

Gunning for the future

ARSENAL joined the Positive Futures (PF) programme, a national social inclusion drive which uses sport to engage with excluded young people, in January 2004. Through the project's full time worker and two part-time staff, the north London club began to engage young people on local estates which had been targeted as areas in need of 'diversionary activities'.

The young people on these estates were offered football activities as a way of building trusting relationships with PF staff. Once they were attending these sessions on a regular basis, they were formed into teams and then began to compete in an Arsenal Positive Futures League. "As you can imagine, there are territorial issues when young people mix with others from different estates and areas," says Hudson. "We tackled this initially by inviting the teams to the club's sports centre to compete in friendly matches. As a neutral facility this worked well and to date, we have not had any problems. The matches have been played in the right spirit and we have been pleased with the response."

EDUCATION

As well as the general estate activities the project is working closely with two local education projects – the Complimentary Education Centre and Project 16 – to engage those that have encountered difficulties with mainstream education. This has provided motivation for pupils and staff alike. Incentives and rewards for attendance, achievement and behaviour have proved to be a useful way of focusing the pupils. Both projects have benefited from visits to Arsenal matches where they have competed in penalty competitions with the winners presented with medals in front of the Highbury crowd. Together the local Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) and PF staff are exploring how best the PF work can compliment the drug screening that the DAAT is delivering at Project 16. In September, completing the range of provision for those excluded from mainstream school, the scheme will start working with the area's Primary Pupil Referral Unit.

Arsenal PF staff have attended Level 1 drug awareness training organised by the DAAT and there are plans for the key worker to go on to level 2 training. Through the DAAT, Arsenal has good links with local drug services and some activities have received visits from their outreach workers. "But taking this forward is not easy," says Hudson. "Addressing issues surrounding drug misuse with young people that come along to a football activity requires a sensitive approach. Establishing trust with a young



Eye on the ball: football offers a diversion from drugs

person is essential if this is to work."

Positive Futures recently developed a government scheme aimed at 16 to 19-year-olds called 'Entry 2 Employment'. This is in partnership with Springboard Islington – a major training agency within the borough – Islington Drug and Alcohol Action Team, Islington Youth Offending Team and Islington Anti Social Behaviour Team. Springboard has funded a full-time post to target a group of around 20 16 to 19-year-olds who will be referred to the project from partner

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Arsenal Football Club are one of the biggest names in world football. As the club celebrates 20 years' work in the community, Freddie Hudson, Arsenal's Senior Sports Development Officer, tells Harry Shapiro, how the club is diverting young people away from social exclusion and drugs



agencies. Participants will attend a 12-week placement and receive training and relevant qualifications with the aim of accessing employment opportunities or further training and education.

PULLING POWER

"We are very grateful," says Hudson, "that the name of Arsenal is a massive attraction to young people in this area. The brand is a magnet and for a project such as Positive Futures a valuable way of engaging young people that would otherwise be difficult to reach." He says a key issue is the quality of staff. "They need to have a passion and feel for this type of work and an understanding of the issues that young people in Islington face, as well as an understanding of their circumstances and needs.

"Young people are people and if somebody shows an interest in them, they

respond," says Hudson. "That's important to remember. If one of our staff say they will do something, whether it is deliver a session or arrange a match, it must happen. Some of these young people may have been let down throughout their lives, by parents, by education and maybe some of the services they have been involved with. If they are promised a game on a Saturday and that game doesn't materialise, it has an impact. It is key that if we say we are going to do something, no matter how small, we do it. Not letting them down is a very big thing.

"We are realistic about the programme and understand that there are many complicated circumstances and pressures that young people have to deal with. But we also recognise that by working together with various agencies the project can have a meaningful impact. Once you are involved in a young person's life, you are hopefully in a position to have some influence over their decisions and their behaviour. For example we have noticed a change in participants' attitudes towards peers, coaches and PF staff. If a young person has a history of flaring up at the slightest challenge and with encouragement, is able to reduce the number of times this happens, then this needs to be recognised and rewarded.

"We are happy to see how the project has grown and at times have to remind ourselves that in Islington, it is still a relatively young scheme. Relationships with project partners and participants are good and we are very excited about a number of initiatives that have either just begun or are about to begin." ■

positive futures >>



THE POSITIVE FUTURES SCHEME

The Arsenal PF programme is led by a steering group made up of Arsenal Football Club, Islington Council and Homes for Islington. Cllr Jyoti Vaja told *Druglink*: "Islington Council is pleased to work with AFC and

local teenagers on Positive Futures. It's a chance to engage with young people at a crucial time in their lives and give them a clear anti-drugs message.

We will also be looking at reaching out to other young people with activities like art, writing and music."



The next issue of *Drug and Alcohol Findings* (number 13) reports on a study of 48 American after school and out of school demonstration projects with important implications for Positive Futures. To subscribe go to www.drugandalcoholfindings.org.uk