

Kicking the habit



Young people will be 'required' to attend drug treatment as part of a community sentence under plans by the Government which are now being piloted in five police areas. Wendy Moran reports on the scheme in Middlesbrough.

 England has the highest rate of drug taking among 15 year olds in Europe and four times more than those in Greece, Malta, Sweden and Norway, according to research conducted by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

Whilst the Government's high profile pledges will not be realised until after the forthcoming elections, drug treatment and testing requirements as part of an action plan order or supervision order for young people began to be piloted in five areas from 1 December.

Middlesbrough is one of five areas to run the pilot, having successfully piloted the testing of youths charged with trigger offences since November 2003.

Acting Ch Insp Kath Barber, head of drugs strategy in Middlesbrough, has spearheaded the moves to 'nip crime in the bud and make bobbies workload less in the long term.'

Middlesbrough was selected for the pilots as a high crime area with the necessary supporting

infrastructure. Youths make up 584 of the 1,969 people through custody each year. The majority of youth offenders are males aged between 15 and 17.

'We have not had huge numbers of charged youths testing positive for Class A drugs. Since August, five youths have tested positive. The majority are using soft drugs. However, the test itself and support offered, may be a deterrent to young people with high-risk behaviour, progressing onto heroin or crack.'

Ch Insp Barber is confident that the supporting resources, which the federation raised with the Government, are now in place locally. Jan Berry, chairman of the Federation had warned: 'There is no point identifying the problem if robust solutions are not in place. At the moment rehabilitation for drug users over the age of 18 is inadequate. This must be tackled if the cycle of crime is to be broken.'

Many in the field question whether there are enough drugs workers nationally to run the new

services. Although the number employed has risen from 6,790 to 9,670, services find it hard to fill vacant posts and are having to rely on agency staff.

In Middlesbrough, there has been an additional custody officer employed and Ch Insp Barber describes the supporting rehabilitation as effective: 'If a youth is charged on Monday, by Tuesday they should see a youth support worker.'

This has been a subject of controversy. Despite the recent announcement of an extra £200m for community drugs teams, the Government is this year spending £314m on drug treatment accessed through the criminal justice system, compared with £299m for drug addicts who do not commit crimes to feed their habit.

As a result, in some parts of the UK it now appears easier to access treatment through the police station than a GP surgery. 'Depending on where you live it can take two months to get prop-



er help from your community drug team, whereas if you get arrested for a crime you can get help more or less straight away,' said one senior manager, who asked not to be named.

'A policy tied to the criminal justice system demoralises service providers who are forced to work with a hard core of users who don't want to change their behaviour, but do want to avoid going to jail - often precisely so they can carry on using. These issues are discussed within the service, but people are reluctant to speak out because they don't want funding to dry up.'

Jamie Clarke, a criminal justice services manager, employed by Addaction and commissioned by Cleveland Police Service, said: 'In my view, enforced treatment does work. These people wouldn't walk into a service, and it's a loss of a good opportunity if we don't work with them.'

Two full time youth support workers have been employed in Middlesbrough from November and a team leader was appointed in August 2004. The service provides an opportunity for young people between ten and 17 to engage with a worker to address a variety of issues. The success of the scheme has been attributed to their independence of the police.

Of 980 young persons admitted into custody over the first six months, 283 were seen by youth support workers and 119 have been registered as ongoing cases. Drugs is only one of the issues

addressed, the support tackles the causes of crime including education, boredom, aggressive behaviour, family and peer pressure.

Mr Clarke, believes that supporting resources are adequate: 'That's not to say we would not mind another support worker but I do believe it's the management of resources that makes Middlesbrough effective. It is a juggling act by no stretch of the imagination.'

Most of the national drugs charities are sceptical. They are virtually unanimous in their belief that the Government proposals lack real vision and commitment. The Drugs Bill, says social care charity Turning Point is more posturing than policy. Drug service managers fear that this could lead to overstretched services being flooded with recreational drug users. 'We're not here to deal with lots of people who use drugs at the weekend and lead normal lives,' says Ricardo Woods, who manages Turning Point's drug treatment programmes in North London.

Addaction, which runs 73 drugs programmes across England and Wales, including drug referral schemes and drug prevention programmes, says that a lack of housing is the reason its efforts to get people off drugs are often scuppered: 'It's all very well getting a methadone script or counselling but if you're living in a hostel where everyone else is taking drugs it's difficult to sustain treatment,' says a spokesperson.

According to the Audit Commission, of the offenders who received a drug testing and treatment order (DTTO) in 2003 requiring them to undergo treatment instead of custody, only 28 per cent completed the programme.

'Treatment programmes have to be radically revamped, including linking them to housing, education and employment schemes which will have a long-term impact on drug users' says Turning Point's chief executive Lord Victor Adelbowale.

The Government argues that its Drugs Intervention Programme (DIP) which from April will be expanded to a further 23 areas, is proving a way out of crime for thousands of drug using offenders each month. Announcing the measures, former Home Secretary Mr Blunkett said: 'Crime in these 66 DIP areas is going down faster than the rest of the country. For example in Bradford crime has fallen 33 per cent and in City and Holbeck, in Leeds crime has fallen 32 per cent.'

Middlesbrough's DIP has five dedicated staff, plus two arrest referral workers and a court worker. 'They meet people coming out of prison, pick people up for appointments and support family and training needs long after someone has finished a DTTO,' says local DIP manager Mary Edwards. This explains, she says, why 80 per cent of the 170 clients who have entered treatment since April 2003, are still there.



The package of measures includes:

- The Drug Intervention Programme will be expanded to 32 new areas from April 2005, so that by 2008 around 1,000 offenders will be entering treatment each week through this route.
- Routes into treatment for vulnerable young people will be expanded by requiring young offenders to attend drug treatment as part of a community sentence. This will be piloted in five areas from the beginning of December.
- This will be supported by a raft of new legislation on drugs, including:
- Giving police powers to test for drugs on arrest rather than charge, so that more people who commit crime to finance their drug habit can be directed into treatment earlier;
- Introducing a new presumption that those caught in possession of more drugs than reasonable for personal use are guilty of intent to supply rather than possession for personal use;
- Making dealing near a school or using children as couriers an aggravating factor for sentencing so drug dealers found guilty of this would face a tougher penalty;
- Making unreasonable refusal to consent to an intimate body search count against the suspect in court;
- Giving magistrates the power to remand into police custody for up to a further 192 hours those who swallow drugs in secure packages in an attempt to hide the evidence, until it becomes available again;
- Issuing a drug counselling order along with an anti-social behaviour order to deal with drug-misusing jobs; and
- Amending the Anti Social Behaviour Act to give police the power to enter premises, such as a crack house, to issue a closure notice.