

How to set up a rewards scheme for young people

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This guide highlights a number of key issues that need to be addressed when assessing whether to set up a rewards scheme.

As concern about anti-social behaviour has grown, it is commonly asserted that young people are responsible for a significant proportion of nuisance behaviour.

However, there is also growing concern that young people are often unfairly demonised in current debates about anti-social behaviour.

Researchers at Sheffield Hallam University studied two pilot rewards schemes – a Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust scheme in York and a Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)-funded scheme in Bradford – which were designed to redress the balance by promoting the positive contribution young people could make to their communities. They have also reviewed literature on other rewards schemes.

Using the learning from their study, they have produced this short, practical guide for agencies including community groups, youth groups, councils, housing associations and any other groups that are thinking of setting up reward schemes for young people.

Will a rewards scheme work for your community?

Most rewards schemes are small scale and need to be firmly rooted in their local context. Prior to investing time and resources in establishing a scheme, it is good practice to gather information and consult widely with residents, young people and other agencies working in the neighbourhood.

The experiences of the two pilot rewards schemes located in York and Bradford indicate that the following factors are critical in determining how rewards schemes can maximise effectiveness:

1. The organisation responsible for setting up the scheme needs to have credibility within the local community.
2. Depending on the nature of the problem to be addressed, alternative interventions might be more effective, e.g. provision of more general facilities for young people, such as youth shelters, diversionary activities, provision of youth work.
3. Questions of fairness and justice may be raised if young people are asked to undertake levels of volunteering and engagement in community activities when such acts of citizenship are not common amongst adult members of the community.
4. Existing community groups can provide a useful forum where ideas can be discussed and priorities agreed, potential solutions assessed and an action plan produced.

The wider literature on rewards schemes indicates there can be a range of benefits associated with rewards schemes, e.g. they have a role to play in engaging young people in stimulating activities, they can improve the self-confidence and esteem of participants and lead to a heightened awareness of others and community issues.

At the same time, however, it should be recognised that the outcomes of existing rewards schemes for young people are complex, mixed and often include unintended negative consequences.

Box 1 provides a checklist of factors to consider in order to maximise the benefits and minimise the negative outcomes associated with rewards schemes.

Getting started

The local context has a significant impact on the development and design of rewards schemes. Co-operation and interaction with existing youth provision should be sought in order to ensure that there is no duplication of provision.

Box 1 The pros and cons of rewards schemes

Positive outcomes

- Improved self-confidence and self-esteem of participants
- Improved awareness of others and community issues
- Improved skills such as negotiation and communication
- Enhanced educational attainment and formal qualifications
- Material and financial gains for participants
- Improved access for young people to educational, leisure and social facilities
- Tangible benefits for the recipients of volunteering activities
- Improved community relations (e.g. between young and elderly people)
- Improved relations and trust between young people and local institutions and agencies
- Promotion of positive role models and positive behaviour
- Reduced levels of anti-social behaviour and truancy
- Reduced levels of fear of crime and young people
- Increasing levels of inter-generational interaction and tolerance
- Increasing levels of local social capital
- Improved local physical environment
- Cost savings

Negative outcomes

- Reduced self esteem if not eligible for rewards
- Further alienation and disaffection
- Increased propensity to engage in anti-social behaviour
- Increasing existing gaps between individuals' access to services and life opportunities
- Polarisation between those receiving and not receiving rewards
- Resentment among targeted and non-targeted groups
- Further perception that young people are being stigmatised and punished
- Positive behaviour becomes dependent on receiving rewards and additional incentives

Consultation with key stakeholders, residents and young people can be used to establish:

- how young people are viewed by adult residents and how young people feel about this;
- whether a rewards scheme could contribute towards addressing fear of young people and lack of inter-generational tolerance;

Box 2 Clarifying the rationale and philosophy of the rewards scheme

1. Which groups of young people is the scheme seeking to target/reach and why?
2. What behaviours is the scheme seeking to address?
3. Are rewards to be given for not taking part in unwanted behaviours or do they require a proactive demonstration of required behaviour?
4. Are the rights and responsibilities associated with membership of the scheme clearly stated and explained to participants?
5. How can you avoid the danger of simply benefiting young people who are already motivated and involved in community activities?
6. Is the scheme based on a clear understanding of the type of incentives that will be valued by young people?
7. If the scheme is to target young people who appear disaffected and/or isolated, how can the rewards/incentives be crafted so that they are attractive to the target group?
8. Is there recognition that activities may be valued for reasons other than monetary reward? For example, less tangible benefits that can be powerful incentives for young people include: public recognition of contribution; social and personal benefits; and skill development that may lead to increased opportunities for paid employment and further training.
9. Will the scheme help provide solutions to problems that young people experience, and assist them achieve their goals?

