

THE SKELMERSDALE INFORMATION **SHOP FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

ABSTRACT

In 1996 Inspector Janet Edmondson and I were responsible for policing the community of Skelmersdale.

During our contact with a number of Skelmersdale Residents Associations and meetings such as the Police and Community Forums we received constant complaints concerning the rising amount of crime and nuisance committed by young persons.

Initial scanning showed a high proportion of Juvenile Nuisance, in excess of 2900 reported incidents. Over 500 incidences of auto crime, and 430 burglaries in Skelmersdale during 1995-1996.

I found that in 1996 51% of offenders and 36% of victims of crime in Skelmersdale were under 25 years of age.

Skelmersdale consists mainly of council housing stock and has a high deprivation status. Drug and alcohol abuse amongst the young was openly evident.

My role was to analyse the problem. I found that young people making the transition from school to adult life have to make many choices and surmount many obstacles, to successfully negotiate their path. Without the appropriate advice, advocacy and counselling young people will turn their time and energy to less productive uses and potentially become a nuisance to the community or commit crime.

Information is the key to making informed decisions, this crucial information was not available.

The response to this problem came in the form of a partnership involving agencies that shared the same goals. After much discussion on many possible initiatives we decided upon the formation of 'The Skelmersdale Information Shop for Young People'. A 'One Stop Shop' which would provide young people with a place to obtain information on every aspect that affected their lives.

All involved agencies, including Inspector Edmondson and myself, formed 'The Skelmersdale Information for Young People Association'. Funding, including £10,000 from The Lancashire Constabulary Community Safety Initiative was secured before the shop was opened in February 1998.

Shop outputs include the fact that since February 1998 to May 1999 a total of 5582 young people have visited and sought advice. Between October 1998 and April 1999, 180 persons have required advice on debt. And 516 needed advice on welfare benefit.

There are no on going police costs.

Although impact on external indicators can not be directly attributed to the initiative, it is worthy of note that all crime at Skelmersdale reduced by 17.68% and juvenile nuisance reduced by 21% in 1998 1 1999.

WHAT WERE THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

In January 1996 Inspector Edmondson and I were responsible for the supervision of Community Beat Officers who served the various estates within Skelmersdale.

Skelmersdale is a sprawling domiciliary new town, situated in West Lancashire with a population of about 42,000. Built in the 1960's the town is predominantly local housing stock. It has a high deprivation status

At that time our department was in constant contact with community leaders of the numerous Skelmersdale Residents Associations. It was these people acting on behalf of the residents of Skelmersdale who constantly brought to our attention the suffering and poor quality of life people had to endure at the hands of young people.

So intense were their complaints that scanning took place revealing that in the preceding 12 months over 2900 complaints of juvenile nuisance had been received at Skelmersdale Police Station.

In 1995/96 over 500 incidences of stealing from and of motor vehicles had been reported. There were over 430 domestic house burglaries together with other burglaries reported during the same period.

Gangs of youths, some influenced by either alcohol or drugs would gather in underpasses and in certain areas of local housing estates. If not real, the perceived problem certainly terrified local residents. Parents of young children and the elderly were being prevented from leaving their homes.

Officers would attend reported incidents of nuisance. The young people would be moved on and dispersed. There was a total mistrust of the police by the youth of Skelmersdale. The residents saw an inactive approach by the police and they began to feel let down and isolated.

A long-term approach was required to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

HOW WE DEFINED THE PROBLEM

Young people need information to enable their successful transition to adult life. This process requires that they make decisions which will affect the rest of their lives. The decision making, needs to be an active process where the young person takes control, however, this can often become a passive and destructive process, resulting in ill considered choices. Where young people are not able to meet their basic needs, their capacity for controlling other aspects of their lives and making informed and well considered decisions about their future, is drastically reduced.

In Skelmersdale evidence of this reduced capacity was indicated by the fact that 23.2% of the resident population are aged 16-29 against a regional average of 19.7%

The unemployment rate in Skelmersdale was 12.3% some 50% higher than the national rate. 33.1% of those unemployed were in the 16 — 24 age range compared to the national average of 26.9%.

