

Art-based diversion project – We’ve Got HeART

An exhibition by artists suffering substance addiction to increase engagement and referrals to drug recovery services within the hostel community.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Evaluated locally
Purpose	Diversion
Topic	Adults at risk Community engagement Drugs and alcohol
Organisation	Merseyside Police
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Region	North West
Partners	Police Health services Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	October 2022
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Communities General public Offenders Victims Workforce

Aim

- to prevent crime and reduce harm and vulnerability by addressing substance addiction through increased engagement with hostel residents
- to reach residents who were previously unwilling to engage with support services using the residents' interest in art workshops

Intended outcome

- increase hostel resident referrals to the local drug support service, chance, grow, live (CGL), for treatment for their addiction
- help residents address their addiction
- reduce crime
- reduce demand at hostels

Description

Problem background

From 2020 to 2021, local policing officers in Wirral embedded themselves within hostel facilities and worked closely with hostel providers, residents and CGL Wirral. This was in response to high prevalence of substance addiction among hostel residents. This high level of substance addiction was a facilitator for the high crime, high harm (HC/HH) nature of the hostels.

Owing to the closer working relationships generated by the increased contact, a hostel management and development group was created by the police, hostel providers and CGL. This was complemented by an information sharing agreement.

To begin with, officers intensified their referrals of hostel residents to CGL for treatment for their addiction. As a result of this, an OSARA (objective, scanning, analysis, response, assessment) model analysis detailed a reduction in crime and demand at the hostels. Moreover, the residents who were willing to engage and accept referrals to CGL were able to show improvements in their personal lives.

However, a problem remained when service users refused referrals to drug support services. These residents did not wish to engage with police or providers, and there was no means to compel them to do so. This left a group of residents in each facility whose behaviour, driven by their addiction, was impacting negatively on staff, other residents, and the wider community. This was becoming unmanageable across the facilities.

Improving engagement

Two project leads at Merseyside Police (at inspector and constable rank) discussed alternative methods to engage with the reluctant hostel residents. The project leads conducted observations within the hostels and discussed options for increasing engagement with all the key stakeholders. One of the project leads noticed that many of the residents who refused any kind of engagement with the police or services were engaging with art workshops in their facilities.

The project leads used this observation to gather ideas about how they could build on the residents' interest in art to increase engagement with them. The objective was to ultimately be able to refer these previously resistant residents to CGL, so they could address the facilitator of the high crime and demand – their substance addiction.

The project leads identified the need:

- for preventative work, with a greater emphasis on increased engagement and building of trust among hostel residents to open referral pathways into treatment
- the need to maintain good relationships with partners to support the police and provide a more sustainable approach to reducing crime within the hostel community

This led to the creation of a new project to use art to increase engagement among those previously unwilling to engage. This project was named, 'We've Got HeART'.

Approach

Firstly, the project leads approached the owner of a local art gallery. The owner agreed for the officers to use the gallery for three weeks to run an art exhibition. The exhibition artwork was produced by hostel residents who attended art workshops in their hostels (involving many of the residents who previously refused to engage). The force have also engaged with drug recovery service, 'Change, Grow, Live' along with housing providers to identify suitable and potential artists who were involved in criminality and needed a greater level of engagement to address their addiction to prevent their offending. Offering keen artists an opportunity to have their work displayed in an exhibition was a clear incentive to be involved.

The police sourced £1,500 of funding from Project Adder (government funding for initiatives to divert people away from offending) and purchased art equipment. Presentations were given at hostels and art packs were distributed to residents who wished to take part in the project. The packs included all the equipment required to produce a piece of artwork for the exhibition. They also included information booklets on local support services for substance addiction.

In between sourcing the art equipment and opening the exhibition, the project leads worked with a local college to run art workshops for the hostel residents. These were hosted at the gallery. These workshops helped maintain and develop a relationship with the residents. There was no cost to the police, the local college or CGL for this.

Along the journey from initially producing the artwork to having the work exhibited, the project leads engaged with the artists on a different level to usual. They were able to use this opportunity to refer more of the residents into services. The project leads also invited substance misuse workers from CGL to the workshops. This enabled CGL to directly engage with individuals they found it difficult to contact under usual circumstances.

