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► [Evaluation of the Hertfordshire Alcohol Diversion Scheme.](#)

McNicol I.

Hemel Hempstead: Druglink, 2009.



*Enticed by a halving in their fines, young 'binge' drinkers in south east England penalised for alcohol-related nuisance undertook a brief course which was followed by reductions in drinking and better management of potential flash points. The fines they did pay helped finance the courses.*

**Summary** The [Alcohol Diversion Scheme](#) in Hertfordshire originated from the local crime and disorder reduction partnership, a coordinating body bringing together relevant agencies. The partnership were concerned at the number of 'binge' drinkers and consequent alcohol-related anti-social behaviour and harm. In tackling these issues, they bore in mind that these drinkers do not see their drinking as problematic because they can choose when to drink and when not to. The tactic of telling them they have a problem and offering help is generally rejected. Instead it was agreed that the intervention had to have a strong educational/awareness approach if it was going to engage this group and maximise learning outcomes.

It was decided to offer three-hour long educational courses with an informal and welcoming atmosphere using engaging training tools and focused on these learning outcomes:

- the link between alcohol and violence;
- understanding alcohol [units](#);
- the implications of the offence and penalty for the offender's future;
- the physical harms of alcohol; and
- the psychological harms of alcohol.

The primary target group were young adult 'binge' drinkers in the process of being fined a fixed penalty of £80 for causing a nuisance linked to drinking. Offenders' details are transferred to the charitable drug misuse service [Druglink](#), which contacts them and invites them to attend an educational programme. The incentive is that attendees are offered a 50% reduction in their fine; the £40 they do pay helps finance the scheme, which therefore requires only set-up costs and some contribution to administration.

The scheme was piloted for six months from August 2007 before being rolled out across Hertfordshire in April 2008. Druglink issued 1356 letters and made 624 phone calls to potential participants. In the scheme's first year, these resulted in 89 individuals completing the courses, constituting 18% of Hertfordshire residents issued a penalty notice for alcohol-related disorder in the county during that period. Participants were mainly young men. Two thirds were employed. Over 8 in 10 had been a victim of alcohol-related violence. Of the 89, 43 completed follow-up interviews six to nine months after their courses, the basis for some of the longer term outcomes recorded below.

## Main findings

Asked anonymously immediately after their courses, 87% of participants stated they now understood the link between alcohol and violence. As a result of coming on the course, 82% said they were now less likely to become involved in alcohol-related anti-social behaviour, 76% that they were less likely to become a victim of alcohol-related violence, and 56% that they would drink less. Over 9 in 10 felt the course had been valuable.


Records showed that none of the 89 who attended the course during the year reoffended during 2007–2008. Among another 443 people issued alcohol-related fixed penalty notices in the county, but who did not attend the course, seven reoffended, of whom five were found drunk and disorderly.

Two thirds of participants recontacted six to nine months later said they had drunk less since attending the course and the remainder had stayed the same. Two thirds also now thought about the number of units they were drinking. Virtually all were now more aware of the potentially violent situations that can occur when alcohol is consumed and avoided these situations. Nine in 10 would recommend the course to other people. The teaching style was recognised as educational and none had felt 'preached at'.

Knowing there was an opportunity for the offender to attend a course, police officers issuing the penalty notices felt more positive towards the process.

## The authors' conclusions

Self-sustainably and at little ongoing cost to the wider public, the scheme effectively engages binge drinkers and delivers meaningful behaviour and attitude change. A key objective is to curb alcohol-related anti-social behaviour. This it does in part by bringing home to participants – in a way which merely receiving the penalty does not – the seriousness of their offence, and enabling them to look at the incident and make the connections with their drinking and their behaviour. From feeling they have been victimised by the police, they are able to recognise that their drinking resulted in uncharacteristic and aggressive behaviour.

 The authors plausibly link learning from the course to subsequent outcomes, lending weight to the contention that outcomes would not have been so good from the penalty process on its own. However, without a **control** group of similar offenders not offered access to the courses, it is impossible to be sure this was the case. The other major limitation in the study is that just half the course participants were followed up.

*Thanks for their comments on this entry in draft to Sue Green of Druglink Ltd in Hemel Hempstead.*

*Commentators bear no responsibility for the text including the interpretations and any remaining errors.*

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