I found that four of the Skelmersdale wards were amongst the top 30 regional youth unemployment blackspots in January 1996. This can relate to the number of young people seen on the streets hanging around the housing estates.

With only 47% of Skelmersdale school leavers in 1996 staying on to take further education, as against over 80% in other West Lancashire areas can give some indication as to why the young people of Skelmersdale are unable to find work.

Approximately 75% of pupils in West Lancashire receive free school meals and with 61% of housing benefit claimants in West Lancashire residing in Skelmersdale. This gives some indication as to the financial constraints placed upon families living in Skelmersdale.

What was particularly of interest to us was the fact that 16% of respondents in West Lancashire did not know where to access information on training and 18% of respondents in West Lancashire did not know where they could access information on options for school leavers.

There were 2008 lone parents registered for benefit in Skelmersdale in February 1996. The high number of lone parents is an indicator that supervision could be lacking.

Analysis revealed that 36% of victims of crime in Skelmersdale were under 25 years of age and 51% of offenders from Skelmersdale during 1996/97 were under 25 years of age.

Our victims, who were in the main residents of Skelmersdale, were complaining bitterly, not only to the Police, but also as it transpired to our friends from other agencies whom we found ourselves working closely with. The newly formed Police and Community Forums were one source in which the community made their feelings of dissatisfaction known. All agencies agreed that to provide a solution to the problem in Skelmersdale we would have to work in partnership.

HOW WE DEALT WITH THE PROBLEM

As a response to the realisation that police enforcement was not a solution. to the defined problem, Inspector Edmondson and I attended a meeting chaired by Mr Jim Humphreys, District Team Manager of Lancashire Youth and Community Services. It was at this meeting that the development of Skelmersdale Information Shop for Young People was suggested.

As well as those mentioned above, other agencies were also represented that evening; -

Stuart Robinson
Mary Walker
Mark Willett

West Lancashire District Council.
Community Volunteers Service.
Career Link.

Deborah Thom	Citizens Advice Bureau.
Paul Prescott	Skelmersdale College.
Peter Rainford	C.V.S.
Pete Cooley	West Lancashire District Council.
Breda McQuillan	Barnados.
Pat Clayton	Health Visitors.
Kevin Hodges	T.P. Training.
Keith Gillies	Youth and Community.
Lorraine Nixon	Employment Service.
Jackie Griffin-Lea	Health Promotion.
Ann Cheetham	Representing the Young People.

We all had ownership of the problem. At that meeting we all became one body and acting in partnership were henceforward to be known as 'Skelmersdale Information Shop For Young People Association'.

A decision was made to develop an 'Information Shop for Young People' in 'The Concourse', a shopping precinct in the heart of Skelmersdale.

In 1996 The Concourse Shopping Precinct was under receivership and on sale in the open market. The receivers submitted figures at that time showing that over 37,000 people walked in and out of The Concourse each day.

There is no doubt that the rents per shop, commencing at £36,000, were so targeted to show an overall profit to prospective purchasers. Unfortunately, for organisations such as ours it meant finding considerable finances each year in order to keep a shop open.

The shop was to provide information, advice, advocacy and counselling to young people aged 14-25 years of age.

It was to be a high quality, high profile resource providing information and support on any issue young people raise. To enable this to be delivered it was to be staffed by trained information workers and volunteers, backed up by a substantial reference section.

Unlike traditional information services, it was to draw upon a 'youth work' philosophy, being person centred rather than problem based. It would promote personal autonomy through a social education approach. Young people would be supported in resolving the issues within their lives. They would not have 'problems' solved for them. They would be ultimately responsible for the successful outcome of their enquiry; they would be empowered, more confident and better able to resolve future issues in their lives.

In those early days the Association had considerable enthusiasm and energy. What we didn't have was any finances. Unfortunately it is a fact of life, however good your intentions, you need money, in this case, several thousands of pounds year after year.