More than 60 pieces of art were produced and exhibited in the gallery. The opening was attended by local partners, the public and key stakeholders along with the artists. After initially opening for a three week period, this was extended to seven weeks due to the amount of interest in the gallery. After the seven week period in the gallery on Wirral, the exhibition moved to Knowsley, and more specifically within an empty retail premises in Kirkby town centre whereby the local community could enjoy the art and find out more about the project.

Overall impact

All visitors to the gallery were asked to record their thoughts and observations in a visitors' book. This has been typed up and saved electronically. More than 200 comments were left in the book. One of the hostel residents revealed:

I have been clean since taking part in this project. This has shown me that I can be good at something, and I have something to offer – thank you so much.

Hostel resident

Merseyside Police also has case studies from individuals involved in the project. These individuals report seeing the direct benefit of this intervention on addressing their addictions and preventing them from committing crime. The feedback suggests that this intervention works well even for people who do not consider themselves as artists.

Overall:

- the project has received positive feedback from the artists and visitors alike
- there has been a greater number of referrals to CGL – even among some of the most resistant individuals in the hostel facilities
- some artists have continued with artwork beyond the scope of the exhibition, reporting that it's given them a way to divert from crime
- those residents willing to engage and accept referrals to CGL have been able to show improvement in their personal lives
- the project has received significant interest and was reported via social media and local media channels. Following this exposure, it was identified by BBC's Crimewatch live. Crimewatch invited the project leads onto the programme to discuss the project to a national TV audience

- the exhibition was extended longer than planned, from three weeks to four. This was due to the levels of exposure and demand of people wishing to see the artwork and hear more about the project
- other police forces have expressed an interest in the project and how they can look to focus on prevention in the same way – that is, problem-solving a lack of engagement among a particular group
- project leads are planning to make We've Got HeART a force-wide project for a future exhibition
- Following on from the initial scheme in 2023, 2024 saw "We've Got HeART" run again on the Wirral area but also expand to include Knowsley

In the last 12 months the force have conducted some analysis of the individuals who took part in the project with regard to their offending patterns pre and post engagement in this project.

The force separated the participants into three distinct groups, low, medium and high based upon offending history prior to the project. Merseyside Police were able to see if the project had led to a reduction in offending, and which group the project had the least impact or most positive impact upon.

Learning

The uptake and support from the local and wider community has been crucial for the success of this project.

The use of analysis and a degree of tracking the progress of the artist post-project is essential. In this case, the force noticed that some of the artists were compliant and were stable with regard to offending during the project but once the project had finished some clearly lost focus.

The force have suggested with future projects that once the initial project exhibition concludes that further workshops are conducted to bridge the gap and retain focus until the next project commences.

Consider availability for artwork sales

As soon as the artwork was submitted, it became apparent that some of the artists had produced exceptional pieces of art. It was not possible to anticipate the excellent quality of artwork produced, so there had been no provision built into the project planning for members of the public to purchase

the art.

This scenario has since been discussed. It has been acknowledged that there may be risks around selling the artwork and providing the artists with the proceeds, as this may ultimately feed the addictions that they are in recovery for.

An alternative suggested solution has been for the artists to agree for their artwork to be sold on their behalf by the police. Any money raised could be given back to local charities that conduct substance recovery work and help the homeless. The theory behind this is that the artists then directly contribute to solving the problems they themselves may have experienced. This is still under consideration for future exhibitions.

Use a multi-agency approach to improve inclusion among the hostel community

Although the initial focus of the project was around substance addiction within the hostel facilities, the project leads were inclusive of all hostel residents for involvement in the project. For example, hostel residents who had not experienced substance addictions but did have mental health issues and wanted to produce a piece of artwork were also included in the project.

As the focus of the project was to refer the artists to support services around drugs, the project leads had not factored in one-to-one engagement with mental health services. Where these issues were encountered, traditional referrals to mental health services were submitted rather than the face-to-face offerings given to those with substance addictions.

The learning from this is to factor in a multi-agency approach. Drug support services, alcohol support services, and mental health services could jointly engage in the project to capture those hostel residents requiring support from a variety of support services.

Best available evidence

Currently, the [crime reduction toolkit](#) does not include best-available evidence on using art exhibitions to engage people with addictions in substance support programmes. It does include the best-available evidence on:

- [drug courts](#)
- [drug substitution programmes](#)

- [focused deterrence strategies](#)
- [brief interventions for alcohol use disorder in criminal justice settings](#)
- [halfway house programmes](#)

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