

The Work of The Derwent Initiative

Judy Hughes describes an innovative approach to coordinating inter-agency response to sexual offending.

The Derwent Initiative (TDI) is an independent charity mandated by all the agencies represented on Northumbria's Area Justice Board to promote an inter-agency response to sexual offending. In fulfilling this function it carries out four main sets of tasks:

- Information exchange and networking e.g. newsletters, directory of services holding multi-agency forums on topics of identified concern.
- Initiating, developing and servicing inter-agency projects to meet concerns or fill gaps in provision research.
- Publishing on specific topics or matters of general policy.

TDI belongs to all the agencies but is the creature of none. It is totally independent, it takes account of the victims as well as the perpetrators of abuse and its special expertise is in facilitating the coming together of agencies to solve problems and develop

Over recent years, agencies have become much better, in some ways, at working together than they were when TDI first began in 1993. Then, astonishingly, police and probation did not share information about sex offenders with each other, let alone with other agencies. Now there is a multiplicity of multi-agency bodies set up to deal with every problem imaginable. But this development does not seem to have solved many old problems and has sometimes created new ones. For example:

- In 2003 a national conference will once again address the issues of the apparent inability of the agencies to share information; a criticism which appears in every inquiry report on failures of child protection.
- The proliferation of multi-agency partnerships is still dependent upon old funding structures.

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initiatives within a framework of mutual knowledge, understanding and respect. It works to break down barriers between all sectors, disciplines and agency groupings and in this respect has been remarkably successful. Among its many achievements have been:

- Assisting the creation of the Sexual Behaviour Unit – a Probation/Health partnership to provide specialist assessments for courts and Social Services and treatment programmes for abusers not in the criminal justice system.
- Negotiating a learning disabilities/forensic services/probation division of the SBU to assess learning disabled abusers.
- Producing the first housing protocol agreed and written by housing officers in association with the criminal justice and child protection agencies.
- Obtaining funding for the Partners Project which brought together the forensic services and Barnardo's to work with the partners of abusers currently in treatment.
- Producing the first analysis of quality standards in inter-agency work.

- The distinctions between inter-agency work, multi-agency work, partnership work etc. are not yet well understood within the agencies.
- The need to manage inter-agency projects in special ways is not yet recognised.

So, much remains to be done. But the problems between the agencies are not the only ones. Much of TDI's current work is concerned with bridging the gaps between the agencies and the wider public. While the agencies have concentrated on trying to work more closely with each other and to cast themselves as protectors of the public, that public itself appears ever more excluded from the management of its difficult and recalcitrant members. We believe that this results in a vicious circle whereby the agencies are reluctant to engage with the public because they are afraid of vigilantism and the public react with vigilantism because it believes that it has no other option.

TDI is working to cut through this barrier of secrecy, exclusion, anger and mistrust by providing that other option, namely identifying the areas in which the public has a clear and effective role in public protection and enabling it to carry out this role within the rule of law. These areas are strongly connected with preventative work and at TDI we believe that the agencies have not yet fully realised the potential strengths of communities nor harnessed these

strengths in a productive way. The emphasis has been on minimising public knowledge, opinion and action rather than on enabling communities to respond in ways other than vigilantism. Leisurewatch is an example of a new positive approach in action.

Leisurewatch is a unique project which brings together front-line workers in the leisure industry with named police officers to help to keep places where children congregate safe. All workers, pool attendants, receptionists, car-park attendants, café and bar staff, managers and cleaners undergo a short training course in which they learn to identify potentially harmful behaviour, spot potentially vulnerable people and understand their powers and the powers of the agencies to deal with problems. But we do more than exhort them to be vigilant. Systems have been put in place whereby a named police officer liaises with the site and all concerns are reported to that officer who then decides on a course of action. The significant features of this way of working are:

- When workers report to their liaison officer they are not reporting a crime but expressing a concern.
- By enabling them to act promptly when some matter comes to their attention, workers feel empowered rather than helpless and anger is diffused into positive action.
- Leisure workers are not asked to make judgements beyond their realm of knowledge, the judgement about whether or not this is a potentially serious incident is left to the police.
- Police feed information on outcomes back to the site and this both enables the workers to see their own effectiveness and helps them to develop their ability to distinguish threatening from non-threatening behaviour.

- Because some of the worries are about people known to leisure staff, the leisure workers begin to demythologise sex abusers and see them as people who can be managed.
- The close links between the site and the police result in co-operation in other areas between the communities and the police.
- Leisure workers take the information they have acquired back into their own communities thus helping to get the issues and the problems into proportion in the minds of the public.

All these contribute to our general aim of involving the wider public in positive management of sex offenders in the community within the rule of law and its own sphere of competence.

Leisurewatch is being delivered across the six Local Authority areas in Northumbria and by May about 1000 workers will have been trained on approximately 60 sites. Other areas have expressed interest in implementing it in their localities and a briefing day for interested police/probation/child protection professionals will be held in May.

In our view, TDI's strength lies in its apparent weakness; we are not a statutory agency and therefore operate only by consent. But this independence enables us to go where others dare not tread and to develop a privileged over-view of all agencies in all sectors which we can use to bring together swiftly the right agencies and individuals to tackle specific problems. The formula, like so many of our projects, is simple and effective. Our long-term goal is to make ourselves redundant. At the moment that goal is far from being achieved.

Judith Hughes is Director of The Derwent Initiative.

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