After many meetings with everyone making suggestions of how to raise finances we decided to make application to the National Lottery, which unfortunately proved unsuccessful.

In 1996 The Lancashire Constabulary Community Safety Initiative Scheme announced the opportunity for all officers to make bids for money up to £10,000 for worthwhile projects. Inspector Edmondson and I formulated a bid for £10,000 to be used towards The Skelmersdale Information for Young Peoples Shop.

Our bid found approval and we were granted the £10,000 applied for. This was a real boost for the Association. It was the breakthrough we had longed for.

The individuals from the various agencies brought their strengths and skills but to make any future successful lottery bid we realised that the partnership alone was not enough, we needed to show match funding. The £10,000 from The Lancashire Police gave us this and perhaps just as important it gave credibility to our project.

It was not long before other members of the Association came forward with offers. Some were financial but most were for employee's time to staff the Information Shop when opened.

Time went on and more Workshops took place. The plan of action to obtain our goals now had new direction in that we would look to finding funding to build a purpose built 'Information Shop' close to the Concourse and certainly within the town centre.

During progress in securing a venue for the shop we found that we were discovering new contacts, some of which had specialist skills. For example Mr Ben Naylor JP who is a local Architect. Another who joined us had contacts and connections with the Receivers handling the sale of 'The Concourse' and also the prospective purchasers.

Towards the end of 1996, West Lancashire District Council approached a number of voluntary organisations, including our Association, to put forward bids to form part of an overall application by the West Lancashire Economical Forum for Government funding under 'Single Regeneration Budget bids'.

Our application for £390,000 was successful and formed part of a total S.R.B. bid by West Lancashire of £4.5m over a five-year period.

In December 1996 West Lancashire discovered that their Single Regeneration Budget bid had been approved. As a result The Information Shop for Young People Association was allocated its full bid of £390,000. Christmas was indeed a time for celebration and the Association looked forward to fulfilling its dream in 1997.

The SRB bid brought about its own problems. The first being that the monies had to be spent over a five year period. By the third year the bulk of the money would be released for the `Information Shop' to be built. The problem was that the Association had to spend the monies first, then submit quarterly accounts together with proven outputs prior to reimbursement.

Being a voluntary body with little or no funding this was going to be an impossible task without assistance. Again members of the Association came to the rescue. Each turned to their masters for help.

Eventually it was agreed that to facilitate cash flow, arrangements would be made between the Association and West Lancashire District Council, whereby the Council advanced monies to the Association which could then, in turn, pay its debtors and submit invoices / evidence to the SRB financial administration system.

The Association had no intention of waiting three years before opening the `Information Shop'. We couldn't afford £36,000 per annum as rent for a Concourse shop yet the Concourse was the very place to establish a `Youth Information Shop' until we could build a purpose built shop.

Our member with connections to the new Concourse owners worked on this aspect and eventually managed to secure a nominal rent of £2,500. per annum.

Applications, through the normal channels were made and we secured charitable status.

After almost 18 months of hard work, sometimes frustrating, we now felt as if we were close to fulfilling our ambition.

Mr Ben Naylor, Architect, put together plans for the `Information Shop' for submission to obtain planning permission etc.

This unfortunately was only the beginning. The work involved in staffing and completion of internal shop construction works seemed endless. Consideration had to be given to such matters as a 'Policy Document' referring to, Confidentiality, Shop Rules, Employment (Terms and Conditions), Equal Opportunities I Discrimination, Security, Health and Safety, Accidents, First Aid, COSHH Regulations, Hazards and so many more.

In December 1997 the shop front was in place. Although there were matters to be resolved Inspector Edmondson and I were now able to spend some of the £10,000 we had been awarded. Office furniture, computer equipment and specialised equipment for the deaf and blind were ordered.

The shop finally opened to Skelmersdale young people in February 1998, some two years since the very first meeting when the decision was taken by the Association to develop a 'Skelmersdale Information Shop for Young People'. An official opening was to follow in due course.

