

Briefing Paper for Policy Makers, Service Planners and Practitioners: Four Early Intervention Substance Misuse Projects in South London

A central focus of the government's ten year strategy for tackling drugs is on early intervention and prevention with high-risk groups. Four such projects were set up with funding from Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham Health Authority in 1998, aimed at highly disadvantaged and high-risk young people. These included a service based in a Youth Offending Team (Yot), aimed at young offenders; a project based in a therapeutic unit for the children of substance misusing parents; an 'in-reach' project based in a school for those at risk from school exclusion; and an outreach project for socially excluded young people. The POLICY RESEARCH BUREAU (PRB) was commissioned to evaluate the four projects, to (1) explore the process of setting up and implementing the projects, and (2) assess outcomes for the young people (from two of the four projects). This briefing paper highlights the main themes to emerge from the research, and makes evidence-based recommendations for policy makers, service planners and practitioners.

SETTING UP THE PROJECTS

Interagency and multi-disciplinary working

This was carried out successfully by all projects, although there were sometimes tensions managing both 'therapeutic' and 'enforcement' roles e.g. between specialist substance misuse workers and other agency staff such as Yot staff. There was sometimes a lack of clarity regarding the remit of specialist workers, and difficulties around confidentiality and information sharing between agencies and workers were also apparent.

Messages

- **for policy**
Information sharing is critical to the success of multi-agency and multi-disciplinary working. Clear principles and protocols should be agreed at the outset, not left to be resolved on an ad-hoc basis. If professionals working in the same agency or family of agencies cannot share information, there is little possibility of achieving the 'continuum of care' for young people and their families that ought to be the main benefit of joined up working.
- **for planning**
It can be de-skilling and wasteful for specialist workers to undertake generic work within a host agency for which they are not trained and may have little enthusiasm. The boundaries of the specialist role need clear thought and planning before they take up post.
- **for practice**
The projects clearly demonstrated that multi-agency working is possible and can lead to innovative networks. However, key staff have to be able to work around the inevitable tensions and culture clashes that occur: agencies and individuals may have to re-examine some long-held professional (and personal) principles when working in new contexts.

Establishing a client base

All the projects found this challenging. There was a lack of recognition of young people's needs on the part of potential referring agencies, so that referrals were slow in coming in. In addition, young people themselves were often unwilling to acknowledge their needs, resulting in poor engagement and attendance.

Messages

- **for policy**
There needs to be a greater awareness of drugs issues generally and training in recognising substance misuse for professionals working with young people.
- **for planning**
Referral routes should be clearly identified at the outset, allowing early identification of potential problem areas and a strategic approach to tackling difficulties.
- **for practice**
Time should be devoted to raising awareness of drugs issues with identified potential referrers, as part of project set-up.

Management support

This was felt by workers to be lacking at times, and greater management guidance and involvement was felt to be needed in relation to clarifying the remit and objectives of the project in the early stages of set-up.

Messages

- **for policy**
This is a very challenging area of service provision, and managers need to 'own' the services, not just watch from a distance.
- **for planning**
New services especially may require substantial input of time from senior managers, both to support staff and help them clarify their role and remit.

- **for planning (continued)**

Management needs to be pro-active, and consistently available.

- **for practice**

Managers and workers need regular and frequent meetings, especially whilst a service gets established, to troubleshoot together and clarify a way forward.

OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Two projects provided quantitative data about young people accessing the projects and about the projects' impact. These data are summarised below.

The Yot-based project

Of the 110 young people referred to the Yot substance misuse worker during the evaluation period, almost three-quarters (71%) reportedly used cannabis in the last year, and more than half (59%) were thought to have used tobacco or alcohol. One in ten were reported to have used cocaine in the last year, and fewer than one in ten used crack, ecstasy and amphetamines. Significant areas of concern, affecting between a fifth and a third of the young people were their offending behaviour; drug use; education and training; and coping with family problems. Nine out of ten were thought to have benefited from the intervention to some degree, most frequently in the area of changes in their actual drug use and attitude towards drug use, but also in relation to offending behaviour and physical health.

The project for children of substance misusing parents

Just over half of the 40 young people referred to the intervention during the evaluation period were referred from social services. Of the sub-sample who received the intervention (20), alcohol and heroin was the substance most frequently misused by parents. Workers reported that in the last year alcohol was the most popular substance used by the young people (in 15% of cases), followed by tobacco (12%) and cannabis (5%). Significant areas of concern were coping with family problems and emotional and psychological problems. Of the fifteen young people who took part in the intervention, 60% were perceived as benefiting, according to workers' assessments.

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Messages for policy, planning and practice

- Although absolute levels of substance misuse were higher in the Yot sample than in the general population, the pattern of drug misuse – mainly involving class 'C' drugs - was similar. Amongst the children of substance misusing parents, drug use was in fact lower than in the general population. Thus, the projects clearly fulfilled their remit of being 'early' intervention services.
- There are considerable challenges to working with high risk young people, and workers were modest in their description of the overall benefit to the young people. These groups often have multiple and overlapping needs, and interventions may have to be of greater intensity and duration in order to make a significant impact.
- Substance misuse forms only one part of the interconnected web of difficulties in the lives of the young people targeted by these interventions. Problems with mental and physical health, education and training, poverty and family support are prevalent and call for the design and planning of innovative services that are well coordinated and flexible in meeting the diverse needs of high risk young people.

About the study The process evaluation drew on 33 semi-structured and depth interviews with project workers, their managers, external agencies and external and service users. Outcomes were investigated by asking workers to complete structured questionnaires about their impressions of the young people and impact of the intervention (N = 110 for the Yot-based service and 40 for the intervention for children of substance-misusing parents).

How to get further information

More copies of this Briefing Paper are available from the Policy Research Bureau (Quote Ref: P147 Briefing Paper). A fuller research summary and copies of the full reports (*The Evaluation of Four Early Intervention Substance Misuse Projects Part 1: The Process Evaluation* by Patricia Moran, and *Part 2: Baseline and Intervention Data* by Laura Brazier and Deborah Ghaté) are available in the publications section at www.prb.org.uk.

About the POLICY RESEARCH BUREAU

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