



## NFER summary

# Positivity in practice:

approaches to improving perceptions of young people and their involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour

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## Introduction

The aim of this NFER-funded research was to investigate the approaches being taken by local authorities (LAs) and partner organisations to improve how young people are perceived, especially in relation to crime and anti-social behaviour<sup>2</sup>. The project's methods included initial desk research of policy documents, research papers and media reports followed by telephone interviews with staff from 20 LAs. Three in-depth case studies involving interviews with frontline staff and young people completed the study.

## Why is it important to address negative perceptions of young people?

Statistical evidence suggests the number of young people involved in offending is decreasing (for example, see DCSF, 2008), yet public perception is thought to be out of step with this reality. For example, a recent survey found 64 per cent of British adults overestimate the number of young people involved in crime (Catch 22, 2009).

Public perception is said to be strongly influenced by the negative portrayal of young people in the media. For example, Ipsos MORI (2006) found that 57 per cent of media stories about young people were negative,<sup>3</sup> and the majority of these focused on violence, crime and anti-social behaviour.

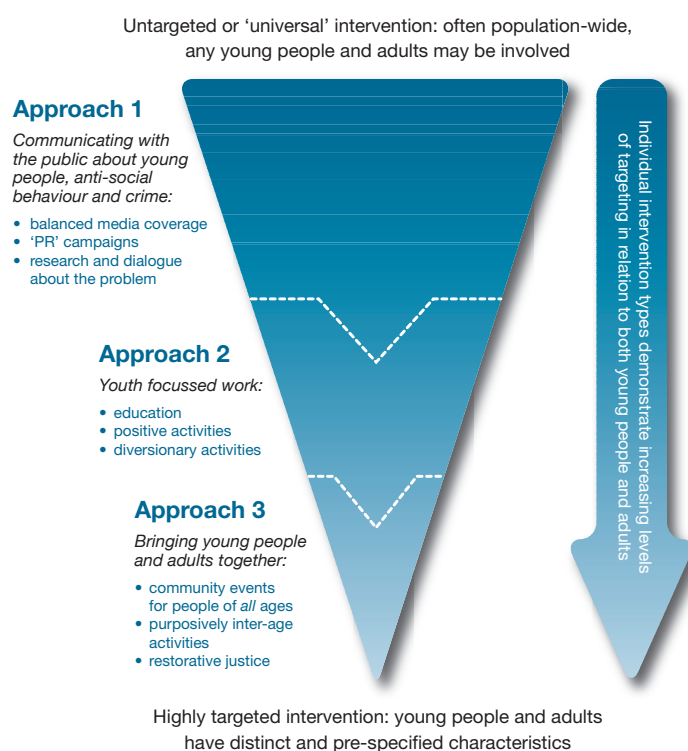


## What approaches are being used to improve how young people are perceived?

Work to improve perceptions of young people, and their involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour was diverse, and delivered by a variety of agencies with different remits and wider agendas.

The work can be placed on a continuum of approaches (see our typology in Figure 1). At one extreme, activities are entirely 'universal' in their remit (that is, any young person or adult might be involved or affected). At the other extreme, activities deliberately target young people and adults with very specific characteristics (for example, perpetrators and victims of anti-social behaviour or crime).

Figure 1 An overview of the range of approaches and activities



The majority of local areas featured in this study were taking a multi-pronged approach to improving perceptions of young people. Activities often involved at least two of the three broad approaches against a backdrop of more general community safety work. Formal or integrated strategies to improve perceptions of young people were rare, although there was recognition of the need to think strategically and create a 'portfolio' of interventions.

## Did the activities make a difference to negative perceptions of young people?

Overall, interviewees felt there had been improvement in perceptions as a direct result of the activities implemented. This included, for example, changes in attitude amongst certain opinion-formers (such as members of a local parish council); improvements in relationships between young people and adults; and young people's sense of being given greater respect by adults.

Interviewees also predicted impacts that would lead to a corresponding improvement in public perceptions. These included, an increased engagement of young people in positive activities; a decrease in young people's negative behaviours; and adults developing a greater understanding of young people's behaviours.

