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Bottletop

An assessment of barriers to involvement in the peer-to-peer alcohol awareness project in Herefordshire and proposals to encourage further engagement by organisations working with Herefordshire's young people.

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Background

The Bottletop project aims to encourage young people to think about being safe on a night out, and the effects of misuse of alcohol, through creating content for a website aimed at their peers. It is about intervening early, to address issues of alcohol misuse with young people at the transition to adulthood. It is also designed to be cost-effective through being delivered within existing school or youth club activities, by staff within the organisations. The project launched in 2008 and has worked with various groups of young people, aged fifteen to 24 years, across Herefordshire. Previous evaluation showed that the intervention is effective for the young people who take part, but take-up by schools, teachers and youth workers has been sporadic.

Research approach

This assessment was undertaken in February 2015 by Rebecca Kelly, a student on placement from the Bulmer Foundation's Master's degree in Sustainable Development Advocacy and aimed to identify the barriers to involvement and propose ways to encourage take-up within Herefordshire, as well as more widely. A range of stakeholders across Herefordshire and from national organisations were interviewed and asked to share their experiences of using Bottletop, or what had so far prevented them from being involved in the project.

48 stakeholders were approached for interview and feedback was received from 27 (56%). Stakeholders categorised by type were:

	Number of stakeholders approached	Response rate
Schools, colleges, pupil referral units and Youth Offending Team	20	55%
Third sector young people organisations	8	75%
Herefordshire Council	10	40%
National alcohol agencies (Addaction & Turning Point)	2	100%
Local alcohol agencies	3	33%
Other	5	60%

Whilst the assessment was conducted in a short time frame, the poor response from those responsible for young people's wellbeing within Herefordshire Council and lack of response from DASH, which provides drug and alcohol services to adults in Herefordshire, was disappointing.

It was clear from the assessment that alcohol misuse among young people is a relevant topic for the professionals working with them in the variety of different organisations approached. Inviting stakeholders to identify barriers, and put forward proposals to encourage use of Bottletop, opened a broader conversation about the most effective way to design and deliver alcohol awareness education in general. Stakeholders were also keen to share their observations about the impact of exposure to alcohol on the lives of the young

people they work with. The reasons perceived for drinking by young people included: coping strategy; habitual; boredom; low cost; easy availability; and as a social activity.

The general response from stakeholders suggests that, whilst there is a need for alcohol awareness education among young people in Herefordshire, there is a gap in current provision and the provision is inconsistent across the County. Alcohol awareness education is not well established in the school curriculum.

Stakeholders expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for Bottletop and appreciated the opportunity to share their expertise and experience and a wide range of feedback and suggestions were put forward for ways in which Bottletop can improve involvement. This suggests that alcohol awareness is indeed a pertinent topic to the individuals working with young people in Herefordshire.

The findings confirm the importance of Bottletop and indicate that, if current barriers to involvement can be overcome, an opportunity exists for the project to expand the model and build on the foundation and reputation it already has.

Barriers

A variety of barriers arose from discussions with stakeholders, with some points being raised several times. The main barriers that were identified are set out below.

Bottletop delivery model

Teacher delivery

The capacity of individuals in organisations to deliver alcohol awareness education cannot be assumed. Teachers may lack confidence to deliver a session, and if the session is reliant on delivery by existing staff, uptake is also dependent on the right person, who is willing to lead involvement. It was reported that some students are unable to have an honest discussion about their own alcohol use when speaking to their teacher, possibly reducing the effectiveness of a Bottletop session.

Recommendations made:

If continuing to rely upon delivery by existing staff, it needs to be clear that help can be called upon, for example from a media company which would take the provision of equipment out of their hands. It was indicated by some teachers that, if Bottletop is not being used as part of an existing unit, providing further lesson structure for them to follow would be helpful.

It is the view of some stakeholders that this kind of work is always more successful if it is done by external people, who are experts in their topic, rather than existing staff who the young people are already familiar with. Suggestions for someone with more expertise and experience to deliver sessions included a youth worker or someone with a personal story to share. It was felt that peer-led education could be enhanced by involving young people in the delivery by training older students, 18 and upwards, in a role with extra responsibility such as ambassadors.

