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Ministry of
JUSTICE
National Offender
Management Service

Tackling drug crime in Birmingham – the Big Society approach

The new coalition government is determined to cut the prison population. Prime Minister David Cameron is also keen that charities and volunteers should get more involved in public services – he calls it the Big Society. In central Birmingham, a scheme has been developed that shows how statutory bodies and third-sector agencies can work together to provide a strong alternative to jail that cuts reoffending.

Staffordshire and West Midlands Probation Trust and the SIFA Fireside charity have successfully piloted changes to a national programme to make treatment for drug-addicted offenders much more effective.

Offenders whose crimes stem from their use of drugs or alcohol can be ordered by the courts to go on an Offender Substance Abuse Programme (OSAP). These are organised by Staffordshire and West Midlands (SWM) Probation, and in Birmingham, staff from SIFA Fireside lead the sessions.

After working with OSAP for several years, SWM Probation treatment manager John Bolton and trainers from SIFA Fireside decided get together to make the programme more interactive. John says, “OSAP is a national programme, so there are certain things we have got to do, but we felt we could make changes in how we deliver the programme to make it more useful to offenders – and therefore more successful.”

For example, offenders have to go to 26 OSAP sessions, which are over two hours each. Originally in Birmingham, these sessions were held twice a week. This often led to offenders not coming to all their sessions – if they had jobs, it was difficult to negotiate two lots of time off. So the SWM/Sifa Fireside team ran two sessions back-to-back, all day, one day a week. This makes it easier for offenders to schedule their sessions around other commitments. Working all day also makes the sessions more intensive, so Sifa Fireside decided to try laying on a sandwich lunch, which has proved very important in keeping up levels of engagement and participation in the afternoon sessions.

The OSAP course aims to examine the causes of drug-related offending, with a view to addressing the substance misuse behind the criminal behaviour. Working in a group, with the help of a trained SIFA Fireside tutor, offenders think about how drugs have affected their lives. This is often the first time offenders make that link between drugs and the crimes they’ve committed, such as shoplifting to get money for drugs. They also learn decision-making, tactics to use to avoid using drugs, and how to plan their lives to make changes to their lifestyles, instead of being impulsive and chaotic.

To help people think about which situations lead them to use drugs, and teach them to start setting goals for themselves, they keep self-monitoring forms. The team felt the forms issued centrally were too prescriptive and didn’t always apply to everyone. So they got the participants to design their own, specific to their own situations.

The team also thought some of the other leaflets and written exercises used in the programme were too formal and technical, so they changed the style to make them more interactive and user-friendly. "The OSAP worksheets were a bit of a long list of tick-boxes," says SIFA Fireside programme tutor Hardip Sunner. "We've made them more person-focussed."

The offenders who attended Birmingham OSAP course number 35 were full of praise for the new approach.

"Before I started the course, I didn't want to come, but it's been really good," said one man, who has been on various drug courses in prisons. "The best thing is the tutors never make you feel like you've given a wrong answer – you can be totally honest and they always explain everything really clearly."

"The 13 weeks have gone by really quick," said another. SIFA Fireside programme tutor Sacha-Deen Powell is convinced this is because the changes Probation and the charity have made mean offenders are not sitting being lectured to – which makes the time drag. Instead, they are fully participating, so it's more interesting and they are really engaged.

"I'm really proud of this particular group," Sacha says. "Their comeback statements are some of the most detailed I've ever seen." Offenders write "comeback statements" as a kind of argument with themselves, a conversation between the devil and the angel on their shoulder, to give themselves reasons not to use drugs in a certain situation.

Another offender agrees. "This course gives you a different way of looking at things. The best thing is realising you have options - you can make choices about your own behaviour."

ENDS

Notes for editors:

1. Drug use is a major factor in acquisitive crime. Out of the 26,000 offenders on the caseload of West Midlands Probation April 2009-March 2010 (pre merger with Staffordshire), almost 8,000 of them (just over 30%) had drug-misuse issues which contributed to their offending behaviour.
2. Accredited Programmes are nationally approved courses designed to tackle the root causes of offending. They are included as conditions of a sentence, meaning they have to be completed or the offender will be taken back to court to receive a more serious sentence.
3. For more information on accredited programmes and the work of Staffordshire and West Midlands Probation Trust, go to www.SWMprobation.gov.uk
4. SIFA Fireside works alongside those who are socially excluded or disadvantaged, addressing alcohol issues and homelessness and empowering and supporting people to meet their short- and long-term goals. For more information, go to <http://www.sifafireside.co.uk/>