

Crime and Criminal Justice Research Findings No. 53

Freagarrach: an Evaluation of a Project for Persistent Juvenile Offenders

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The Freagarrach Project for persistent juvenile offenders was established in Central Scotland early in 1995, with funding from The Scottish Office, Barnardo's Scotland, which managed the project, and the relevant local authorities. Freagarrach was intended to work with the most persistent juvenile offenders in central Scotland, with the reduction of their offending as its principal aim. The evaluation of the project was carried out by staff of the Department of Applied Social Science at Lancaster University from August 1995, and covered the work of Freagarrach up to 31 March 2000.

Main Findings

- One hundred and six young people, 94 males and 12 females, formally attended Freagarrach during the 5-year period of the evaluation, 15 of them attending twice. Their average age was 14¹/₂ in the first year, but closer to 16 in the final 2 years.
- The figure of 106 is lower than was planned, because young people on average stayed at the project for longer than the 6 months originally envisaged. The average length of stay was 11¹/₂ months in 1995-96, and 7¹/₂ months in 1998-99. There is no indication, however, that a substantial number of persistent juvenile offenders was 'missed' by Freagarrach.
- The young people had an average of 17.7 charges against them in the year before they started at Freagarrach. Almost all had been charged with offences of dishonesty; the majority had also been charged with vandalism and violent offences.
- Over half of the 80 young people who were of school age when they started at Freagarrach were excluded from school at the time; only 14 were attending school with any regularity. Most of the young people had problems of substance misuse, and the great majority came from unhappy or disrupted family backgrounds.
- In the year after they started to attend Freagarrach, the overall rate of offending by the young people decreased by between 20% and 50%, compared with the previous year. Although it was rare for young people not to have been charged or convicted within 2 years of starting at Freagarrach, there is evidence that the project was successful in reducing the risk of long-term criminal careers.
- Taking account of savings in the costs of residential care and custody, the net cost of Freagarrach per annum is estimated at £13,350. Direct savings to the criminal justice system of about £2.4 million can be estimated over a 10-12 year period.
- It was important for the success of Freagarrach that it was well supported by the agencies in central Scotland concerned with criminal justice, and that its staff were able to deliver a high quality, intensive and caring service to the young people and their families.

Establishing the Freagarrach Project

Freagarrach was the result of a successful bid by Barnardo's Scotland in response to a Scottish Office invitation to tender for funding for a developmental community-based project for persistent juvenile offenders. It was crucial to the success of the bid that Barnardo's was able to show that it was well established in central Scotland and had credibility with local agencies, and that the proposed project was a natural development of an existing inter-agency strategy for young offenders and those at risk of offending.

The proposal was also based on research that suggested that about 60 juvenile offenders a year were likely to meet the proposed criterion of persistence: at least 5 'episodes' of offending in a 12-month period. Information on persistence was available through the TRACE information system used by Central Scotland Police, and this was to be made available to Freagarrach, thus helping to ensure that the project worked consistently with its intended target group, and allowing the project leader actively to seek referrals in appropriate cases.

In addition to the support of the police, Freagarrach had access from the outset to educational resources in the form of guaranteed places in a support unit, and was supported by the social work departments through the secondment of staff and the provision of premises.

The decision to award funding to Barnardo's for the development of the project was announced in August 1994. The first project leader started work in February 1995, and most of the other staff - deliberately recruited from a variety of professional backgrounds - were in post by May. Premises were found in Polmont and, after some delay, in Alloa, and the first young person to be formally accepted by the project started to attend in early June. Although the process of bringing the project into operation took longer than had been hoped, the delay allowed the project leader to build a network of contacts with social work and other practitioners, and to refine the criteria for acceptance and the referral process. Attendance at Freagarrach was to be on a voluntary basis.

The criteria for acceptance were that the young person was aged 12-16 (the upper limit was raised to 18 in 1999); that she or he had been involved in at least 5 episodes of offending in the previous 12 months, and at least one in the last 2 months; that offending was the main ground for statutory agency involvement; and that a recent social work assessment had shown a need for intensive support. It was also essential that the young person should have - or be able to obtain - reasonably stable accommodation in central Scotland.

The work of Freagarrach

Up to 31 March 2000 there were 121 'starts' at Freagarrach, by 106 young people (i.e. 15 attended the project more than once). This was a lower figure than had originally been envisaged, because on average the young people attended the project for longer periods than the 6 months mentioned speculatively in the proposal. The average length of stay tended to decrease over time, from 11½ months in 1995-96 to 7½ months in 1998-99. The reasons why young people stayed for longer than expected were the intensity of their problems, the difficulty of making adequate arrangements for their leaving Freagarrach, and the commitment of the staff to provide a flexible, individualised programme of work for each young person. The great majority of young people were able to start attending within 4 weeks of being accepted.

