

PARENT ALCOHOL WORKSHOPS TO TACKLE YOUTH ALCOHOL ABUSE IN WEST OXFORDSHIRE (IDeA ref. no. 679)

ABSTRACT

The project was set up by West Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership in response to local concerns about under-age drinking and anti-social behaviour in town centres and other public places. Police officers and police community support officers targeted known hotspots and confiscated any alcohol they found at the scene.

The details of young people found drinking or in possession of alcohol were recorded in a secure database and the parents or guardians were invited to attend a workshop with their son or daughter. The workshops focused on why the young people were there, the impact of their behaviour on their health and local communities and how parents could help in improving their behaviour.

A recent evaluation has shown that the project has had a positive impact on both parents and young people with a significant fall in the number of young people being referred to the workshops. The success of the project has been attributed to close working between the police and council and the project has now been mainstreamed

MAIN ORGANISATION INVOLVED

West Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

West Oxfordshire District Council

REGION

South East

DATE OF CASE STUDY

27th November 2009

KEYWORDS

Alcohol abuse
Anti social behaviour
Young people
Youth crime

NATIONAL INDICATORS

The project is contributing to two targets in the Oxfordshire Local Area Agreement 2:

- N121 – Dealing with local concerns about crime and anti social behaviour
- N111 – First time entrants to the youth justice system

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CONFIRMATION THAT CONTACT IS WILLING TO BE PUBLICLY AVAILABLE

Yes

DATE FOR UPDATING THE CASE STUDY

January 2011

WILLINGNESS OF AUTHOR TO DO THIS

Yes

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THE ISSUE

The project was developed in response to concerns about underage drinking and anti-social behaviour in public places. These were top priorities identified by West Oxfordshire's five neighbourhood action groups and highlighted by the local MP, David Cameron.

Evidence showed that the problem was particularly acute on Friday and Saturday nights and involved groups of young people ranging from 14 to 16 years old. In some cases, the young people had large quantities of alcohol. This could have come from a number of sources including older siblings and friends or, in some cases, the homes of the young people themselves. Test purchase operations suggested that licensed premises including local convenience stores, pubs and restaurants were less likely to have sold/served alcohol to people under the age of 18.

The issue came to a head during the summer of 2007 when local police noticed an increase in the number of young people consuming alcohol in highly visible locations including market squares, outside shops and open public spaces. This was accompanied by an increase in the number of reports of anti-social behaviour in and around community areas and low level crime, including criminal damage and harassment.

Confirming these reports, a county-wide strategic intelligence assessment in 2007 showed that 59 per cent of all crime in West Oxfordshire was recorded as criminal damage or violent crime, a significant amount of which was believed to be alcohol related.

WHAT THEY DID

Tackling the problem

In November 2007, the West Oxfordshire Local Police Area launched a pilot scheme with support from West Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership. Using police resources, the aims of the Operation Judicious scheme were to:

- identify young people (under 18) drinking in public places and confiscate the alcohol
- tackle related neighbourhood priorities including anti-social behaviour
- engage with parents or guardians of the young people concerned and raise their awareness of the impact of alcohol on crime and disorder
- empower parents or guardians to discuss this impact with their children
- deal robustly with specific criminal offences

As part of Operation Judicious, police officers and police community support officers carried out regular stop and check exercises at known 'hotspots'. They confiscated

any alcohol they found at the scene and the operations were filmed by police evidence gathering teams and officers wearing body worn video cameras. The parents or guardians of young people found drinking or in possession of alcohol were contacted and asked to attend the scene to take responsibility for the young person.

Other work complementing Operation Judicious included educational packages on the night-time economy and the consequences of underage drinking, which were distributed to all secondary schools in West Oxfordshire as part of citizenship education.

Parent alcohol workshops

A key objective of Operation Judicious was to encourage parents and guardians to be responsible for their children's behaviour. This would be achieved through specially convened parent alcohol workshops.

