

Revolving doors

Police officers are used to seeing the same faces coming through custody suites but the Drugs Intervention Programme aims to break the cycle of drug addiction. John Dean reports on the scheme in North Yorkshire

Every police officer in the land is familiar with the 'revolving door' syndrome when it comes to drug users. They arrest a user one day then do the same the next. Custody officers, in particular, grow accustomed to the same faces time and time again.

Now, a national project, the Drugs Intervention Programme (DIP), backed by a range of agencies including the police, is trying to change that by guiding users brought into police stations toward experts who can help them break the cycle of drug-taking and reoffending.

The project was launched with £447m of government funding in 2003 for three years, it was extended beyond that period with the amount invested now having topped £600m.

A recently published Home Office report *Tackling Drugs Changing Lives* showed that research into 7,727 offenders revealed that DIP brought about a 26 per cent reduction in drug-related offending. More than half DIP participants recorded a drop in offending of 79 per cent.

One of the places where the programme is proving a success is North Yorkshire Police's area, its results reflecting the national figures in the city of York and the towns of Harrogate, Scarborough, Skipton, Northallerton and Selby.

More than 800 drug users have been helped since the programme opened in 2005, with 180 new offenders signed on in the year to May alone. Supporters include North Yorkshire Police, the courts, the Prison Service, the National

Probation Service and Drug and Alcohol Action Teams (DAATs).

For the drugs workers, the support of the police is absolutely crucial because experienced officers are able to identify those offenders who would benefit from help.

That has certainly been the case in the biggest of the communities, the city of York. Behind the tourist image of stunning architecture, medieval streets and the spectacular York Minster, the city has another, seedier side, one which embroils a significant number of people in the abuse of drugs, particularly heroin.

“Appearing in court does not necessarily address the long-term issues behind their offending. This programme can do that.”

The Fulford Road station in the city is a major supporter of the DIP programme, operating two schemes when offenders are brought into the busy custody suite.

On the first occasion, the offenders are offered a voluntary scheme, whereby they can opt to take part in DIP, which allows them access to a trained drugs worker and a service involving counselling and practical support as they try to wean themselves off drugs.

For someone who does not take the option, and who is brought back for another offence, involvement becomes mandatory, a condition of their entry

into the criminal justice system. Police are keen to make clear that DIP is not a soft option and that it does not replace police cautions and court appearances. However, officers can see the benefits of trying wean users off drugs.

Insp Angela Carroll, administration of justice inspector at Fulford Road, whose job includes running the custody suite, said: “Offenders’ involvement with DIP begins with police officers. In the custody suite, they are able to identify those individuals coming before them who they believe have drugs issues and who they feel are appropriate to be referred to the programme.

“It is important that custody officers can recognise the people they believe would benefit from this approach. What we are trying to do is make a difference to these people’s behaviour and break the cycle of their offending.

“Appearing in court does not necessarily address the long-term issues behind their offending. This programme can do that.”

Other officers can see the worth in the programme as well. Former custody sergeant Colin Taylor, currently an administrative officer, said: “We have found that, although the custody officer mentions the person to the drug worker, it helps if the drug workers actually make the approach to the offender themselves. It is one step removed from a uniform.

“A lot of the offenders will willingly volunteer to talk to a drug worker because they recognise that they have a problem that is affecting their lives. No one wants to be a heroin addict.”

And colleague PC John Ayres, a response officer at Fulford Road, said: “We do tend to see the same people and the intervention gives them a chance of rehabilitation. If you can catch them early, and get some intervention and education in there, you can give them a chance of breaking the habit.”

According to the government, greater investment in treatment services and other support for people with drug issues has seen the treatment workforce double to 9,000 since 2002.

Martin Weblin, criminal justice manager for the Drugs and Alcohol Team in North Yorkshire and the City of York, said: “The figures show that DIP reduces offending and for a significant number of people the reduction was 79 per cent.

