

Early intervention and stopping children falling through gaps in services are key elements in the new approach to reducing drug use by young people.

Steve Tippell, Head of Prevention at the Home Office Drug Strategy Directorate, explains the vision and the way forward. Interview by **Harry Shapiro**

Plugging the gaps



STEVE Tippell knows well enough that the genesis of many adult drug problems are to be found in a troubled childhood. Trained as a social worker, he worked for voluntary sector drugs agencies for 13 years before joining the Home Office. "For all the thousands of users I saw when I was working in drug services," he says, "I never saw a happy user. And when you talked to them about their backgrounds, their childhood histories were absolutely horrendous. This was a contributing factor to the problems they were having in adult life."

In April, the government published *Every Child Matters: Change For Children – Young People and Drugs* with the aim of driving progress on young people and drugs. Although reducing young peoples' drug use has always been an aim of the National Drug Strategy, Steve Tippell admits, "the focus has been on adult treatment and linking across from the criminal justice system to get people into treatment".

PATCHY PROVISION

"We weren't really having the impact we needed with young people. When we looked at why that was, it quickly became apparent that there were groups of young people that were more likely to be using drugs than others," says Tippell. But they also found that across the board, provision for young people was patchy: from drug education and social inclusion

programmes like Positive Futures, to appropriate specialist drug services. Within mainstream children's services, basic assessment and screening for drug problems was not consistent, opportunities for early intervention were missed and young people were falling through the net.

The opportunity for some coherent strategic planning was presented by *Every Child Matters* (ECM) arising out of the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié. "On the drugs side," he says, "we looked at ECM as a way of bringing the drug strategy for children and young people – and the developments in children's services – more closely together." But does that just mean more bureaucracy?

"Better outcomes for young people is the key objective but we want things to happen and changes to be made so we do need better accountability. And that starts right at the top. The Public Service Agreement target on young people and drugs is now jointly held by DfES and the Home Office. So immediately we are

How the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* programme links to the Updated Drug Strategy for young people

TO support delivery of the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* programme and the Updated Drug Strategy, the Department for Education and Skills, the Home Office, and Department of Health have agreed a joint approach to the development of universal, targeted and specialist services to prevent drug harm and to ensure that all young people are able to reach their potential.

The approach has three main objectives:

- Reforming delivery and strengthening accountability: Closer links between the Updated Drug Strategy and *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* programme locally, regionally and nationally.

- Ensuring provision is built around the needs of vulnerable young people: More focus on prevention and early intervention with those most at risk, with drug misuse considered as part of assessments, care planning and intervention by children's services.
- Building service and workforce capacity. Developing a range of universal, targeted and specialist provision to meet local needs and workforce training.

The approach is being implemented nationally. All local authorities in England and their partners are expected to make significant progress towards meeting its objectives from April 2005, with more rapid and sustained progress in 30 'high focus' areas.



Tippell: a need for better accountability

making a statement that this is an issue for both departments. The Department of Health is signed up to that as well. From that we set out our vision across the three departments as to how we wanted responses to develop.

NETWORK

“There is a National Programme Board which brings together senior officials from the three departments. They receive reports from the regional government offices. And what we have done there is to establish joint regional teams so that the people dealing with drugs and crime in the regional offices are now working with their colleagues in the NTA, Youth Justice Board, Public Health, Education and Social Services to support and challenge local areas. And at local level we have asked the drug action teams chairs and the new Directors of Children’s Services to come up with joint priorities and targets for how they are going to take forward the young people and drugs agenda. So it is

knitted together right from the top down to the local level.”

The government has identified 30 ‘high focus’ areas across the country to act as the leading edge of the programme.

“I was up in the North East talking to the high focus areas there. And it was a great day. About ten people from each area came together and after the presentations the people from drug services and children’s services were sitting down and working out their action plans. There was tremendous stuff coming out about sharing resources, developing training, better commissioning, how can social services help?, what can we do about communications campaigns?, how to apply experience of YOTs to working with young people in drug services. There was a real sense of energy and commitment. It really seems to have touched a nerve.”

For Steve Tippell, the message is clear for drugs services. “It’s a question of looking up and realising there are big agendas on young people surrounding the drug strategy. There is a key role for specialist drug services but we would also hope to intervene earlier before problems become acute. The field should not see any of this as a threat. Drug services should be looking at the contribution they can make to the whole agenda. For example, services could be working in a more detached, outreach kind of way to make their staff and expertise more available to mainstream generic children’s services. It is all part of the drug field growing up, moving out of adolescence into a more mature integrated way of dealing with problems.”

While the Home Office is clearly committed to taking forward the programme, it is a strategy that deals with children up to 19 years old – therefore including a group some feel are being demonised through the use of ASBOs and bans on hoodies. Is there a tension for the Home Office in trying to support young people while at the time being seen at the forefront of the fight against so-called ‘yob culture’?

“The programme we are putting in place involves the criminal justice system, through YOTs and the Drug Intervention Programme, right back to work with the children of drug misusing parents. We want better drug education, more focussed work with truants, school excludees and other vulnerable groups. It isn’t an ‘either/or’ situation. We want young people to grow up to be healthy, safe, to lead fulfilling lives and not commit crime. I think if we can try and address some of the root issues earlier on, it will not only help us on the drug side, but benefit the wider community and, most importantly, young people.” ■

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Paul Goggins, Home Office minister, on young people and drugs

“Drugs can have a devastating impact on the lives of young people. Reducing their misuse, particularly by the most vulnerable groups, is central to the government’s Drug Strategy. Many areas have made good progress in tackling the problems that drugs can cause. Levels of drug use by young people have stabilised (following significant increases in the 1990s). But they are still too high and there is more work to be done. Working with the Department for Education and skills and the Department of Health, the Home Office is determined to develop more effective services to prevent drug harm and help to ensure that all young people are able to reach their full potential.”

