

No more needle

Essex Police is working with partner agencies to address drug-related crime. Tom Bovingdon finds out how the scheme has changed standard policing practices

Tell a police officer about a scheme that could cut crime related to problem drug users, save money, reduce duplication and improve partnership working and they might be sceptical. Tell them it was launched on 1 April 2010 and you would be lucky if they heard you out.

However, this is what a group of partnership agencies, including Essex Police, claims to have done with its 'InsideOut' scheme.

With an estimated 60 per cent of acquisitive crime nationally being committed by drug addicts, the group, based in Chelmsford, Essex, claims to have found a way to tackle these criminals and cut reoffending. So how does it work?

Partners against crime

The scheme came about when the Essex Drug and Alcohol Partnership, an agency overseen by the Home Office and the National Treatment Agency, commissioned the Westminster Drug Project, a charity for drug and alcohol treatments in London and the southeast, to bring together representatives from different agencies to tackle the problem collectively.

At a local level, before InsideOut was launched, the Westminster Drug Project charity, one of the agencies involved in the scheme, placed 127 problem drug users in Essex on treatment 'journeys' during 2009.

David Suen, operations manager at the charity, tells Police Review the new scheme was created as part of a government pilot that allows agencies to put together 'more creative and more innovative' solutions to problems facing their region.

Under the new scheme, Westminster Drug Project workers make themselves available to Essex Police custody suites to talk to offenders, assess their needs and start planning a programme of rehabilitation as soon as they are identified as problem drug users. The scheme is aimed in particular at users of drugs such as cannabis, cocaine, crack and heroin whose addictions drive them to offend.

Once addicts have been identified they can be offered a range of interventions including counselling, therapy, drug prescription, detoxification, rehabilitation, education, training, employment and life skills such as being able to socialise.

Mr Suen says: 'The link between prison and the community was sometimes quite frustrating because people can sometimes fall through the gaps upon release.'

'Now clients know from the start of engaging with the service that Essex has one approach which means police, probation, prison, drug intervention programme services, housing services and social services all work together to ensure they obtain what is a sustainable change.'

The two-year pilot programme brings together these agencies to identify and assess the needs of problem drug users and then create a plan that they hope will reduce or end their offending and drug use and improve their welfare in terms of health, housing and employment.

The scheme is running across the whole of Essex except the Southend and Thurrock areas which are covered by different treatment providers. The agencies are also willing to provide help to problem drug users who originate from Essex but who now live in other parts of Britain.

Long-term approach

The difference between the old arrangements and the new way of working is the 'sustainability' of the approach, meaning that it can help drug users in the long term, according to Supt Ewen Wilson, who is responsible for substance misuse and the territorial policing department for Essex Police.

He tells Police Review: 'We are able to apply to step outside of the administrative restrictions that we had previously. So if we want to achieve something, we step back, we look at it as a problem and we go and solve the problem. And you do that by being creative and working together, which is the whole essence of what we are here to do.'

He adds: 'It was not a routine [in the past] to be thinking about a more sustainable approach. The police traditionally have been only about enforcement. What we are looking at now is a problem-solving approach where you are looking at other opportunities to achieve your outcomes and that is the important thing. We are putting aside traditional performance measures by which the police might have ordinarily have been measured [such as arrest rates].'

However, enforcement still plays a role in tackling any offending committed by problem drug users, Supt Wilson adds. 'This is about a process built on experience and understanding of what a particular client needs. It is about a professional, sensible approach. But do not for one moment think we have hung up the handcuffs. If enforcement is what is required then that is what will happen.'

Previously, under-18s, over-18s and problem drug users in prison would all be dealt with separately, whereas they are now all dealt with by one scheme.

Ben Hughes, joint commissioning manager and deputy strategic manager for the Essex drug and alcohol action team, says: 'We wanted to look at creating a service that was truly integrated and properly joined up so that clients would have a seamless provision service and could access the same level of service no matter where they were. So whether it was in custody, pre-custody or in prison, they know what they are getting. They would not get assessed to death by any number of services and all of the services working with the individual know what is happening with that individual and work together.'

Single service

David O'Neill, head of reducing reoffending at HM Prison Service in Chelmsford, says there was a lot of duplication in the old system with offenders being required to complete similar assessment forms for each different agency that dealt with them. He adds: 'The client group get a bit fed up with that and will start to disengage and that is not helpful.'

'So one of the reasons why we, certainly from a local prisons perspective, were keen to get involved was to stop the repeat interview to make the journey into and through treatment easier and integrated and the same in prison as outside. Because ordinarily we would have to start again. You would not necessarily start afresh but there were a few hurdles to get over.'

Supt Wilson says the scheme aims to stop the 'revolving door' of offending problem drug users repeatedly being encountered by officers. He adds: 'If you are a drug user and you are offending to supply that habit, unless something changes [then there will be no improvement]. This service has the potential to provide that and we have already seen the green shoots to suggest that is the case.'

'What we had before was fragmented treatment services. We had police enforcement activity that was not engaging as best as we would want it to with other treatment because if I can deal with an offender for his offending but I can also encourage and get that person into treatment, ergo they get off their drugs, then it is going to potentially stop the reoffending, bringing chaos to an end and [bringing] order to their chaotic life.'

Value and evaluation

Supt Wilson says the scheme had to make financial sense at a time when the public sector 'is having its budgets cut left, right and centre'. He explains: 'It has got to be value for money. If you were a member of the public looking at how we are spending our money, this makes far more sense than the previous situation. If we have got hundreds and hundreds of hours of police officers' time spent dealing with people in custody, surely it is far more sensible to speak with colleagues and make sure the right treatment is provided.'

The first of four quarterly evaluations of the scheme will take place at the end of July to assess whether the scheme works as well as the partner agencies currently believe it does. Anecdotal evidence, case studies and analysis of clients' drug use, offending and wellbeing will be pulled together. The partner agencies have also commissioned Essex University to undertake a review of the scheme's effectiveness.

Mr Hughes says: 'If, after the second quarter, we see absolutely no change in anything then we will be asking ourselves questions and [asking] Westminster Drug Project questions. There is also the scary bit that you commission an external evaluation and they tell you that it is rubbish.'

Mr O'Neill says he has already seen the benefits of how the scheme works in prison. He adds: 'The difference in prison is absolutely remarkable from 18 to 24 months ago when [repeat drug offenders in prison] looked like a scene from [the film] *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. I mean it genuinely did: grown men, unshaven, unkempt, shuttling across the floor, looking at the floor. Now they are stable, they are supported, they have people that can talk to them on a daily basis.'

Supt Wilson concludes: 'Integrated offender management is the way forward. That is crystal clear.'