

CATEGORY | Best Environmental Health Project

WINNER | Wirral Council



“Reducing the Strength and Custodians”

INTRODUCTION

Wirral has unacceptably high levels of alcohol-related harm. The local alcohol profile shows it is performing worse than national averages in every indicator from hospital admissions to fatalities. Equally concerning are the levels of alcohol-related crime and anti-social behaviour ranging from littering to serious assault; levels which are higher in the borough’s more deprived areas. In response, a truly multi-agency ‘Reducing the Strength (RtS) campaign’ was created. RtS campaigns are not unique, but the decision to put environmental health officers on the frontline is. Wirral’s EHOs were responsible for recruiting ‘custodians’ to be trained by local alcohol services to identify and safely signpost customers with problematic drinking into services. Team-working in this way has helped to not only seriously restrict the availability of cheap and potent alcohol, but has also created pathways for individuals to get help.

The initial target was to sign up 80% of Wirral’s off-licences to RtS agreements within 12 months. This gave the campaign the twin advantages of having a clearly defined objective, as well as cementing police involvement as partners. This target was in fact exceeded. Subsequent targets focused on disseminating RtS throughout Wirral and were formalised when Wirral set an official pledge that by 2020, 30% of off-sales premises would be ‘super-strength free’. Meanwhile, the main objective of custodians was to train and support 140 off-licence staff in recognising problematic drinking and signposting individuals into services.

Wirral had previously taken various approaches to reducing alcohol-related harm, however, research into RtS campaigns in other areas (notably Ipswich) suggested they were something which could be quickly and cheaply implemented to deliver impact within 12 months. Research also highlighted RtS as a good fit for multi-agency working. With public health leading strategically, Wirral Council’s environmental health, trading standards, licencing and community safety teams were recruited along with the police, health (notably drug and alcohol services) and local charities/concern groups to form a steering group.

Further research revealed that the key to a successful campaign lay in the choice of frontline workers – those who would directly approach businesses. It was agreed that EH and Trading Standards had the skills, relationships and knowledge necessary to be effective. One officer from each service was carefully appointed to RtS and kept in that role throughout the project to maintain consistency and build expertise.



While each officer was given a RtS brief, they worked alone to promote the scheme and formed their own strategy for approaching individual businesses. It was soon apparent that some off-licence staff were - by a mutual yet informal agreement - working with customers to help them limit their drinking. This transformed the programme into what is today. Currently 59 off-sales retailers have been actively recruited to the scheme with a further 45 'affiliates'. Data from the borough's controlled drinking environments along with litter surveillance shows RtS is driving a change in drinking habits. Improvements in local indicators include a 3% drop in alcohol-related anti-social behaviour over 2015. There were 8 voluntary closures of potentially harmful businesses resulting from RtS and 29 off-licence staff have now been custodian trained.

It is beyond doubt that RtS has reduced alcohol-related harm in Wirral. The total EH spend for the project over 2016-17 was £39.4k, which is insignificant when compared to the overall costs of harmful drinking to Wirral - £131m annually at the latest estimate. Regarding custodians, if only 4 individuals entered into services and reduced their drinking down to safe levels (or zero), the value in health gains would exceed the entire EH costs of both projects for one year.