

The Salvation Army and Strawberry Field

A Supplier Conference in an Iconic Setting

Steve Apted starts with a history of the Salvation Army Strawberry Field site. John Lennon wrote 'Strawberry Fields Forever' about happy times playing in the grounds when it was a children's home; it still continues to give care and support to young people. Leading by example, rather than giving directives to suppliers, the Supplier Conference outlined Strawberry Field's own initiatives in providing employment to those who find securing paid and meaningful employment difficult, in being 'Disability Confident' (some interesting statistics here), and in being a Christian Community of spiritual exploration, retreat and pastoral care. It concluded with a talk by Mark Mitchell on how he relates his Christian faith to his many business ventures.

Every organisation has a hierarchy of stakeholders, and in the commercial world the investors or shareholders usually sit at the top of the hierarchy. Other stakeholder groups include employees, customers, communities, governments and trade associations. In the charity or not-for-profit sector, donors and service users can be added to this list. The bargaining power and influence of these various groups will tend to vary from sector to sector, with geographical location, and by their degree of collective influencing, lobbying and negotiating power. Shareholders and investors have bargaining power through their ability to withhold or inject funding, and through the various corporate governance structures. Employees may or may not have collective bargaining rights, and governments have legislative controls that can be tightened or relaxed, depending on the circumstances.

Suppliers as a collective stakeholder group are often an overlooked and undervalued community who in many sectors operate in isolation from one another. Their degree of influence will be determined by the critical nature of the goods and services they supply, the degree of competition in their supply

market, their investment and control over technology, and the dominance they hold in particular sectors. Suppliers often get a very narrow and limited view of the organisation they supply, determined by the utility of the goods and services they are contracted to provide. Their engagement with the organisation may be at a very transactional level, with no real insight into how they contribute to the wider mission and strategy of the organisation.

Over the last six years, since a professional procurement function was established at the Salvation Army in the UK, there has been an intentional effort to engage the supply base of the charity in the wider vision and mission of the organisation. One of the ways that this has been addressed has been to hold supplier conferences on a regular basis. In October 2019 over 200 supplier representatives were invited to attend the first Salvation Army supplier conference. This was hosted by the Procurement team at William Booth College, the Salvation Army training facility in Denmark Hill, SE London. The purpose of the day was to allow suppliers to understand more of the heritage of the Salvation Army, going back to its formation in 19th Century

Whitechapel through to today, where it operates in over 100 countries around the world. The conference coincided with National Anti-Slavery Day, which took place in the same week. Keynote speakers were Commissioner Anthony Cotterill, the Territorial Commander for the Salvation Army in the UK and Ireland, and Gary Grant, founder and Chairman of the toy retailer *The Entertainer*. Presentations looked at the historic work of the Salvation Army in fighting trafficking, going back to the 19th Century, when it challenged child prostitution, through to today and the Salvation Army Home Office contract for the Care of Victims of Modern Slavery and Trafficking. A further key focus of the event was to thank suppliers personally for their contribution to the work of the Salvation Army. It provided a setting for them to meet senior leaders and engage with them informally over coffee and lunch.

The Strawberry Field supplier conference

In October 2022 a second supplier conference was held at the Salvation Army Strawberry Field site in Liverpool. The Strawberry Field site has been in Salvation Army ownership

The original house gifted to the Salvation Army as a Children's home

Photo: Julia Baird



since 1934, when a large Victorian house, originally owned by a wealthy Liverpool businessman, was gifted to the organisation and opened as a children's home in 1936. For nearly 70 years it gave some of Liverpool's most vulnerable children a refuge from turmoil and unhappiness – a safe, calm and spiritual home.

It was on these grounds that a young John Lennon, before Beatles fame, came to play, reflect and escape the post-

war streets of Woolton. Those days spent playing in The Salvation Army grounds shaped him and inspired his work within the Beatles as an adult. Strawberry Field was later immortalised in the famous song, 'Strawberry Fields Forever,' where he explored those more innocent days of escape that contrasted with the later complexities of a life lived in the public gaze.

