

Using art to address substance misuse in Birkenhead

Published on 28 November 2023 Written by Inspector Alan McKeon, Merseyside Police

Practice note: We've got HeART

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As the Community Sergeant for Birkenhead town centre, I identified the high level of substance misuse among residents of the hostel facilities in the area as the driver of the high levels of crime and harm. Working with the local drug recovery service and the hostel providers, an information sharing agreement and management group were initiated to coordinate our efforts to refer the hostel residents into treatment and address the cause of their offending.

Although this approach led to a significant reduction in crime and demand in and around the hostel of around 60%, the management group noted that there were some residents who remained resistant to working with drug support services and they were sometimes also linked to criminality. As residents cannot be compelled to address their addiction, we questioned how we could work with them to address the cause of their lack of engagement.

Working with Constable Diane Park, who became the point of contact for the hostels, it was identified that some of the more difficult to engage residents were taking part in art classes and this might provide an opportunity to use art to increase engagement. The idea of working with a local gallery owner to run an art exhibition showing artwork by the hostel residents was mooted as an incentive to increase engagement with drugs, alcohol and mental health services.

Planning and resourcing

Using £1,500 of funding from Project Adder, a national programme of coordinated law enforcement activity to divert people away from offending, art equipment was purchased. Participants were provided with the equipment needed to produce a piece of artwork and were given a range of options including pencils, pastels, oil paint, acrylic paint, felt pens or anything else they wanted to create their artwork.

Workshops were run in the gallery with local artists, who passed on their skills to participants (now prospective artists). We attended the workshops with substance misuse workers to maintain consistent engagement and support the artists to address their addictions while exploring their creativity.

Exhibition

The exhibition was launched in February 2023 and was called 'We've Got HeART' with over 60 pieces of art displayed.

All art was produced by hostel residents who had experience of substance addiction. Artwork included abstracts, landscapes, self-portraits, tattoo-style designs and all using different mediums. One resident submitted a poem he had written himself and we displayed this framed in the exhibition.

Many of the artists had been resistant to engage with police and support services. We've Got HeART helped break down barriers using art as a new method of introducing the engagement away from victim or offender-based contact.

Impact

The exhibition gained traction and we presented it on the BBC1 Crimewatch Live programme. This generated huge interest from the public and other police forces keen to find out about what we'd learnt from using art to increase engagement and prevent crime. A visitors' book left in the gallery received over 200 comments, many from visitors who were suffering with addiction and had been inspired by We've Got HeART to seek help. The local policing team has maintained contact with the artists, many of whom have transformed their lives having engaged with drugs, alcohol and mental health support services.

In 20 years of operational policing, this has been the most rewarding piece of work I have been involved in. It has demonstrated the importance of preventative work to reduce harm in our communities. We've Got HeART enabled us to engage not just with the artists but also the visitors to the gallery. They were keen to share their personal stories with us and had often experienced addiction or had family members who had suffered similarly. We've Got HeART has enabled us to

drive cultural change. The artists were seen as being part of the problem in our area and now they are perceived as being part of the solution to preventing crime.

- This article was peer reviewed by Police Constable Liam Green, Lincolnshire Police.

- [Read a full write-up of this project by Merseyside Police in our practice bank](#)

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