Developing a database

The details of young drinkers identified during the stop and check operations were passed on to West Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership and entered into a secure database. The database also recorded the time, date and location of the incident. This information could then be used to profile trends relating to underage drinking.

Engaging with parents/guardians

Using the referral database, the Safer Communities Team wrote to the parent or guardian of the young person inviting them to attend a parent alcohol workshop with the young person. While it was not compulsory to attend, parents or guardians who failed to respond were sent a second invitation to another workshop evening.

Workshop setting

The workshops took place at West Oxfordshire District Council's offices in Witney. Initially they were run on a monthly basis and held during the evenings. The optimum number of participants ranged from 10 to 15 young people plus parents/guardians.

Format

During the workshop, parents/guardians and young people watched a PowerPoint presentation by the police Schools Liaison Officer and Anti Social Behaviour Officer with occasional input from the council's Community Safety and Licensing Manager. The presentation outlined:

- the reasons why the young people were there
- the impact their behaviour had on their health and local communities
- how parents could help in improving their child's behaviour.

Following the presentation, a locally-made DVD called 'Wasted Nights' was shown. The workshop ended with question and answer sessions and, before leaving, the parents/guardians and young people were asked to complete a questionnaire.

THE IMPACT

Outcomes

A recent evaluation shows that there were 198 referrals to the workshops between November 2007 and January 2009. Of these, 128 young people (65 per cent) attended the workshops. During the same 15 month period, there were only two repeat offenders on the project (who were then placed on acceptable behaviour contracts (ABCs)).

Feedback from workshop questionnaires suggest that the approach had a positive impact on both parents/guardians and young people. For example:

- 82 per cent of parents/guardians and 80 per cent of young people indicated that they were more aware of the impact of alcohol on public services.
- 92 per cent of young people attending the workshops said they understood why the police and local council had taken these steps to deal with alcohol
- 78 per cent of young people were more aware of the impact of alcohol on crime and disorder

There is also evidence to suggest that the workshops have fostered greater engagement between parents/guardians and the young people involved. For example, after attending the workshop:

- 94 per cent of parents/guardians felt more confident about talking to their son/daughter about alcohol and its impact
- 78 per cent of the young people felt more confident about talking to their parents about alcohol

Impact on crime

According to the workshop evaluation there was a 27 per cent fall in the number of crimes young people committed in West Oxfordshire following the introduction of the parent alcohol workshops. Just under half (46 per cent) of these crimes were recorded as less serious violence against the person and criminal damage.

Mainstreaming

The Operation Judicious pilot used significant numbers of police resources and, as such, it seems unlikely that it could have been sustained as a regular operation. Because the project has resulted in a visible reduction in the number of young people drinking alcohol in public places it has been possible to mainstream the stop and check work into neighbourhood policing patrols.

At the same time, the fall in the number of referrals has meant that workshops are now held at three monthly intervals, rather than on a monthly basis, and have been mainstreamed into the work of the Safer Communities Partnership.

Good practice

West Oxfordshire's parent alcohol workshops are believed to be the first such initiatives in the UK and in 2008 received the National Justice Award for Outstanding Contribution to Tackling Youth Crime. The project has attracted national interest from other crime and disorder reduction partnerships as well as fire services.

In 2009 The West Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership was shortlisted for the Local Innovation Awards in the community safety: policing our communities theme. The judges said: "This is an excellent partnership, demonstrating how achievement and innovation can be undertaken in a rural setting. Some of the work - for example, the 'Wasted Nights' alcohol project, is genuinely innovational."

LESSONS

Challenges

In the initial phases of the workshop project, letters were sent out addressed 'To the parent or guardian of (the young person)'. It soon became clear that, in some cases, these letters were being intercepted by the young person concerned and were not reaching the intended recipient. This problem has now been rectified by sending letters to 'The Occupant' and franked with the council's logo, which helps to conceal the purpose of the letter.

