Troubled children or children in trouble?

Working holistically with young people at risk in NI

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Teenager aged 14 years old
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This policy and practice briefing focuses on two partnership services – Newry Adolescent Partnership and Armagh and Dungannon Adolescent Partnership. Both are coordinated by Barnardo’s Northern Ireland and have developed community based services for young people at risk of entering care or custody. The initial impetus for the development of these services was a shared concern among a number of agencies, both statutory and voluntary, about young people involved in anti-social behaviour. This was coupled with a clear gap in local services.

Partnership between the agencies and with the local community was, and continues to be, a crucial element in the service. A 2004 (NIO 2004) Evaluation of community based services for young people in trouble concluded that the partnership element of the service is key to its success and recommended extending that model of partnership. In particular it identified that placing greater emphasis on the involvement of parents and carers, extending the model of partnership to secure greater commitment from childcare and education, strengthening links with other voluntary and community organisations and addressing the particular issues of Northern Ireland were key to further success.

The development of links with the wider community is integral to the services and work is undertaken by the activities of the social inclusion worker. They have responsibility for engaging with the local community and ensuring they feel some ownership of the work. There is also work that addresses the cross border nature of the community and seeks to address issues for young people on both sides of the border.

The service accepts referrals from the statutory childcare sector, education and the juvenile justice sector for young people aged between 10 and 17 years and their families.

The operational objectives of the service are:

- to develop and deliver innovative community based interventions to young people and families at risk, by offering supportive services that reduce the involvement of young people in crime or at risk behaviour
- to equip young people and their families with skills and opportunities to become positive citizens
- to work in partnership to promote community based interventions as alternatives to care/custody for young people.

Each service aims to work with 45 young people per year and offers a wide range of services to young people and their families that range from additional help with education, to working to improve family relationships and parenting to addressing directly the young person’s offending behaviour. Every young person referred to the Partnership has:

- a planned and contracted individual programme of work which may include specific issues such as addressing substance misuse, self-esteem issues or careers guidance
- programmes which are planned, assessed, reviewed and evaluated with service users.

All work ensures the full engagement of the young person and their family.

The available evidence suggests that programmes of service delivery that are community based, goal focused, time limited and attempt to address the issues that are of concern, not only to the referring agent but also to the family, are more productive in reducing offending (McGuire, 2000).

Partnership working – critical success factors

The collaborative partnerships developed at these services involve a mix of both statutory and voluntary agencies. This arrangement was formalised into a partnership agreement in 2003 and has been successful in that each partner has been able to commit to a strategy of delivery of services in this area for a fraction of the cost, partners have been able to share training and expertise and have been able to share their local knowledge to assess need.

The critical success factors in enabling the Partnership to work are:

- clarity between the partners about its function and purpose
- sharing of finances, developmental time and resources
- partners have a means of resolving conflict
- partnership maintains a focus on achieving outcomes
- partnership is open to innovation and risk taking
- decisions are made in a collaborative way and disagreements shared openly
- partnership arrangement is kept under review.
Partnership has been crucial to the development and success of the services. The key benefits of partnership working are:

- the Partnership is effective in delivering its services in a planned and focused manner
- local agencies are not competing with each other and duplicating services
- limited resources are shared effectively
- knowledge transfer between the partners helps build the most effective response
- voluntary organisations within the Partnership can help to involve the local community.

The Partnerships operate with the following range of agencies:

- Barnardo’s Northern Ireland
- Youth Justice Agency Community Services
- Local Health and Social Services Trust
- Local Education and Library Board
- NI Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
- Confederation of Community Groups
- Parents and young people.

The majority of young people admitted to juvenile justice centres were male. In 2002, 86 per cent were male and only 14 per cent were female.

In 2002 there were 323 admissions to juvenile justice centres in NI.

Of this total, 68 per cent were admitted under PACE (Police and Criminal Evidence Order), 28 per cent were admitted on to remand and 5 per cent were sentenced.

Of those children admitted in 2002, 6 per cent were aged 11 to 13 years old, 14 per cent were aged 14 years, 34 per cent were aged 15 years, 46 per cent were aged 16 years and 1 per cent was 17 years old.

In 2002 there were 2,453 children looked after in NI.

In 2002/3, 5,849 children were excluded from school in NI.