The existing teaching curriculum

Established programmes in schools which cover health and wellbeing may not focus upon substance abuse. For example, the Eco Schools programme does not cover substance abuse in its “healthy living” topic. Prioritisation of time and teaching material means Bottletop might be overlooked. In schools, teachers’ work may be results-driven so extra-curricular activities are not a priority and several stakeholders reported that they found it difficult to engage with secondary schools.

Recommendations made:

PSHE was identified by several stakeholders as an ideal subject to incorporate Bottletop, but the session still needs to fit with the existing format which can vary widely between schools. For example, in one school the health risks of alcohol are covered as part of science. Alcohol awareness is not currently a mandated part of PSHE, but it is worth noting that this is currently the subject of discussion with Ofsted and The House of Commons Education Committee which may result in compulsory elements being introduced.

Group delivery structure

Some organisations only work with young people on a one-to-one basis and it was felt that such sessions would not be as conducive to creating content for Bottletop compared to group work. However, through this barrier being raised, it was also found that existing Bottletop media is used as a resource by some organisations when working with individuals with substance misuse difficulties. Within organisations where group work is undertaken it is not necessarily easy to incorporate Bottletop because they may not have tutorial sessions where different topics can be more easily introduced.

Recommendations made:

Varying suggestions were put forward for the structure of project delivery, from lessons designed to last one hour; a more interactive structure; a wider mixture of teaching material and activities; provide a more complete package of delivery; to enhancing the current PSHE format. One organisation suggested organising a trip to enable students to leave Herefordshire and get some cultural experience. Identification of how local agencies are using Bottletop as a resource was considered important.

Lack of funding

Prioritisation may be given to activities which provide some form of funding. Not all organisations have sufficient funds to put on activities. Some reported being understaffed and therefore unable to take on additional activities like Bottletop.

The venue

The classroom environment can be uncomfortable to some young people due to different learning styles and past learning experiences.

Recommendations made:

An alternative is to target young people in their leisure activities. Two third sector organisations suggested their venue as a better alternative and indicated willingness for it to be used by Bottletop.

Stakeholder resources

Website access

Organisations may have unreliable internet access, a lack of portable computer technology or their browser may not load the Bottletop media. This is, for example, reported to be the case within Herefordshire Council.

Recommendations made:

It was felt that it would be useful to have DVDs of content available for organisations to use with their young people.

Equipment

Not all organisations have access to the necessary facilities for producing Bottletop media, especially films.

Recommendations made:

It must be made clear to organisations who are engaging with Bottletop that help can be called upon from a media company.

Bottletop profile

Some stakeholders who were working with children were unaware of the project.

Recommendations made:

Strategically, there needs to be a process by which all local services are made aware of the resources available to them to support the well-being of local young people. This could include further evidencing of outcomes to share among stakeholders. There were many suggestions from stakeholders on how to further increase profile. These included having a presence at College events such as the student fair and organising an annual one day alcohol awareness campaign. There could be collaboration with specialist staff in schools, such as Healthy Lifestyle Trainers, and the project could assist schools to link their own websites to Bottletop.

Partnership working is important and several organisations recommended links. In particular, Zig Zag, which offers support to young people affected by substance misuse, was identified as an organisation with which Bottletop and the Bulmer Foundation could link more strongly. It was further considered that Hereford Diocese might be a useful ally and funding opportunities could be reviewed with Herefordshire Council.

The perception of alcohol education

It was reported by a school that parents can perceive alcohol education as encouraging alcohol use. It was also commented that schools may be concerned that their profile will be impacted negatively by portraying that alcohol education is necessary.

Bottletop resources

The website

Several stakeholders fed back that the website needs updating in terms of content and design, to interest young people and to be relied upon as a source of information. Reducing the Bottletop target age was suggested, but this raises the possibility that some existing Bottletop media on the website is not age appropriate for a younger audience. It was also reported that Bottletop is not one of the top search results if looked up on a search engine.

Recommendations made:

Suggestions for ways to improve the website, as well as keeping information up to date, included holding a focus group with students and running a design competition with students. New social media platforms, such as apps, could make content more accessible to young people. Some material from the website could be provided in other formats to young people, such as fliers. An example of this was the Super Liver story cards.