Another related problem was that the scheme depended on voluntary attendance at the workshops. Where parents/guardians failed to attend a workshop, the Safer Communities Team followed this up with invitations to attend future workshops. In cases where there were other, non alcohol-related, concerns about a young person, this was responded to through a multi agency meeting.

Factors influencing the success of the project

Good partnership working

The success of the project has been attributed in large measure to close working between the police and the council to oversee community safety. In West Oxfordshire there are five police staff based at the council's offices in Witney and managed by the council. This arrangement has enabled a more joined up approach to underage drinking, facilitating links with relevant council departments such as licensing, anti-social behaviour and housing. A similar approach to underage drinking in another part of the county has been less successful because the links between the police and council are more tenuous.

Choosing the right venue

Early in the project, a decision was made to hold the workshops at council offices. Using civilian premises as a venue was felt to be less confrontational than police buildings and is thought to have been a factor in encouraging participation from more than two-thirds of young people (and their families) referred from Operation Judicious. Using the council logo to frank letters to parents was another strategy used to ensure that letters to parents/guardians were not intercepted by their children.

Using a multi media approach

A PowerPoint presentation provided an economic and effective way to disseminate information about the impact of underage drinking and anti-social behaviour. It also offered flexibility and could be made to capture new trends or local issues. The use of a locally made DVD highlighting the effects of binge drinking and anti-social behaviour on the community and local service providers helped to strengthen the message.

Involving families

The aim of the workshops was not only to provide information about the impact of underage drinking but to promote greater understanding and dialogue between parents/guardians and their children. The workshop's format allowed for open discussion of local issues and fostered greater engagement between parents/guardians and the young people. It also helped to encourage parents to take greater responsibility for their children's behaviour and parents/guardians often stayed behind after workshops to discuss their child's personal needs or issues with safer communities' staff.

Applying lessons to other projects

There are a number of lessons which can be drawn from the parent alcohol workshop project in West Oxfordshire:

- There should be strong, working links across the community safety partnership and especially between the police and relevant council officers with both ideally sharing a common base. There should be an enthusiastic team to deliver the project.
- Before establishing a project you should pilot the process for at least six months. During this time you will need to find an effective mechanism for referring the young people who are drinking and/or engaging in anti-social behaviour. The West Oxfordshire project has shown that a particularly effective way is to first identify young people drinking in the streets and then to establish a database of young drinkers.
- Letters to parents/guardians inviting them to attend the workshops should be addressed 'To the occupier'. You should run the workshops from a non-police venue and any parents/guardians who fail to attend should be contacted again and invited to come to a future workshop.
- The workshop should be informative, relevant to the local community and structured to elicit feedback and promote discussion. During the presentation you should explain the social and health implications of drinking and the potential sanctions which can be taken against young people behaving in this way. A multi-media approach may help in reinforcing any messages.
- You should use the local press, radio and television to promote the project. This will help raise awareness about the project and instil confidence in the local community that problems of underage drinking in public places are being addressed.

DATA/EVIDENCE

Project evaluation

Data on the impact of the parent alcohol workshop project has been taken from an evaluation undertaken by West Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership in 2009 (see below).

Contributing to national indicators

The project is contributing to two targets in the Oxfordshire Local Area Agreement 2:

- N1 21 – Dealing with local concerns about crime and anti social behaviour
- N1 111 – First time entrants to the youth justice system

Most recent monitoring information suggests that there was been a 55 per cent fall in the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system in Oxfordshire. No breakdown for West Oxfordshire is available for either of the indicators.

FURTHER INFORMATION

West Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership has produced several resources about the project. These include:

- Parent Alcohol Workshop: Evaluation. A report produced by West Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership (2009)
- ‘Wasted Nights’. An educational packing (including DVD) for young people on the local night-time economy for Key Stage 4 (2006)
- “Too Wasted”. An educational package (including DVD) highlighting the consequences of underage drinking for Key Stage 3 (2008)

For more information about these resources contact:

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