- what practical activities could be undertaken to help build community cohesions and promote greater tolerance of the visible presence of young people.

Prior to establishing a rewards scheme it is advisable to carry out a feasibility study, which may include the following elements:

- an audit of existing youth facilities and services;
- activities and meetings with different key stakeholders in the local community to establish whether there is general support for a rewards scheme. At this stage it is important to ensure that the widest possible range of members of the community have a voice including:
 - potential adult volunteers;
 - parents/guardians;
 - local agencies including schools and educational and training groups;
 - established youth groups;

- consultation with young people of different ages/ genders and with different interests (schools and existing youth schemes may be able to help facilitate this).

The rationale and philosophy of rewards schemes

Rewards schemes cannot substitute for mainstream youth provision. It is essential that everyone involved is clear about the rationale and underlying philosophy of the scheme (see Box 2).

Involving young people in setting up and running a rewards scheme

Young people should be given a central role in the design, implementation and management of rewards schemes. By encouraging young people to take ownership of the scheme, this will ensure that the target activities and rewards match their particular needs (see Box 3).

Managing a rewards scheme

Rewards schemes are resource intensive. The most successful schemes are based on open and democratic decision-making processes, in which young people's views and opinions are given priority. Whatever the management structures adopted by the scheme, it is vital that young people have a voice on the decision-making body.

Further, it should be recognised that running a rewards scheme requires specialist skills but retaining staff and volunteers can be very difficult in a climate of funding uncertainty.

While initial recruitment of young people may not be problematic, sustaining interest can prove more difficult. The employment of dedicated project staff is a critical influence on whether schemes are successful in attracting young people to participate and will also help to ensure that the scheme is sufficiently flexible to craft rewards that meet the specific needs of the young people involved.

In the evaluation of the JRHT scheme in York, and the JRF-funded scheme in Bradford, the following factors were found to be instrumental in influencing the continued engagement of young people:

- maximisation of recruitment of young people, by working in partnership with local schools and youth organisations to promote the scheme;
- retaining flexibility and the ability to change in response to young people's views and needs;

Box 3 Finding out what young people value

Rewards schemes should be based on a clear understanding about what type of activities and rewards and incentives are attractive to young people.

1. What do young people value about the neighbourhood where they live and what would they like to see changed?
2. What sort of rewards schemes are young people already involved in and what do they feel about existing schemes?
3. What are the best ways of recruiting young people to the scheme and which local organisations could help in the promotion of the scheme?
4. What eligibility criteria should be used and what if any sanctions should be employed?
5. What are the barriers that would prevent young people from joining a scheme and how could they be overcome? (consider transport and access arrangements, the location and timing of activities, the influence of peer pressure, etc.)
6. How can the scheme maximise the opportunities for ineligible individuals to gain or regain eligibility for rewards?
7. What sort of additional support would young people value in order to meet the expectations of required behaviour?
8. What activities would young people enjoy doing for gaining rewards? Is there a need to provide a choice of different activities/rewards for different target age/gender/interest groups?
9. What type of rewards/incentives are valued by different groups of young people?
10. Should activities and rewards be individual or collective, or a mixture of the two?

- designing credible activities taking into account age and gender differences;
- while financial rewards alone are not sufficient to generate a commitment to participate in pro-social activities, if the reward is seen as too minimal or tokenistic this will put others off taking part;
- it should be recognised that activities may be valued for reasons other than monetary reward – including public recognition, personal relationships, increased self esteem, and enhanced skills, which may lead to increased opportunities for paid employment, training etc;
- the style and approach of project staff can be critical in gaining confidence of young people, adult residents and volunteers.

Managing the public profile of schemes

Schemes benefit from high-profile events. Gaining local press coverage for activities and arranging public presentations not only provides participants with recognition that their activities and contributions are valued, it can also help promote the scheme within the local community and contribute towards building greater tolerance of the visible presence of young people (see Box 4).

Box 4 Publicity and marketing

1. How will the scheme formally and publicly recognise participants' activities and contributions?
2. Prior to marketing and profiling the scheme locally, is it clear exactly what rewards will be employed?
3. Could the scheme link activities and rewards to formal accreditation and qualifications?
4. How could the scheme attract a wide range of partners, for example to include local businesses and transport providers?

Further information

This guide is taken from a report called **An evaluation of two initiatives to reward young people** by Julia Hirst, Eleanor Formby, Sadie Parr, Judy Nixon, Caroline Hunter and John Flint, which is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, along with a summary of its findings.