

Collaborative projects on youth crime

Sept 08 – March 09

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council – Case Study

1. Where the project started

Initial Catalyst discussions in Knowsley involved a key group of participants, including the Assistant Chief Executive, Director of Children and Young People's Services, Acting Head of the Youth Offending Service, colleagues from the Crime and Disorder Partnership and external Catalyst facilitators.

These creative discussions revealed a strong desire for the Catalyst project to both add value to their existing youth crime activity, in particular the strong information, evaluation and analysis capacity already in place, and to help further build the innovation capacity of the council as a whole.

There were some key questions they considered as the project was being set up:

- In terms of building innovation capacity, does the current system allow a number of people to collaborate and innovate together?
- How do we secure the active agency of young people in the process?
- Could we tackle perception issues by supporting young people and elected members to work together?
- Can we develop a richer understanding of young people and their behaviours through a focus on qualitative research? In particular, what do we know about resilience factors?

It was agreed the Catalyst in Knowsley would focus on early intervention and prevention. The team wanted to understand why some people young people offend, and some don't, by working specifically with three cohorts of young people:

- First time entrants to the youth justice system
- Young people with an Acceptable Behaviour Contract (ABC)
- Young people who exhibit more entrenched criminal behaviour

The question the project sought to address was:

Will the active participation of young people improve the impact of services to reduce the entry of young people into the Criminal Justice System?

The project would support key corporate priorities and key indicators in the local area agreement - crime prevention and reduction, and tackling anti-social behaviour.

2. Defining success

The Catalyst project was not intended to provide all the answers to youth crime in Knowsley, or on its own lead to redesigned services. Rather, the team set out to explore and encourage new ways of engaging service users to build a clearer understanding of their perspectives and experience, with the aim of contributing towards more responsive and co-designed services.

The intended impact of the project went beyond the field of youth crime. The team was seeking to develop an approach that nurtured innovative practice in Knowsley and that could be used across the Council and its partners to deliver or commission the services that are responsive to community and individual need.

3. Building the right project team

Knowsley quickly established a dedicated, cross-service project team. Securing early support from senior staff and dedicated internal resource ensured the project developed quickly and built momentum. Wide internal engagement early on also built interest for learning from the project as it progressed.

Features of the project team:

- Included representatives from: Crime and Disorder Team, YOS, Participation and Engagement, Policy and Strategy, and Business Development
- Led by Assistant Chief Executive
- Project management resource in the form of Officer time and implementation of effective process

Step-change moments

- Definition of cohort
- Securing support from senior officers
- Establishing a local project team and a project plan
- Agreeing the research approach and focus

4. Researching the key issues and gathering insights

A programme of research was undertaken in order to better understand first time entrants and how to shape services through the active agency of young people and their families. The research explored why some young people do not offend whilst others in similar circumstances do by analysing key factors (role models, geography, day to day contacts, family, psychological profile) and assessing the scope for enhancing some of these factors for potential offenders.

This research questions were:

- What do we know about risk factors, and about patterns that don't follow these?
- What are the specific routes that show most promise in terms of diverting young people, e.g. role of key adults?
- What advice do young people themselves have in relation to crime reduction?
- What lessons can be learned from other cities and countries about reinforcing protective factors?

Desk based research focused on the characteristics of first time entrants in Knowsley, compared to the national trends, and the known risk factors which make young people more likely to offend. Studies from Edinburgh, Copenhagen and the CJS concluded that the most common risk and resilience factors for young people are:

- Schooling
- Parenting and stable home life
- Friendship groups and peers
- Access to appropriate role models

The desk based research also highlighted a range of interventions in place elsewhere to build resilience amongst young people.

These four risk and resilience factors formed the focus of the practical research. Ethnographic studies ('a day in the life of') were conducted with three young offenders. These were backed up by interviews with young offenders and YOT workers (held by the Catalyst team) and a focus group with young offenders (led by the Knowsley engagement team).

Significant findings included:

- Young offenders were often truants, some with attendance rates of less than 33 per cent
- Few young offenders felt a sense of achievement at school, or that they ever would
- Many young offenders come from vulnerable and rapidly changing family circumstances
- Many have strong relationships with their mothers and extended family
- None of the young offenders would describe themselves as being in a gang, but they do hang around in groups – some offend together, they never hang out in places with bad lines of sight, they are very conscious of territory, they often carry weapons and they are fearful of other groups
- Some young offenders have offended for the first time because they are easily influenced
- Many value the relationships they have with authority figures (including YOT workers and mentors)

5. Moving from research to design

A service design workshop was held with 20 policy makers and practitioners to digest the findings of the research phase and develop potential interventions. The potential service change ideas were:

Idea #1 – Mentoring: Provide one-to-one, consistent mentoring and coaching for primary school age children.

Idea #2 – Social cohesion framework: Design a social cohesion framework with gateway criteria to be used in all decisions affecting children and young people.

Idea #3 – Connecting young offenders: Enable older young people (possibly ISSP) to share their experiences with first time entrants.

Idea #4 – Personal development programmes: Build confidence and self-esteem through personal development programmes, e.g. which are issue based, address risk behaviour, etc.

Idea #5 – Mediation: Establish mediation between teachers and young people so they can share perceptions and develop a mutual understanding of issues.

Idea #6 – Early assessment: Undertake early assessment of literacy and numeracy abilities... before young people reach the point of no return.

Idea #7 – Holistic approach: Identify needs in the family – take a holistic approach – and offer appropriate support, e.g. mentors for parents.

The Catalyst team in Knowsley are planning to continue the service design phase of the project beyond March in order to appropriately respond to the research, take time to do further research if required, and to engage the right group of people in developing initial ideas.

In particular, the ideas for new services and service improvements for young offenders and potential young offenders, developed by the YOS and engagement professionals, will be reflected upon and further developed by young offenders.

6. Planned next steps

As well as continuing the design phase, the team in Knowsley have committed to:

- Reviewing the commissioning process and how it relates to services targeted at those at risk of entering the Youth Justice System in particular giving consideration to trigger points and young peoples' resilience
- Continuing to engage with a range of young people specific to particular services
- Through the democratic process to review how information from young people is used to influence service design/delivery
- Explore an innovation model in Knowsley informed by the Social Innovation Lab for Kent (SILK)