Promotional resources

The existing items, which are mainly key rings and cards, were reported as not being popular with young people.

Recommendations made:

More new Bottletop accessories could be provided that would be more attractive to young people, such as pens and Spikey anti drink spiking stoppers.

Target groups

Age group

Bottletop works with young people between fifteen and 24 years old. Feedback suggests that Bottletop could engage a younger age range more effectively and therefore have a greater impact on their future drinking habits. This is on the basis that preventative alcohol education is only effective up to the age of sixteen, by which time stakeholders report alcohol abuse being an issue among the young people they work with. Among the key reasons offered for this by stakeholders was that although alcohol can be a potential issue in young people's lives between ages thirteen and sixteen years old, it may not yet be embedded in their culture, and a group of young people agreed that they would have benefited from being engaged with the Bottletop project when aged ten or eleven years old as they were becoming aware of alcohol at that age. By the time they are fifteen or sixteen years old, they need to feel confident enough to stand up to peer pressure. At the same time, there were also suggestions that there needed to be more targeted work with young people aged eighteen years and over, because they are no longer within the age range worked with by Zig Zag, the young people's drug and alcohol agency.

Recommendations made:

Stakeholders put forward a range of proposals for working with young people at different age groups. For example, providing work related training was a suggested option for more mature young people, with a social enterprise being a possible way to encapsulate them.

High risk groups

There are also indications of opportunities within the County for Bottletop to focus on targeted intervention. There are groups of young people who are in lifestyle situations that go hand-in-hand with substance abuse and who can be reached by working with existing organisations in the county. Some suggested that the project could be targeted at young people who are known by support staff or professionals to already have had a negative substance misuse experience or to be dealing with substance abuse in their lives in some form. Comments received about working with pupils at Pupil Referral Units indicate that the message is more difficult to deliver, but more beneficial if it works.

Recommendations made:

The Pupil Referral Units remain interested in incorporating Bottletop within their work with their students. Two further third sector organisations working with more difficult young people also indicated that they would like to discuss partnership work further.

Parents

It was suggested that it would be useful to create a tool for parents based upon Bottletop.

Conclusions

Bottletop aims to intervene early at the transition to adulthood and also engage with an age-group that has received less focus in alcohol awareness. Findings suggest that these two aims may be achieved most effectively by working with age groups at the opposite ends of the age bracket of fifteen to 24 years old, which Bottletop has previously worked with, or reducing the age range. Working in two separate strands, with different age groups, may suit a more tailored model of peer-led education, working with the characteristics of young people more fully. The two different ages could potentially be engaged differently, in a symbiotic way which enhances the benefits to each age group. Another focus for symbiotic work could be the cycle of media being created and then used by different parties, which is already taking place within some organisations. Participants identified issues that were specific to their particular circumstances and these were largely related to the learning requirements of the pupils they taught and the size and structure of the organisation. It is therefore not surprising that different opinions were given about whether delivery of alcohol education is more effective when run by existing organisation staff or someone from outside the organisation. There are also differing views about what model of delivery is most useful to the individual in charge of the group, and the organisations as a whole. It was, however, clear that the person delivering alcohol intervention must be someone who can engage effectively with young people.

Inconsistency in the manner that alcohol awareness is currently delivered across schools and other organisations in the County means that designing a package to cater to all young people will only work to the degree that it can be adapted by the individuals to suit their needs. This format would, however, be at the expense of the stakeholders who indicated a preference for more targeted and structured models. Bottletop's current model of delivery appears to sit somewhere between these two formats. Without a more embedded place in schools, Bottletop and other alcohol awareness teaching appears to be at some risk of being by-passed, because it is competing with other topics and priorities to hold its place. There is also a risk indicated by stakeholder feedback that the ability to address only the most pressing and current problems in a time of austerity may mean that trends in substance abuse among young people, such as the reported rise in legal highs, present a possible threat to alcohol awareness being of high concern, despite the evidence of existing alcohol abuse reported by stakeholders.

Our thanks go to all the stakeholders who contributed to this assessment.



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