Much like The Cavern Club, Penny Lane, The Grapes, and The Beatles

Story, Strawberry Field is a key site in Liverpool's Beatles' heritage. The original children's home closed in 2005. The original house had already been demolished. Remaining true to the tradition of giving young people every chance to succeed in life, Strawberry Field is today perpetuating this legacy of care and support through a new training hub for young people with learning difficulties and other barriers to employment. With a visitor exhibition exploring the site's history and links to



Photo: Strawberry Field

Some early residents



Strawberry Field in 1967

Photo: Strawberry Field



John Lennon
Photo: Salvation Army

brings together a Fresh Expression of Salvation Army church and mission, a training hub for adults with learning disabilities and other barriers to employment, and a Visitor Experience which provides funding for the overall Strawberry Field vision to ‘open the gates for good’.

Kathy presented the contemporary threefold Strawberry Field mission to conference delegates.

First, Strawberry Field is a place that provides sustainable employment opportunities for young people with learning difficulties. The new hub offering training, skills and valuable work placements provides real employment prospects. Both the young people and their families are offered support, time to socialise, develop aspirations, help to break down barriers and achieve their full potential.

Second, to open the gates to the public, follow in the footsteps of John Lennon, and visit the newly developed site, which has an interactive exhibition dedicated to the story of the place, the song and John Lennon’s early life. Or simply enjoy a new destination, off the beaten track, with tranquil gardens to visit, enjoy lunch, and explore.

Third, and just as importantly, Strawberry Field is also a Christian Community of spiritual exploration, retreat and pastoral care.

John Lennon, a café as well as gardens for spiritual reflection, the Strawberry Field site weaves together educational, cultural, heritage and spiritual elements in one site to continue inspiring future generations.

In spite of the hundreds of thousands of tourists that come to Liverpool each year, this important part of local history had never been open to the public. However, since the site was redeveloped in 2019 that has changed: the famous red gates are now open to the public.

Conference themes

One of the key themes of the conference was to present the diverse ways that the Salvation Army champions inclusive

employment amongst various groups who find securing paid and meaningful employment difficult. The importance of caring for employees as valued stakeholders was also a theme of the conference. Given the history and the repurposed current use, the Strawberry Field site provided an excellent and fitting location for this event.

Major Kathy Versfield, the Mission Director at Strawberry Field, kindly agreed to provide the conference facilities for the event. Kathy, together with her husband Allister, lead the new look Strawberry Field. Kathy and Allister have been Salvation Army Officers for 22 years. Four years ago Kathy was appointed to lead the new Salvation Army Centre at Strawberry Field, which



Photo: Salvation Army

The iconic Strawberry Field gates

Disability confident

The Salvation Army has recently achieved the Department of Work and Pensions Disability Confident Leader level 3 accreditation, part of which is a requirement to encourage the organisation's supplier base to consider participating in the programme. Sandra Morris and Angharad Jones, who have been leading in this area for the Salvation Army HR team, updated the conference on the following statistics.

- There are 14.6 million disabled people in the UK
- 21% of working age adults are disabled (1 in 5)
- Disability rates are rising, largely due to mental health conditions
- Employment rates for Q2, 2021:
 - Non-disabled 81%
 - Of those who are disabled, only 52.7% are in work (an increase of 9% since Q2, 2013).
- Disabled workers move out of work at nearly twice the rate (8.8%) of non-disabled workers (4.9%)
- Workless disabled people move into work at nearly one-third of the rate (11.0%) of workless non-disabled people (26.9%).

The Disability Confident Scheme was launched in November 2016, and supports the government's commitment to having one million more disabled people in work by 2027.

'Disability Confident' is creating a movement of change, encouraging employers to think differently about disability, and take action to improve how they recruit, retain and develop disabled people.

