

# Alternative high

How do you replace the buzz of taking drugs with the buzz of achievement? Hindley Young Offender Institution took the brave step of teaching their inmates how to climb, use their initiative – and learn to survive outside.



➤ Last October, professional instructors arrived at Hindley Prison and Young Offender Institution and began to teach a group of teenage inmates how to climb a wall. The idea might seem unlikely, but two months later, staff were celebrating the success of a scheme that has brought new skills and confidence to its participants. Perhaps more significantly, it is opening up opportunities outside prison, to give former inmates a chance of flourishing in the community.

The concept was to combine physical activities with essential life skills, explains Chrissy Hutchinson, group manager for the substance misuse service, who introduced the programme to Hindley, in consultation with youth work consultant Kate Clements.

'Young offenders would be given the opportunity to experience new and exciting activities that would act as a diversion to taking drugs,' she says. 'In addition it would be a basic course equipping them with life skills such as team-building, communication and problem-solving.' Skills would give a strong foundation for other schemes and qualifications, such as first aid and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

The young person's substance misuse service (YPSMS) staff talked to experienced instructors at Hill Climb Activities to design a programme of outdoor pursuits. The activities needed to be challenging, with the purpose of giving the participants an 'alternative high'. Instead of relying on substances, they would feel the adrenaline rush of taking a calculated risk, or achieving an unexpected goal.

'Young people are natural risk-takers. They have little sense of their own mortality,' says Graham Smith, Hindley's principal officer for whose role includes co-ordinating work with the voluntary and community sector. Activities would give them the skills to assess risk, make judgements, and consider possible consequences – transferable skills that would stand them in good stead in the outside world.

The programme is also designed to link to other initiatives – the government's 'Youth Matters' agenda, which advocates providing young people with 'things to do, places to go'; the Youth Justice Board's requirements that they are helped to find positive leisure interests within the Resettlement and Aftercare Provision (RAP) system; and 'Positive Futures' activities, being piloted within some youth offending institutes. So whatever the individual experiences and 'highs' for those involved, it also fitted with the strategic direction of the institute.

The course was set for half a day a week over eight weeks, with each session lasting two hours. When Andy Hill and Innes MacDonald arrived with climbing equipment – including an eight metre portable climbing wall – they found some of the lads nervous about the task ahead. After the mandatory health and safety instruction, they were taught how to scale the wall.

In the second week, Paul Hunterdale arrived to introduce problem-solving activities, supported by Innes MacDonald, and by Jenny Evans from the substance misuse team. The 16 young people were divided into two teams, to play team-building games. Each team had to complete six challenges as efficiently as possible, and with as few errors as they could. Every completed challenge earned points, and used different

skills such as thinking and listening, communication and strength, and groups were moved around the site so they could not see their opponents' tactics.

'Two contrasting teams emerged from the outset,' Jenny Evans observed. 'One team was a very dominant mix of young people, who were all very vocal, all trying to take the leadership role in their own right. The second team was a much quieter group on the whole, but they developed excellent communication skills as they listened to what each individual had to say. Through this they supported each other magnificently.'

A log sheet, which participants completed at the end, encouraged them to think about what they had enjoyed or disliked, as well as the outcome. Some of the lads told Evans, after the event, that they had enjoyed this session even more than the climbing, joining in the challenge and the feeling that 'the race was on'.

Weeks three and seven introduced all the skills for attaining an HSE accredited first aid certificate. The course covered conscious and unconscious casualties, bandaging and resuscitation and taught practical advice on dealing with situations such as asthma attacks, heart attacks and diabetic incidents.

'The benefits of these skills may be obvious in relation to outdoor activities, but from a substance misuse point of view the benefits fall in neatly with the harm minimisation ethos,' comments Phil Stuart of the YPSMS, who supported Andy Hill and Innes MacDonald in delivering the training. 'With the nature of our clients' lifestyle and the risks they put themselves at, the skills they have learnt may help a peer who has used illicit substances.' He added that 'it was refreshing to see them showing genuine benevolence to their mock casualties'.

More advanced climbing skills and rope work followed in week four, when they were noticeably more confident with the whole activity. By week five they were ready to learn the basics of navigation. They were shown a video from the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, taught the basics of map reading with the encouragement of Roz Ashworth from the YPSMS, and set loose within the grounds to carry out some orienteering exercises.

The sixth week had a survival theme, and included building a shelter and pitching a tent blindfolded – 'a fun activity that had both students and teachers in fits of laughter', says Graham Smith.

At the final session in December, the lads had a recap on all the subjects they had covered, and were then presented with certificates of achievement by Emily Thomas, Hindley YO's head of reducing re-offending, who said: 'This is an excellent initiative for Hindley that will have very positive benefits for the young people we care for.'

While longer outcomes of the programme will need to be monitored, the staff at Hindley are satisfied that the two-month programme fulfilled its aims.

'We can say with some certainty that as the programme has progressed, each individual has gained confidence and developed new skills, says Graham Smith. 'Their progress becomes evident to them when they read their own weekly accounts of their experiences.' **DDN**

### The lads' verdict on their 'alternative high'



#### Ben

##### 'It showed me ways of enjoying myself without taking cannabis or cocaine'

I found it really exciting. It was interesting learning new skills and I liked the teamwork. I feel I've achieved something and learnt things I wouldn't have done before. It showed me ways of enjoying myself without taking cannabis or cocaine.'

#### Daryl

##### 'Physical and enjoyable at the same time'

I enjoyed the rock climbing best, as you were doing something physical and enjoyable at the same time.

#### Dean

##### 'It taught me how you should speak to people'

My favourite bit has been the rock climbing and I also enjoyed the camp craft. I didn't know any first aid before, but now I would know what to do if something happened. I found the team building good as it taught me how you should speak to people.

#### Lee

##### 'It's improved my confidence'

I learned different things like rock climbing and team work. I feel glad that I've done it as it's improved my confidence. When I get out I would definitely do something like that again if I got chance, but before doing this I wouldn't have wanted to.

#### Bradley

##### 'It gave me a buzz'

I thought it was an enjoyable activity and it gave me a buzz. I learned new things so I'm glad it gave me this opportunity. It also involved team work which was good.'

#### Lee

##### 'It gave me the chance to learn new skills'

I loved it. It's not everyday you get a chance to do something like this. I wouldn't have thought of doing it before, but I got the opportunity, went for it and loved it. It gave me the chance to learn new skills like first aid. My favourite bits were all the team building exercises and the wall – basically all the ones you had to think about. They really got you going.

#### Ian

##### 'It has given me ideas'

'It's a great opportunity for people inside. I loved the rock climbing with my mates as it then became a challenge – it showed me how to work as a team. It has given me ideas to take it up when I get out.'

#### Karl

##### 'I loved it all'

'Great, fantastic. I loved the rock climbing – in fact I loved it all.'

#### Sean

##### 'I'd recommend it to others'

It was good – pretty cool. I'd recommend it to others. It gave me a chance to learn new skills.