

Drugs Services for Young People under YOT Supervision: a case study

John McPhail describes the ingredients for success in the Worcestershire and Herefordshire Substance Misuse Project.

The overall aim of the Worcestershire and Herefordshire Substance Misuse Project was to prevent offending through the development of a range of age specific services targeted at young people for whom drug, alcohol or substance misuse may be a factor related to actual offending or to an increased risk of becoming involved in offending. Surveys undertaken at the end of the 1990s indicated a strong link between drug taking and alcohol consumption amongst young people in Herefordshire and Worcestershire and the likelihood of being involved with the criminal justice system.

In 1998, 80 % of young people under supervision with the Worcester Youth Justice Team admitted using substances, with 50 % identifying a link between their drug taking and their offending behaviour. At the same time, the Herefordshire Youth Justice Manager estimated that approximately 60 % of young people under supervision were using drugs or substances to an extent that impacted upon their offending.

Consequently, there was a need for a flexible range of services to young people involved in the criminal justice system, including assessment and screening services; treatment programmes; advice and information; one-to-one counselling; and drop-in and outreach services. It was felt that recruiting a team of drug, alcohol and substance misuse specialists to work directly for the Youth Offending Service across the two counties could most effectively provide these services.

Partnership

The project design and aims necessitated a close working relationship with established local specialist drugs and alcohol agencies, namely, Hereford and Worcester Advice Service on Alcohol, Worcester Community Drugs Team, and Drugs and Alcohol Service Herefordshire, from which all three project workers were recruited. Herefordshire and Worcestershire are largely rural counties, with a small number of industrial and semi-industrial towns, where the majority of referred young people live. A large amount of the project workers' time is spent travelling, which places constraints upon their work in assessing referrals and supporting clients. The project could not have succeeded without the experience and expertise of the partner community-based agencies in delivering drug, alcohol and substance misuse projects in these environments. All

had established working methods that had been developed specifically for young people. At the beginning of the project, all the project workers had previously worked with these agencies and employed these methods.

Despite being YOT staff, these workers continued to be line-managed by the specialist agencies. Initially, this caused some concern amongst the project workers as they were developing their role within the YOT and their host agency. However, these issues have been resolved, and the partnership between the YOT and the specialist agencies is generally positive and sustainable. To be sure, there are some areas of contention, not least as the project represents a significant proportion of the resources allocated to both counties to address drug and alcohol issues. Agencies feel that similar services must be made available to young people who are not offending (or have not yet been caught offending). A positive outcome of the project is a proposed multi-agency young people's substance misuse team.

Referrals

163 referrals were made to the project between May 2000 and December 2001, of which 88.3 % were offered a service. Referrals were slow during the first half of the project, but improved as YOT staff became more aware of the project's existence. Young people with greatly differing scales of drug and alcohol consumption manifesting a wide range of support needs and variant degrees of intensity of intervention have been dealt with by the project. The level of support offered by project workers is determined by the individual needs of the young person, and the degree of compliance and engagement the young people have with the project. Almost half the young people were with the project for less than twenty days, with just under two in five attending a single session. However, one in five were with the project for over one hundred days.

Young people were asked about their drug and alcohol use. Almost all young people had drunk alcohol (98.3%) and smoked cannabis (95%); and over half had taken amphetamines (56.7%) and ecstasy (60%). More than three in ten young people had taken hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD (35%) and magic mushrooms, with 31.7% admitting taking cocaine powder. A quarter of young people interviewed admitted to having taken crack cocaine and just less (21.5%), heroin.

Outcomes

Interviews with young people involved with the project indicate that the personal support offered by the worker was key to the changes in their alcohol consumption and drug taking and their ability to sustain a less chaotic lifestyle. One young woman explored strategies with her worker that she can employ in order to drink sensibly and avoid getting drunk and offending whilst under the influence: "We talk about how to drink sensibly; how to control it".

Another young man had been drinking heavily before going to prison and taking drugs, activities he continued on release. Following another court appearance he was referred to the project by his probation officer. He described his meetings with the project worker:

"We go for a drive in his car to somewhere quiet and private and talk and talk... I talk about problems with alcohol and drugs... We don't ever meet at the YOT place. That wouldn't be private. I wouldn't want to go there. It's better the way we do it... I get a lot of help. Thing is, I was on an ounce of cannabis a week. Now I'm on nothing and no drink at all. It's being able to talk. Getting it out in the open with someone who understands about it. I'm proud of [stopping] both alcohol and drugs and with the rest of my life going good."

The project has allowed early intervention with a substantial amount of young people who may not have been referred, or have referred themselves, to established drug and alcohol agencies. Being located within the YOT has necessitated the project's adoption of an approach orientated to young people. Project workers have focused their work within the criminal justice system, prioritising a group of young people that have traditionally been marginalised from mainstream provision. As a result, therefore, a large number of vulnerable young people with drug and alcohol problems which may have contributed to their offending have received a programme of individually tailored support.

However, there is a lack of resources to sustain and expand these services to meet the support and treatment needs of young people in two rural and semi-rural counties where relative prosperity hides the pockets of deprivation that nurture drug and alcohol abuse. All the evidence



Julie Grogan photo courtesy of Wandsworth Police

from the evaluation strongly points towards the importance of skilled specialist workers experienced in working with young people forming close personal relationship with clients. However, there has been difficulty in filling the drug worker posts, which the project attributes to a national shortage of suitably qualified and trained people.

The project was initially funded in April 2000 for two years by the Youth Justice Board. An evaluation of the project has been carried out by Nacro as part of a national evaluation of drugs and alcohol projects funded by the Youth Justice Board.

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