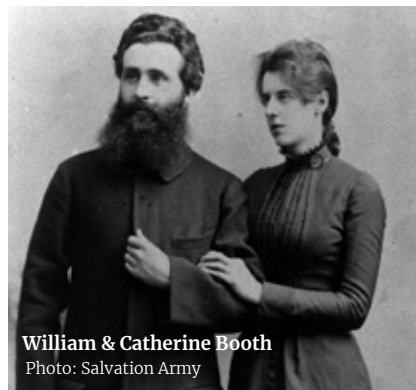
Aims & Objectives of the Disability Confident Scheme

- give employers the skills, techniques and confidence they need to recruit, retain and develop disabled people
- increase the understanding amongst employers of disability and the benefits disabled people can bring to their businesses
- increase the number of employers, across all sizes, sectors and locations, signing up to be Disability Confident and taking action that will make a difference to disabled people

- make a substantial contribution towards getting one million more disabled people in work by 2027.

The Mission of the Salvation Army

Lt Col Drew McCombe, the Salvation Army Secretary for Mission, gave a presentation on the origins of the Salvation Army, going back to the formation of the Salvation Army by William and Catherine Booth in 1865.



William Booth was deeply challenged by his Christian faith to reach out to the least, the last and the lost in an era when poverty and destitution were often associated with fecklessness, drink and idleness. Booth often referred to soup, soap and Salvation, meaning that if a person did not have the means to feed themselves or were hungry and lacked the basic necessities of life then they were unlikely to be receptive to the Gospel. The Booths proved this simple maxim repeatedly and this principle endures in the mission of the Salvation Army to this day.

The Cab Horse Charter drew attention to the fact that horses were often better cared for than people at the time, and William Booth's seminal book *In Darkest England and the Way Out* highlighted the desperate plight of those struggling with poverty, unemployment and poor working conditions at that time.



Today the Salvation Army's Employment Plus service offers tailored support to help people become job-ready. The aim is to help job seekers to get a job and stay in work. Employment Plus operates in over 650 Salvation Army locations: in churches, community centres and Lifehouses (Salvation Army communal residential accommodation) for various vulnerable groups in society. Employment Plus works with jobseekers to understand their needs and goals, and tailor a support service to fit the needs of each individual, and to provide training opportunities to support the move into work. Employability Practitioners thoroughly assess each jobseeker taking part in Salvation Army programmes. This is much more than simply understanding the candidate's employment history, and includes understanding their personalities, experiences and goals in life.

Participants benefit from one-to-one support, and from group workshops with Employability Practitioners. This enables those seeking to provide support to better understand the person's whole character, and guide them to the resources and training opportunities that best fit their needs.

Participants are empowered to overcome obstacles they face, whether that is building up self-esteem, overcoming health issues, or facing their addictions. The barriers jobseekers face can be as simple as needing to improve communication skills, learning how to email, or improving language proficiency. They could also include issues with transportation, health, or more complex barriers. Employment Plus staff and volunteers seek to understand each individual's situation and help them overcome these issues, so they can move into sustained employment.

Mark Mitchell and the Mitchell Group

Mark Mitchell is Group Managing Director, and joint founder with his wife Anita, of the Mitchell Group. He attended the conference as a keynote speaker. Mark

is local to the area, having been born and bred in Birkenhead on Merseyside.

Mark firmly believes that God gives each one of us gifts, and from a very early age (eight to be precise) he realised that his gifting was in the world of commerce, setting up his own hamster retail business in the school playground. Mark went on to read Economics at Leeds, alongside creating and launching a wide variety of business ventures in his spare time. On graduation, he joined the motor industry, and after holding some key positions at Rover, Ford and Jaguar, returned to the Wirral at 28 with his new wife, Anita, where they started the Mitchell Group in 1990, with £100 share capital and a £10,000 overdraft from Barclays.

