

**Drug Dogs Report:  
D – must try harder**

The issue of sniffer dogs in schools is hugely important. The widely-reported evaluation of a scheme in Buckinghamshire asserts that the use of sniffer dogs has been a 'success'. This alleged positive outcome has gone unchallenged by the media – including *Drink and Drugs News*.

However, scrutiny of the report reveals a poorly executed piece of research which in no way demonstrates that the use of dogs has been a success.

In the first instance, it is essential that any such evaluation is undertaken by a neutral body: in this instance it was undertaken by the John Grieve Centre for Policing and Community Safety. Without wishing to cast aspersions as to their academic neutrality, it would seem likely that such a Centre, established by former top Met copper John Grieve would be sympathetic to the use of sniffer dogs.

More worryingly, the methodology used by the report is riddled with flaws, and invalidates much of its findings. So for example, letters informing parents about the scheme were sent home with pupils, but due to 'prohibitive costs' these were not posted out and there were no reply slips. Such an approach maximises the chance that the letters do not get home and minimises the chance that they will be returned.

So it should come as no surprise that the response rate was pitifully low. Altogether, 260 questionnaires were returned to the researchers – of which 100 were from pupils and 88 from parents. The researchers fail to say how many questionnaires were distributed.

Given that five schools responded, this meant that on average 20 pupils per school replied – or three pupils per year. This is not a good sample population from which to draw conclusions.

One school had a response rate of 8 per cent for pupils and 9 per cent for parents: the highest response rate from any school was 38 per cent from pupils. Worse still, only five people aged 15 and six people aged 16 responded. Given that this is a key age group for substance use, the fact that only one 15-year-old per school responded is unacceptably low for a serious piece of academic research.

The researchers unfortunately did not see fit to include the questionnaire that they used in the report. So it is not possible to critically assess the way that questions were phrased – a crucial consideration in such a controversial subject.

Nonetheless, from the small number of people who responded, support for the use of dogs was undoubtedly high, with a

high proportion of parents and pupils expressing support for the scheme.

From this, the researchers claim that the scheme has been a success. But being popular is not the same as being a success. The aim of the scheme was in part to act as a deterrent and also to identify pupils who may need assistance.

It is here that the report is utterly unable to demonstrate 'success'. What was the level of possession, use or supply before the pilot? We don't know and the report doesn't say. How did this change after the pilot? Again, we don't know. Were pupils discouraged from bringing drugs on site? No evidence of this in the report. And how many people were directed to Addaction for 'rehabilitative programmes?' Again, we are not told.

When the report was launched it was touted as 'proving' the worth of sniffer dogs. In fact, the report does nothing of the sort. It merely proves that people like the idea of sniffer dogs. And there is a world of difference between approving of a scheme and a scheme being effective.

**Kevin Flemen  
KFX**

*KFX has produced a booklet 'Drugs and Dogs and Schools' for parents and pupils who are unhappy about the implementation of Sniffer Dogs in schools. It explains the rights of the child when the use of dogs is proposed. It can be downloaded from <http://www.ixion.demon.co.uk/drugs%20schools%20police%20and%20dogs.pdf>*

**Children must be put at the centre of our focus**

I would like to thank Rosie Brocklehurst for her interesting article regarding 'Hidden Harm' (Breaking the Cycle, DDN 18 April). As an organisation working specifically with the children and families of substance users, we echo much of what she said.

Our experience over the two years we have been running the CoreKids project is that it is incredibly difficult to get substance misuse services, funding bodies, and potential financial donors to see beyond the using adult. It is even harder to facilitate relationships between children and adult services so that appropriate referrals are made.

We have to remember that there is often a whole system of individuals profoundly affected by each adult's addiction. It is our experience that there is immense difficulty in 'seeing' this hidden group.

Our plea is simple: 'adults are not the

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only ones affected by addiction, the family needs attention too.' It is essential that we start the process now of putting children at the centre of our focus.

It is only by changing the patterns of trans-generational transmission of behaviours and parenting, patterns profoundly impacted by parental substance use, that we can hope to create environments where all our children can thrive and grow.

It is a worthy goal, and one that seems to have only recently come into awareness. It is not surprising that there has been reluctance; it is very difficult to think about the child daily injecting his mother with heroin aged only six, or the eight-year-old forced to hide under her bed when the dealer comes around for payment 'in kind'. It has been hard to hear the stories that these children tell, and to view the pictures they draw. But for us at CoreKids, it is a joy to watch these resilient young people reconnecting to the spirit of play and creativity that they have had to put aside whilst being their parent's carer. For us this process is only possible as the parents also engage in the difficult journey of taking the responsibility of becoming parents themselves, a process that for many is a responsibility that they accept for the first time.

At CoreKids we believe that we are charged with both an individual and collective responsibility. It is critical that we model healthy family dynamics to our clients. To achieve this we must develop effective systems of inter-agency working in order that we ensure that we hear the gradually more vociferous voices of this previously silenced minority.

CoreKids is a project working within the Core Trust, a structured day rehabilitation programme in Marylebone, Central London. Please contact [corekids@coretrust.org](mailto:corekids@coretrust.org) or visit the website – [www.coretrust.co.uk](http://www.coretrust.co.uk)

**Ian May, Project Director  
The CoreKids project, London**

**Flagship team was forced to change rules**

With reference to the ongoing debate about user employment and the 2 year rule, HOT was indeed a flagship of good practice for a number of years – which is why I joined them as team leader in 2002. HOT has actively encouraged current drug users to apply for vacancies within the team in the past, running a successful Community Volunteer Training Scheme through which several volunteers were able to move on to permanent employment.

However, unfortunately some employees were not able to fulfil the 'fit for work' criteria or limit their drug taking to out of work hours and this is where the difficulties began, causing major management problems for a small team. During my time as Team Leader (2002-2004) I saw my fellow workers demoralised due to those employees who chose to abuse the opportunities they had been given and take advantage of working in a service user led environment. Several employees took extended periods of sick leave causing endless staffing problems. There were also suspensions for gross misconduct, lengthy investigations and ultimately dismissals leading me to question my own beliefs about how HOT could continue to provide an appropriate service to the local community. I am not surprised that the Trust has decided to impose the two-year ban even though I am passionately opposed to it.

It is tragic that HOT has had to change its philosophy because of the behaviour of those individuals who could have been pivotal to changing and challenging the assumptions of the majority that drug users can't hold down a job. It was not for lack of support, supervision or opportunities that the drug using employees were not able to fulfil their duties, but as they say you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink...

**Debbie Fowler, ex Team Leader HOT**