the trap that kills the change process.

*James McCartney is chief executive of THOMAS (Those on the Margins of a Society)*