## How are perceptions about young people measured?

There had been few attempts to quantify the direct impact of the activities. The biggest challenge was the variable nature of perceptions and the range of influences upon them. The most common forms of 'measurement' were national and local surveys such as the Place Survey. While these provided information on public concerns, few of these surveys enabled specific concerns about young people and their involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour to be separated out from general fears of crime. Similarly, population-wide surveys that measure public opinion and perception cannot attribute change to a specific activity or intervention.

At the project or activity level, interviewees acknowledged they often had insufficient means to adequately assess the impact of work on public perceptions. They were reliant on proxy indicators such as local crime rates and numbers of complaints made to the local council about young people. Interviewees recalled observable changes in young people's behaviour, and feedback was given to project delivery staff and partners to evidence perception change. However, this evidence was typically gathered informally and often not recorded in a systematic way. Staff were concerned that they did not have the necessary skills to devise appropriate measures nor analyse and interpret the results of any data that was gathered. Limited time and resources to undertake such work was another factor.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The study offers a number of recommendations that can be taken forward by policy makers and strategic leads at both national and local level.

### **Undertake a local audit of the activities already underway that are designed to impact positively on perceptions. This will support future strategic planning and co-ordination.**

Formal strategies focussing on improving perceptions of young people were rare but the need to think strategically and develop a 'portfolio' of interventions was increasingly recognised. Our typology (see Figure 1) provides a useful starting point for the development of a simple audit tool that can be used by LAs to support strategic planning and co-ordination.

The central importance of communicating with the public about 'good news' regarding young people is evident. Those responsible for any youth-focussed work and intergenerational activity should seek out opportunities for promoting their programmes in the media, and particularly relay the positive impacts that are achieved.

### **Measure the impact of activities more systematically in order to provide clearer direction for those developing, commissioning and championing work locally.**

Reliably measuring and attributing changes in perceptions is far from easy but there is a clear need to expand knowledge about the impact of specific interventions and

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1 In the context of this report, 'young people' are those typically defined by interviewees as individuals between the ages of nine and 20.

2 'Anti-social behaviour' is defined as any aggressive, intimidating or destructive activity that damages or destroys another person's quality of life (Home Office, 2010).

3 Neutral stories that feature young people but do not portray a clearly positive or negative view of them (30 per cent) the number of positive stories (12 per cent).



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programmes. Those measuring perception change must consider what the specific interventions and activities are aiming to achieve and what is an appropriate measure. In many cases, this might include looking at sources of evidence that are not currently being utilised. There is also scope to improve understanding of the 'problem' and the wider influences that affect perceptions about young people at both the local and national level. One way this understanding might be achieved is through the introduction of a wider range of youth-specific questions to national surveys such as the Place Survey.

- ✓ Further develop the skills and knowledge of operational staff in order to share effective practice and key factors associated with success. This can be supported through local or regional training activities, toolkits and guidance in order to help professionals overcome challenges and exploit opportunities.

Interviewees identified factors impeding and increasing the chances of achieving a positive impact on perceptions of young people. Some of the challenges identified related to the skills and resources available to staff to conduct effective monitoring, evaluation and communications of activities. These included: the involvement of a range of partners; clarity of purpose and the effective use of local intelligence (in order to target work); the creative use of resources; and a balance of approaches and activities to improve perceptions (for example, from highly targeted to the more universal).

- ✓ Provide a policy steer that is specific to youth perceptions and underpinned by legislation requiring agencies to work together.

The study highlighted good practice at a local level to improve public perceptions about young people that needs to be operating nationally (e.g. the need for partnership working, and to implement a range of activities, from those that are universal to those that are highly targeted). Although there is a body of broadly relevant policy concerning community safety, there does not appear to be a strong policy steer specific to youth perceptions: there is no parallel with the duty of partnership imposed by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Such a steer could be a significant catalyst for LAs to engage with the issue of communities' perceptions of young people, particularly if underpinned with guidance and examples of good practice. It may also be beneficial to introduce criteria for future funding of relevant initiatives. Such criteria could include addressing perceptions of young people. Similarly, setting responsibilities for safer schools partnerships and CDRP's to focus on this issue, as well as performance management targets for LA staff could also help.

## References

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