The basic expectation was that each young person should have 3 direct, face-to-face contacts with project staff every week, the contacts lasting between 1½ and 2½ hours. In practice this amount of contact was often exceeded. The first 4-6 weeks of attendance were used for assessment and for engaging the young people's commitment to working with the staff on their offending and related issues. At the end of this time an 'individual programme contract' was drawn up, which specified the targets for change, the commitments of each party to the contract, and the methods of work to be used. Recreational activities were used as a reward for commitment to the work programme, and as a means of developing informal communication between the staff and the young people.

Freagarrach's staff were able to use a wide range of methods tailored to the needs and aptitudes of the young people, and, for example, to work with them on an individual basis as well as in groups. Offending was invariably at the core of the programme of work, but staff also undertook work on related problems such as substance misuse and educational failure. They attempted to develop joint work with other agencies, but apart from visits to Glen Ochil Young Offenders Institution and, later, to Cornton Vale women's prison, this never became established as a regular feature of the programme, largely because of resource constraints in other agencies. Whenever possible, staff involved parents or carers in the process of change.

The programme of work was delivered in an environment that young people experienced as safe, accepting and caring; staff were able to convey concern and respect for the young people while making it clear that their offending behaviour was unacceptable. While the methods and content of work were in line with the findings of research on effective practice with offenders, the workers' style was also important in engaging the interest and commitment of young people whose previous experience of adults had often been one of rejection.

The young people at Freagarrach

Ninety-four of the young people who attended Freagarrach were male and 12 female, a ratio in line with that to be expected of a population of persistent offenders. Their average age was 14½ in the first year and closer to 16 in the final 2 years of the evaluation. Two-thirds had been charged with an offence before the age of 12; the average number of charges against them in the year before starting at the project was 17.7. They were versatile offenders, and, of the 80 who were of school age, only 14 were attending with any regularity when they started at Freagarrach. Most had problems with substance misuse, and about 90% had experienced loss or rejection in their family lives. Many lacked social skills and were involved in local networks of criminality and drug-dealing.

The effectiveness of Freagarrach

The main evidence of Freagarrach's effectiveness comes from the subsequent criminal records of young people who spent a substantial period at the project. In the short term, Freagarrach contributed to a reduction in their overall offending rate of between 20% and 50% (representing respectively 90 and 226 offences); these figures are derived from a comparison of the year before they started to attend Freagarrach and the year after. In the longer term, while it was unusual for young people to have no offences recorded against them in 3-4 years after starting at Freagarrach, it was also unusual for them to have developed criminal careers that suggested frequent or serious offending: only 3 of the 41 young people on whom at least 3 years' criminal records were available had been sentenced on more than 10 occasions, and only 10 had ever been sentenced to custody. Comparison with other groups suggests that Freagarrach contributed to a lower use of custody than might have been predicted on the basis of the young people's previous records.

Costs and benefits

The average cost of Freagarrach for each young person who attended was about £13,580, making it expensive in comparison with most community-based measures. Its net cost was, however, considerably lower than this, because of the savings Freagarrach made possible in the costs of residential care (estimated at about £202,000 a year) and custody (a total estimated saving of about £70,000). Freagarrach also contributed direct savings to the criminal justice system through reducing the offending rate of the young people who attended; the extent of this saving can be estimated as between £63,000 and £158,000 annually. The net cost of Freagarrach was therefore probably about £13,350 a year during the period of the evaluation; and if longer term savings from reductions in offending are taken into account, the project will deliver a net saving of about £2.4 million over a 10-12 year period.

Conclusions

Freagarrach is a successful project which could provide a useful model for replication elsewhere. Its contribution to reducing offending and the need for expensive measures such as residential care meant that its apparently high costs in fact represent good value for money. It is doubtful that a similar level of success could be achieved elsewhere without similar expenditure. The key elements in Freagarrach's

success were its embeddedness in a coherent inter-agency strategy on young people in trouble in central Scotland, and the high quality of its work with individual young people. This reflected the skills and commitment of the staff, which they were able to exploit fully because they were securely employed and well supported organisationally. These are also likely to be key elements of any successful replication.

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SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Designed and produced on behalf of Scottish Executive by Astron B18433 2/01

ISBN 1-84268-952-5



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