

The synergy project – engaging with high-risk young people to reduce offending

A partnership-based approach that supports high-risk young people through a structured five-day programme of activities designed to build confidence and reduce offending behaviour.

First published
10 August 2026

Key details

Stage of practice	Independently evaluated
Purpose	Reoffending
Topic	Assault and violent crime Public protection, safeguarding and vulnerability Offender management
Organisation	Wiltshire Police
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2025–27 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: An inspection of Wiltshire Police
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Region	South West

Key details

Partners	Police Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Fire and rescue service Local authority
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	July 2024
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people

Aim

The aims of the synergy project are to:

- develop young people's skills including communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving
- build trust and confidence between young people, the police, and partner agencies
- support young people's positive decision-making and divert them away from offending behaviour
- deliver a coordinated multi-agency intervention through strong partnership working

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the synergy project are to:

- reduce reoffending rates among participating young people
- reduce the number of recorded incidents involving participants
- improve the identification of high-risk individuals
- increase the number of positive interactions between young people, the police and partner agencies

- improve young people's engagement in education, training or employment
- increase the number of young peoples who self-report improvements in confidence, communication, teamwork and leadership skills
- increase the number of young people engaging with post-programme support and early intervention services

Description

The synergy project was developed following consultation with young people involved in the Youth Justice Service (YJS). Feedback from the consultation indicated a preference for a practical, interactive, and engaging programme. Many participants also reported having had negative experiences with agencies such as Wiltshire Police.

Planning process

The planning process was undertaken by Wiltshire Police and the YJS, with input from parents and carers. The YJS identified between eight and 10 young people, aged 13 to 17 years old, based on assessments of risk and vulnerability, alongside obtaining consent and completing risk assessments with families.

Wiltshire Police are responsible for implementing the synergy project, including:

- partner inputs
- safeguarding and logistics
- scheduling activities

The project is delivered through a multi-agency partnership approach and includes the following teams and organisations:

- neighbourhood policing teams
- youth and early intervention teams
- YJS
- Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service
- British Army

Additional inputs can be provided by departments within Wiltshire Police headquarters.

Implementation

The synergy project is delivered as a five-day programme, across a two-week period. The programme includes:

- day one – introductions at Wiltshire Police Headquarters, featuring interactive scenarios with specialist units such as the dog unit, armed response and roads policing, alongside team-building events such as paintballing
- day two – hosted by the British Army at Tidworth or Warminster Garrison, involving assault courses, team icebreakers, and marksmanship on laser ranges
- day three – activities delivered by Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service at Swindon or Salisbury Fire Stations, where participants use hydraulic tools to rescue simulated casualties from road traffic collisions
- day four – medical and first aid training, often led by street doctors or helicopter emergency medical service staff, covering topics such as alcohol, drugs, and stab injuries, alongside water rescue exercises
- day five – a final team-building activity such as Free Dog Swindon, followed by a celebratory lunch and awards ceremony attended by parents, carers, and staff

Each child is assigned a dedicated police officer or police community support officer who participates in the programme alongside the young person. Using staff who are present during the course is intentional, as it ensures relationship consistency and builds on the trust established during the intensive five-day intervention.

Programme delivery requires close coordination with partner agencies to design and deliver practical sessions. Risk assessments are completed for all participating young people, as well as for each activity. Each day runs from mid-morning to mid-afternoon, with structured breaks built in to maintain engagement.

Depending on individual circumstances, transport is coordinated through either the YJS or families. Food and refreshments are provided to support engagement, wellbeing, and informal relationship-building between staff and participants. Mobile phones are collected at the start of sessions to minimise distractions.

Progress is captured through photographs and observations, which are shared with families and schools where appropriate. Post-programme support is provided to reinforce positive behaviours and help sustain outcomes achieved during the programme.

Funding and senior management approval

The synergy project received £12,000 from the Home Office Serious Violence Duty grant to fund courses in Wiltshire and Swindon.

The programme is delivered through existing serious violence and partnership governance structures, with oversight from senior leaders across policing and partner agencies. This oversight helps ensure alignment with local priorities, effective partnership working, and compliance with safeguarding requirements.

Evaluation

An [evaluation](#) was conducted by C J Williams Consulting. This evaluation covers the 2024-25 delivery year, during which four five-day programmes have been delivered:

- three in Swindon (July 2024, December 2024, March 2025)
- one in Wiltshire (February/March 2025)

This evaluation used a quasi-experimental design, tracking longitudinal outcomes for the synergy cohort and utilising several data streams:

- Quantitative behaviour data provided by YJS's performance and insights teams: The data compares police-notified offending and missing episodes from the funding start date against an equivalent period prior to the intervention. This was only available for Swindon course one and Wiltshire course one.
- Participant self-report: pre-course and post-course questionnaires where the young people rate ten core skills on a scale of 1-10.
- Qualitative staff feedback: formal debriefs and observations from Wiltshire Police and partners.
- Limitations: the small cohort size (each course had a maximum of eight attendees) requires caution when generalising results.

The evaluation results highlighted that the synergy project is particularly effective at reducing volume offending.

Overall impact

The evaluation of the synergy project demonstrates a positive impact on its target cohort, achieving an 84.5% reduction in total offending volume, from 206 to 32 incidents.

Findings by course

- Swindon course one, July 2024 – there was a 90.3% reduction (175 to 17) in offences committed, with all seven participants reducing their offending.
- Swindon course two, December 2024 (pre-course and post-course questionnaires only) – leadership, new challenges, and communication showed the largest increase in scores.
- Swindon course three, March 2025 (pre-course and post-course questionnaires only) – new challenges, leadership, asking for help and confidence showed the largest increase.
- Wiltshire course four, February to March 2025 – there was a 52% reduction (31 to 15) in offences committed.

Learning

What went well

- Group sizes – the consensus among staff is that groups of eight to 10 young people is the optimum size, ensuring adequate supervision and engagement without placing undue pressure on resources.
- Smaller workstreams – participants were notably more likely to engage when split into smaller groups or rotating activities, allowing stronger individual relationships to develop between the young people and professionals.
- Informal bonding – downtime periods, such as shared lunches or transport in the minibus, were cited as vital for breaking down barriers. Lifts in smaller vehicles provided valuable opportunities for one-to-one conversations, helping staff to develop a better understanding of the young people's needs.

Challenges

- Digital distractions – access to mobile phones and vaping were identified as primary barriers to engagement. Staff observed that engagement levels increased significantly during the Army day,

largely because access to mobile phones was restricted.

- Staff consistency – staff identified consistency as a key factor in building positive relationships. Frequent changes in personnel were seen as a barrier to developing the level of trust required for participants to feel safe disclosing traumatic experiences
- Activity sequence – feedback suggested that high-intensity activities, such as paintballing, should be scheduled later in the programme rather than on the first day. Staff noted that some participants who initially held negative perceptions of the police used the activity as an opportunity to target officers, rather than engaging with it as a team-building exercise.

Advice for others

- Age-appropriate – review the cohort age range to ensure participants are grouped appropriately and to prevent older young people from feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed when placed with significantly younger participants.
- Long-term metrics – continue to track cohorts at 12 and 18 month intervals to the sustainability of desistance as the young people transition out of the YJS.
- Expand the programme – to a six-day format to prevent the young people from becoming exhausted by the intensive physical nature of the course.
- Introduce pre-meets – implement a mandatory "pre-meet" two weeks before the course to alleviate participant anxiety.

Best available evidence

The [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#) currently includes best available evidence on [police-initiated diversion for young people](#).

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01/09/2026

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