Once the shop was up and running and we were in a position to prove its viability we received funding from many quarters. Much was by way of skilled employment from various agencies to work certain hours in the shop.

£33,500 was secured from the European Social Fund for one year. £2,500 had been secured from the Prince's Trust for advocacy work with young people from the Supported Accommodation Project. £5,000 was secured from West Lancashire District Council.

The official opening of the Skelmersdale Information Shop for Young People took place at the shop on the morning of Friday 18th December 1998. Mr George Howarth MP supported by Colin Pickthall, West Lancashire Member of Parliament and many other dignitaries officially opened it. Representatives of all involved agencies attended. Press and radio stations from Lancashire, Wigan and Merseyside were also in attendance and gave much needed media coverage on the work of the 'Information Shop'. (Appendix 'A' photographs of official opening)

THE SUCCESS OF OUR APPROACH

The `Skelmersdale Information Shop for Young People' looked to achieving two initial goals.

The first was the achievement of actually opening the shop, but more importantly would be to see the young people of Skelmersdale using the facility.

As previously stated the `Youth Information Shop' opened in February 1998. Since that day until May 1999 a total of 5582 young people have visited and made enquires proving without doubt a need.

Samples of other outputs are as follows: -

Access to Health Service

This heading would include such matters as, pregnancy testing, H.I.V. testing and counselling etc. Over 900 young people have been seen since February 1998.

Crime Prevention Initiatives

Nine crime prevention sessions, each involving different aspects of crime prevention have been held. 91 young people have attended the various sessions over the past 12 months.

Legal Servicing,

This category would involve enquiries into such matters as benefit checks, (solicitors' charge £100. Free to young people using the shop). Community Care Grants, housing and homelessness.

From October 1998 to April 1999 the following legal advice has been given: -

- 516 welfare benefit enquiries.
- 458 housing advice enquiries.
- 180 debt enquiries.
- 397 employment enquiries
- 87 others.

The shop estimates that it has saved expenditure totalling £88,000 in legal fees for young people.

All crime in Skelmersdale reduced from 2975 complaints in 1997/98 to 2449 in 1998/99 a 17.68% reduction. (Actual figure).

Juvenile nuisance reduced in Skelmersdale from 2751 in 1997/98 to 2168 in 1998/99 a 21% reduction.

OTHER INFORMATION

Every attention was paid to aspects of confidentiality. The shop had to arrive at an agreed system of collating and storing of data which could clearly specify who is to have access and would safeguard against access by others.

Records had to provide sufficient detail to:

Quantify the nature and extent of the use of the service.

Describe the characteristics of the young people using the service.

Identify the outcomes of help given.

Allow emerging needs to be identified and backed up statistically.

Identify the training needs of workers.

Targets needed to have quantitative and qualitative analysis of our Service.

A 'Research Role' was put in place, in brief, the needs and ideas of young people are constantly changing, together with the opportunities for meeting these needs and developing the ideas. This assumption of change is based on the fact that, by its very nature, 'growing up' involves physiological and psychological change and all this within a world of increasing mobility, changing work patterns and the reconsideration of a whole range of social expectations and responsibilities.

Research programmes, which seek to discover the nature and extent of changing needs and opportunities are vital in order to test the validity of the shop's provision and also to keep informed the Policy and Planning Sub Group.

This is not the end, but the beginning. I believe that the work of the Association will ensure that the 'Information Shop' goes from strength to strength, helping young people to make the right decisions in life and as a result deflect from involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour.

1999/2000 should see the building of our own shop, doing away with the need to pay out rent, thus securing the future of a Skelmersdale Information Shop for future generations.

Neither one agency nor one individual can take credit for this project. It is the coming together of like-minded people acting in partnership with vision and energy that now obtain satisfaction in their efforts.

There are no on going police costs.

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SKELMERSDALE INFORMATION SHOP FOR YOUNG PEOPLE OFFICIAL OPENING

