

The Importance of Partnership

Elaine Arnull and Shilpa Patel evaluate the missing elements in a youth substance misuse pilot scheme.

The *Crime and Disorder Act* (1998) established a new approach to youth justice and created the Youth Justice Board and Youth Offending Teams. The YJB strategic approach to youth offending highlighted some key areas in which to develop practice, including restorative justice, cognitive behaviour and substance misuse.

Whether it is a cause or an outcome, substance misuse is often associated with offending (Hough 1996, MacGregor 2000), and especially for many young people, substance misuse and offending may co-exist. Based on the premise that the youth justice system is one of the best places to target young people with drugs and/or alcohol problems (Newburn and Elliott 1999), in 1999 the Youth Justice Board invited bids from YOTs and/or voluntary organisations for funding of three-year pilot projects. These had to be submitted quickly, although bidders often had little experience of the process and of project development.

Evaluation

Independent evaluation was built into the budgets of all pilot schemes. Our research team from the Centre for Community Research at the University of Hertfordshire was invited in 1999 to evaluate a pilot scheme that was based in a large, ethnically diverse London borough (Arnull and Patel 2002). This involved a YOT in partnership with two voluntary organisations that had previous experience in drugs prevention. The project was to be a new service in the area that would take referrals of young offenders from the YOT, assess them and undertake counselling; if necessary they would be referred on as appropriate. We will call this pilot 'Project X'.

Unfortunately, the project did not meet its original objectives. Thus the focus of the evaluation shifted from drugs education and prevention to partnership working - a current trend particularly relevant to the substance misuse field and those working in the criminal justice system. The evaluation of the project demonstrated the importance of effective partnership working in services for young people who misuse substances.

Initially it was felt that the project would meet a clearly identified need and there was a lot of enthusiasm amongst the partners. Communication between the YOT and the project manager was very positive at this point. Project X hit its first obstacle when there was a delay in receiving funding and the recruitment of two drugs prevention staff was

delayed. A knock-on effect of this was that Project X was not able to incorporate itself at an early stage within the YOT as the source of referrals. Subsequently the senior worker left the project, followed by the project manager shortly afterwards. After some time one of the voluntary organisations appointed a new manager and senior worker. The problems were not resolved however.

The initial funding for the pilot was to have been for three years, provided that funding was secured from another source to continue at the end of that period. Project X was not able to find funding from any local organisations and therefore closed early, so was effectively open for eighteen months, due to delay in launch and early closure. During its lifetime, Project X had contact with just eleven young people from the YOT; three were referrals and the remaining eight were seen as a part of Drug Awareness Training provided at the Final Warning group sessions at the YOT.

Interview findings

In order to find out why the project had seen so few young people, we interviewed some of the staff and managers of Project X, the YOT manager and other key stakeholders.

Our main findings were:

- There was a lack of communication between the YOT and Project X, with expectations (or assumptions) that certain responsibilities would be carried out by the other party never being fulfilled. The YOT members did not feel that Project X had made itself known to them. They said that communication was poor and that there was no feedback from the project about what had happened following a referral. The YOT manager described a lack of communication between himself and the second project manager. The differences in assumptions between the partners meant that Project X did not have the chance to 'take off'.
- There was a lack of experienced staff at the project who could launch the scheme and maintain the momentum of referrals. Project X staff and the project manager were surprised that the YOT had not referred more young people to them. They believed the YOT would know to refer to them almost automatically and did not share the opinion that communication was an issue. These beliefs demonstrated their reactive working style.

- There were a number of staff changes and also sickness/absence at Project X which had a negative impact on the way in which the project was implemented.
- Another new, local and proactive young person's service was established and this came to be perceived by the YOT as a better place to send referrals and with whom to develop a working relationship. This project was seen as good at communicating, fast at responding and easy to refer to.
- Project X did not embed itself into the local structures and tiers. It did not have a public identity. Other local stakeholders, such as the borough's Drug Action Team co-ordinator, indicated that Project X was not known in the area.
- Project X did not champion itself locally or within the YOT. No one person or manager assumed 'ownership' of the project and took subsequent responsibility for seeking to drive it forward.

Future planning

This evaluation was one of a number of evaluations that were taking place around the country prior to December 2001. The findings of these will be pulled

together by the national evaluation team and will be presented to the Youth Justice Board at the end of March 2002. It is to be hoped that these findings will show where there is good practice, as well as areas for improvement.

It is known that partnership working between the statutory and voluntary sectors can be problematic (Gibbs 2001). Future planning and implementation of 'joined-up' services should more fully take into account what doesn't work, based on research like the evaluation of Project X.

A key requirement for effective partnership working is open and regular communication between the partners and especially the managers. The staff must be experienced in launching a project, establishing its profile within its referral source and keeping up the momentum of referrals - in other words 'championing' the scheme.

The 'silver lining' in this experience is that there are key lessons to be learned. Establishing what did not work through evaluation should help improve the focus on what does. This should lead to a more effective delivery of partnership projects, which can then establish the best way in which to tackle the problem of substance misuse among young people, especially those who are already caught up within the criminal justice system.

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