

The big squeeze

The government is failing to put its money where its mouth is when it comes to steering young people away from problem drug use. **Andrew Brown** and **Hajra Mir** on the impact of controversial cuts on drug education and prevention projects.

INSTANT IMPACT: HOW THE FIELD IS FEELING THE CUTS

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The Young People Substance Misuse Grant (YPSMG) is a pooled cross-departmental grant, managed by the Home Office. The grant is used by DATs and their partners in children's services, alongside mainstream resources, to deliver a range of interventions, targeting vulnerable young people and where necessary providing specialist treatment before problems escalate in line with the *Every child matters: Young people and drugs* strategic guidance published in 2005.

The grant will total £55.2 million in 2007/08, down by roughly 10 per cent from £61.8 million in 2006/07.

In March 2007 DrugScope received feedback from its members on the impact the reduction of the grant is having on local young people services.

Here are some examples:

- An award-winning project in Brighton has had to "substantially" scale down its service for children of substance misusing parents. The service provides individual and group therapy to over 40 children and young people a year. They have been given one year's 'slippage' funding and a target of working with only 25 children this year. If it cannot raise any further funds, the service will close in April 2008.
- In Kent a number of services are at risk, including all targeted prevention services for looked-after children, children of substance misusing parents, young offenders and young people excluded from school. For example, the Drug Intervention and Support Programme, an alternative to exclusion and prosecution for over 300 young people, is at risk.
- In Bristol, an early intervention service which places a drug worker in every secondary school and pupil referral unit, will cease between 2008-09. It delivers weekly confidential help in term time, alongside out-of-term work with 10-16 year olds.

Incoming Prime Minister Gordon Brown last month made it clear that he sees drug education as playing a vital role in the next drug strategy. He told the ACPO annual conference in Manchester that he wants primary schools to find ways of talking to their pupils about the harms that drugs can do.

Yet Brown's statement of intent, laudable though it is, sits uncomfortably with what is actually happening on the ground. In February, almost out of the blue, the government announced that there was to be a 10 per cent reduction in the young people's substance misuse grant.

The loss of £6 million was explained by a government spokesperson as being down to the "stabilisation" of young people's drug taking. However, while any decline in the numbers of young people being harmed by their use of drugs is welcome, we know that young people in the UK are still amongst the heaviest users in Europe. One DAAT co-ordinator said: "We are told that we must ensure mainstream funding picks up this deficit but of course there is little chance of this while mainstream budgets are under pressure. Drug education in schools is pretty non-existent and will clearly get worse."

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But even before this set of cuts, there had been changes afoot that hit hard on attempts to educate our children about drugs. In 2004, when the ring-fencing of money to support school drugs advisors was stopped, we warned that this was likely to lead

to a reduction in the numbers of people supporting drug education in schools. The following year when we surveyed DAATs for the first time, we were told eight out of 24 were already seeing that change of policy impact.

Last year we again raised the issue with Ministers in the Home Office, Department of Health and DfES, pointing out that DAATs have had their budgets for drug education and prevention cut and that the tightening of NHS budget control had also impacted on drug education and prevention in many areas where Primary Care Trusts had decided not to fund *Choosing Health* initiatives. The response that came back stressed that the government saw decisions around the level of support for frontline drug education services as being for local authorities to make.

In the next few weeks the government will start consultation over the next drug strategy. We hope it will be an opportunity for Gordon Brown to send a signal to local commissioners that drug education remains a central plank of what they should be supporting – at primary school level and further up the education ladder, in both formal and community-based programmes.

We hope it will also be a signal to schools and out of school providers that drug education is important for us as a community and that they should use mainstream budgets to invest in the development of their staff and the resources they access in delivering drug education.

■ **Andrew Brown** is the Coordinator of the Drug Education Forum, the umbrella body for national organisations committed to improving the provision of drug education in England.
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- In Devon, a service delivered mainly to groups in schools and other venues as well as one-to-one work, is closing down. This is a huge blow for young people in parts of Devon, but also for the establishments and agencies who refer to the service and gain benefit from it. This is compounded further by the fact the service was not officially notified by the DAT of the decision to close down, resulting in two members of staff not being served a proper notice, thus incurring additional costs and making it difficult to efficiently close down the service, inform everyone affected in a timely manner and try to reconfigure other services effectively to minimise the impact.
- In Cheshire the cut has directly resulted in the decommissioning of the Cheshire Young People's Substance Misuse Arrest Referral Service and the reconfiguration of their Looked After Children Substance Misuse Service.
- The timing of the cut poses significant issues in managing the contract process within the voluntary sector, according to one DAT boss in the South East. She said: "The announcement has seriously undermined the process of engaging with voluntary sector providers and has forced this DAT into breaking our code of practice." She said this would

undermine trust with providers and gives insufficient time to develop a robust contingency plan. "With notice and careful strategic planning and negotiation we would have been able to minimise the impact of such a large cut in funding, but the lack of notice means that service cuts are inevitable. This will result in poorer outcomes for young people and will have a devastating impact on service provision, destroying much of the good work that services have constructed in recent years."

- Southampton is working on raising awareness of substance use and has been effective and as a result, demand is increasing for services, in particular from schools for training. The cut will affect ability to respond to these demands when the profile of substance misuse is at its highest. Additionally, *Hidden Harm* is now accepted as a serious issue, but with decreasing resources, makes it difficult to do anything about it.
- In Northamptonshire, the reduced allocation, along with other successive cuts, has resulted in posts being lost, making it difficult to provide appropriate service provision to young people.