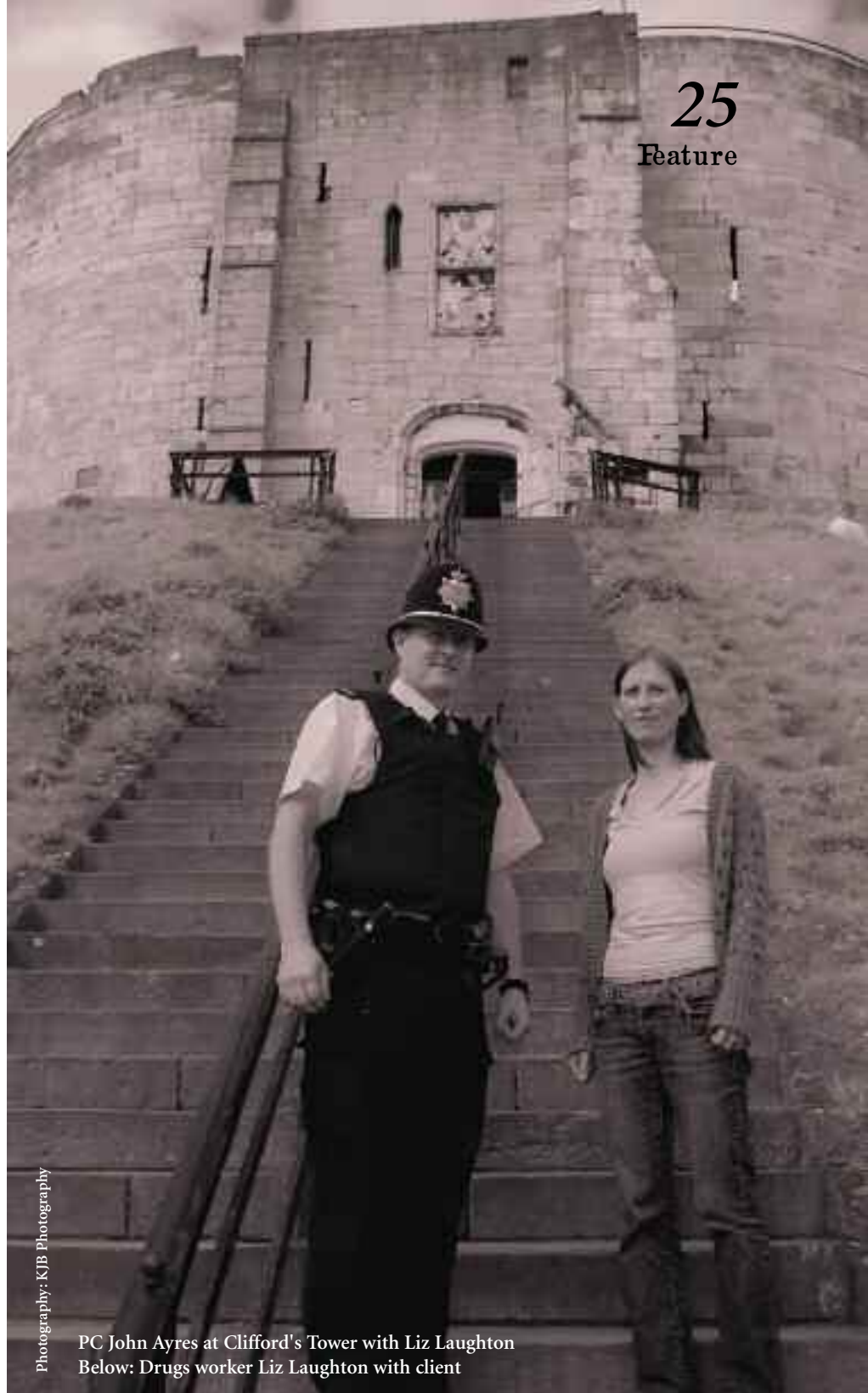
“It is about getting drug users to engage with us and we very much appreciate the role played by the police in identifying those people who could benefit. There has been a lot of co-operation.

“One of the benefits of identifying people in the custody suite is it helps if you engage offenders early on. If you engage them early on, there are tremendous benefits for society.”

Criminal Justice worker Liz Laughton, who specialises in dealing with drugs offenders, agrees. She is one of three drugs workers who spend a lot of their time seeing offenders brought into Fulford Road’s custody suite - offenders on DIP are spoken to in booths close to the custody desk itself.

“Being there is useful because drug users tend always to be dashing around, rushing from offending to fund their habit, perhaps through crimes such as shoplifting, to selling the items to make the money to buy the drugs and then taking the drugs. It is a chaotic lifestyle. “Having them in the custody suite gives us an opportunity to see them when they are more attentive. Also, they are often quite happy to come and talk to us because it gets them out from the four walls of a cell,” she says.

Away from getting people off drugs, another important part of the programme is approaching potential employers on behalf of rehabilitated offenders which, she says, is crucial.



Photography: KJB Photography

PC John Ayres at Clifford's Tower with Liz Laughton
Below: Drugs worker Liz Laughton with client