Sources:

- Prosecution and Sentencing in NI – Research and Statistical Bulletin 2002
- NISRA – key indicators of PSS for NI 2003

Young people at risk

Research has identified a number of risk factors that can indicate that a child is more likely to engage in offending and as the number of risk factors increases so too does the chance that a child will offend. However, it is important to stress that this is a risk relationship and not a causal one. The Youth Justice Board listed the following as indicators of risk among children:

- family factors such as poor, erratic or harsh discipline, a family history of offending, parental attitudes that condone anti-social or criminal behaviour; low income, poor housing and large family size
- risk factors in school such as low achievement, aggressive behaviour and lack of commitment to school
- risk factors within the community such as living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, community disorganisation and neglect and availability of drugs
- risk factors for youth crime include cognitive impairment, early involvement with crime and drugs and friendships with peers involved in crime and drugs.

Clearly the more risk factors there are in a child’s life then the greater likelihood that they will engage in offending behaviour. However, some have been identified as greater indicators than others. The Youth Justice Trust (2003) suggested that the key predictor that young people will be arrested for a criminal offence is low achievement at school. Their 2002 research found that 85 per cent of young people engaged in offending were not in education, training or employment at the time of their offending.

It is a generally accepted viewpoint that there is no ‘magic solution’ or quick fix program to working with young people whose community situation is viewed as at risk. The term ‘at risk’ itself assumes a lot and depends on factors such as the culture and politics of the community the young person is from, standards set by government and caring professions and the presupposition that the young person will suffer harm if intervention does not take place to meet his or her needs. However, the identification of risk factors also clearly highlights the range of areas that services seeking to address young people’s offending behaviour should focus upon.
The Partnership projects work with young people who are assessed as needing support to help maintain them within their local communities. We use an evidence based model of community intervention that is needs focused, partnership based and participatory in terms of user involvement.

Working with young people who have substantial difficulties is a complex and long process which must begin with identifying helping strategies in a holistic manner or the young person will self-identify as the problem and it will be more difficult to encourage the family, professional agencies and the community to find a common solution based approach.

**Historical approaches to young people in trouble**

In the late 70s a dominant theory of ‘nothing works’ (Martinson 1974) was developed in dealing with troubled young people. This view gained substantial support in both Britain and the USA and led to a punitive approach by government. Evidence based research (Farrington 2002; Utting and Vennard 2000) challenges that pessimistic view and suggests that there are common themes, risk factors and models of intervention which when combined, do make an impact on the level of risky behaviour, offending and recidivism of young people.

The most recent evidence from Canada, USA and Australia suggests that interventions that include all aspects of a young person’s life and are restorative in nature have the most positive impact on supporting young people.

**What works**

The majority of the evidence on the effectiveness of interventions is based on practice and research from Canada and the USA. While these can provide a broad understanding of best practice the models of understanding must be adapted to take into account both the cultural and historical dimensions which are unique to Northern Ireland.

Juvenile offending is a controversial and politically charged issue. Youth crime is often portrayed as extreme and violent and impacting on the elderly and other vulnerable members of the community. In fact, young people are more likely to be the victim of crime than any other age group. Overall the evidence indicates that:

- custody as a deterrent only works when the person feels they have something to lose. Many young people already feel they have lost everything
- naming and shaming is not effective when the young person readily accepts and aspires to being different and deviant. In short, labelling becomes a positive group value within their own culture
- isolation from communities hinders re-integration of the young person within their home, school and local community
- young people who receive punitive sentences like custody, feel that society owes them a favour and subsequently less likely to stop re-offending
- residential or custody based sentences are more costly than community based disposals.

Evidence based practice would suggest that intervention at many levels is an effective system for dealing with young people in trouble.

Cognitive behavioural approaches designed to assist young people in accepting rather than avoiding responsibility for their own behaviour. This approach must focus on an integrative needs based programme designed to address all of the prevalent risk factors.

Individual and practical approaches designed to help young people deal with issues such as substance misuse, exclusion, family relationships or coping with stress.

Family or parent strengthening approaches such as parent support groups designed to promote relationships with significant others or community adults who may in turn become peer mentors.

Inclusive community strategies that are solution focused and help make vulnerable community members feel safer.

Involving young people in empowering situations, activity and experiences which help them assess their own strengths and limitations both individually and within groups.

Partnership strategies which look at the family as a whole and then plan appropriately targeted services in consultation with both referrers and families.

Help young people develop social and life skills; which will in turn, help them in their social skills and lead them to gain employment.

Both services work with young people to address their needs in the family, school and community. This is reflected in the range of partner agencies who between them can address issues arising from any of these arenas.

**Comparative costs of custody and community based services in Northern Ireland**

- Average cost per referral for a young person in custody – £19,000.
- Average cost per referral for Armagh and Dungannon Adolescent Partnership – £3,673.
- Average cost per referral for Newry Adolescent Partnership – £3,850.