The business now represents three automotive brands, Lexus, Mazda and Škoda, from the five-acre base at the Cheshire Oaks Designer Outlet Village, ten miles from Strawberry Field. It employs over 100 colleagues, and has annual revenues of £50 million. Driven by a passionate Christian faith, Mark

has always been countercultural in terms of business leadership, putting colleagues before customers, and refusing to trade on Sundays. Mark talked to the conference about how his faith drives his business practices and attitude towards people. Mark has a reputation for outstanding care to his employees, visiting new parents in their home with a gift for the newborn, providing staff holiday accommodation, and time off for family commitments like sports day and nativity plays, etc... He has also created a fund to support staff with the soaring cost of living and utility costs. Mark extends this culture to his customer base, delivering every new car with a bunch of flowers, and holding a carol service each Christmas in Chester Cathedral, inviting his customers to attend.

This has been recognised by the wider motor trade and community. Mark was appointed UK Automotive Business Leader of the Year 2020, and at the same time, served as Her Majesty's High Sheriff of Cheshire. He will also

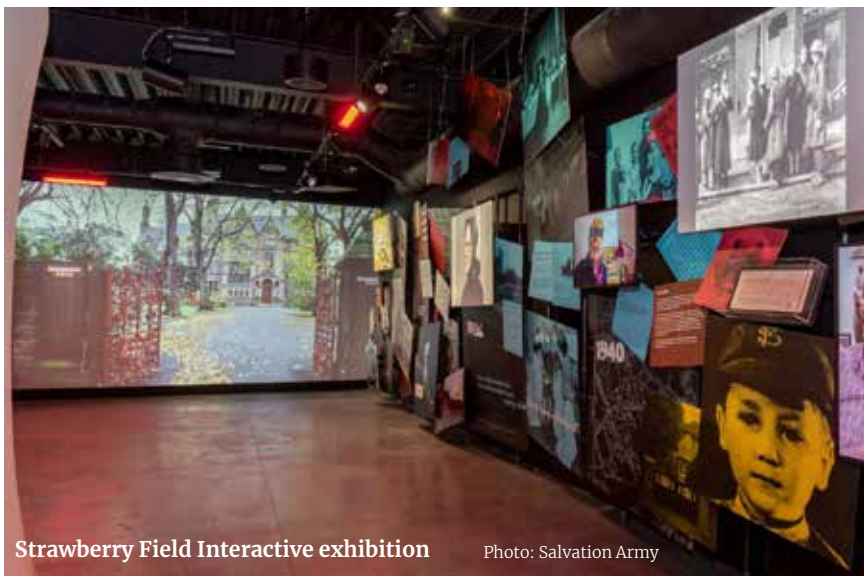
be serving as Deputy Lieutenant of Cheshire until his 75th birthday. His wider involvement includes food banks, youth work and street pastors.

The conference concluded with a guided tour around the local community with a Blue Badge guide, visiting a number of other Beatles Heritage sites, including the venue for the Quarrymen pop group, the forerunner of the Beatles, and the graves of Eleanor Rigby and Father McKenzie.

The feedback from the conference has been very positive. Suppliers appreciated being hosted with no other agenda than to share with them the vision of the work of the Salvation Army and thank them for their contribution as key stakeholders. At least one company which attended has gone on to explore adopting the Disability Confident employment standard for themselves. The next conference is hopefully going to be held in the Spring of 2024 in the new Salvation Army Headquarters, currently under construction in Denmark Hill and due to open in August 2023. 📺



Mark Mitchell speaking to conference delegates



Strawberry Field Interactive exhibition

Photo: Salvation Army



Steve Apted is Head of Procurement at the Salvation Army. He has previously worked in three publicly listed companies in a variety of procurement, supply chain, project management and operations roles. Since 2008 he has worked in in the faith-based not-for-profit sector, both running his own consulting and interim management company and latterly as a Salvation Army employee. He serves in church leadership and as a Trustee on a number of Charity Boards.