(Source: Evaluation of Youth Justice Agency Community Services, NIO 2004)

DHSSPS report (Effectiveness Evaluation: health and social care: final report, Nov 02) estimated that average cost per child per day in care is £138 (1999-00).
Service users' views

'At the start of working at the Partnership I thought that it couldn’t help me but then I realised that it could. I think it’s very good. I would recommend it to anyone.’
Teenager aged 14 years old

'I was glad to be part of the parents group at the Partnership; it has learned me to think about how teenagers think and behave. It is great that someone shows an interest in teenagers and when they are in trouble, are there to help, listen and support them. I just wish there were more partnership venues spread around isolated areas for people not so lucky to have the services.’
Mother

'As parents of a young person who experienced a lot of bother with the police as he was involved in shoplifting and causing damage, we know that if it wasn’t for the help he got in the Partnership he would still be involved in this way. The Partnership staff never gave up on him and we knew this was very important to him.’
Mother and father

'I am here because I am not attending school but I am getting help with some problems at Court and to see if I can go back to school. I feel pleased with myself because I am getting a bit of help I need and some education as well. I first felt a bit terrified but then I got to know some of the people in the Partnership and that was great. The Partnership is helping me and like I said I am very pleased with how well I am doing.’
Teenager aged 16 years old

'I think the Partnership has helped me with my problems and with alcohol and a bad temper. I have really enjoyed coming to the Partnership and it has helped me.’
Teenager aged 14 years old

'I have been at the Partnership over different periods for a couple of years. The scheme is a great idea and it’s a pity that there were not more local schemes like this. It’s not just the visible things they do, its work that goes on behind the scenes that really matters. The time and energy that the staff put into place organising outings, calling out at homes of the young people with reassurance for parents that things are OK and that their child matters. It is also the little things, like a simple phone call to see how things are going. Even when the young person has left the scheme the staff never forget them. It is a huge responsibility taking care of other people’s kids but there, people do it everyday and are brilliant at it.’
Mother

Case study

Joe was 15 years old when he was referred to the service following problems experienced in school and his involvement in offending. Joe (not his real name) was engaging in low level offending and had already received a caution. There was also a concern that he was placing himself at risk in the community because of negative peer influences which had the potential for more serious offending. Joe was jointly referred by the Educational Welfare Officer; the PSNI Youth Diversion Officer and his school. A programme was agreed with him and his parents. It included working with one of the teachers linked to the service to improve his educational attainment levels. As a result, Joe gained qualifications in English, Maths, and IT.

Individual work was undertaken that encouraged him to look at the triggers for his offending behaviour. These included alcohol abuse, peer pressure and boredom. Joe was encouraged to explore different methods on how to deal with these triggers and to look at the effects of his offending behaviour on his life, family and community. The individual work also focused on Joe’s social and life skills.

Joe moved to group work and began to participate in a citizenship programme and to undertake a Duke of Edinburgh Award. Both his parents were invited to take part in a Skills of Parenting Programme and Joe’s mother agreed to do so. The programme gave her the opportunity to learn about legislation governing children and parents, substance misuse, parenting skills and how to seek support as a parent. Joe’s mother attended all eight weeks of the course and was positive regarding its usefulness and the benefits of parents supporting each other in dealing with difficulties.

Joe has progressed through an individual needs-led programme and is now embarking on full-time employment and has not become involved in further offending.
Policy recommendations

- The introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders is a punitive step and undermines a restorative and community based approach to dealing with youth offending. Anti-Social Behaviour Orders should not be used on young people under 16.
- Funding should be made available to allow for the further development of community based partnership youth services.
- Northern Ireland longitudinal research on rates of recidivism for young people in custody and those in community based services should be undertaken.
- Government should ensure that the Children’s Strategy reflects and addresses the full human rights of children who are at risk of care or offending.
- Any response to young people who have engaged in offending behaviour should be governed by the principle of the best interests of the child.
- Statutory agencies need to develop a public profile campaign that counters the negative view of young people that is often portrayed in the media.
- The age of criminal responsibility should be raised.

References

Utting, Vennard et al. What Works with Young Offenders in the Community Barnardo’s (2000).
Youth Justice Trust, Young People who are not in Education, Training or Employment (2003).

Barnardo’s Adolescent Partnerships are two of 20 Community Based Partnerships that operate under the auspices of the Youth Justice Agency and are based throughout NI.

For further information, please contact Armagh and Dungannon Adolescent Partnership tel: 028 375 15910 or Newry Adolescent Partnership tel: 028 302 51115