



# Thinking Differently:

Lessons for Practitioners

# Below are 12 top tips for organisations that want to develop approaches which aim to reduce alcohol-related harm by positioning young people as potential catalysts for change:

## Developing your project

- 01 Work with others to develop your outcomes (the differences you hope to make)
- 02 Take time to develop strong partnerships with other agencies
- 03 Don't underestimate your staffing requirements
- 04 Provide clear referral guidance criteria
- 05 Talk to your funder

## Working with different client groups

- 06 Know that it takes time to build positive relationships with those you are working with
- 07 Think about the resources and capacity of those you are working with
- 08 Putting alcohol upfront, as the main message, doesn't always work
- 09 Recognise that peer relationships can be both facilitators and barriers to involvement
- 10 Recognise that the needs of your client group might change

## Evaluating your project

- 11 Know that any positive changes will take time to appear
- 12 Revisit self-reported scores with individuals at a later stage in the project

*These tips have been drawn from the learning of three organisations funded through the Thinking Differently programme which sought to trial innovative, preventative interventions designed to reduce alcohol-related harm in Scotland. More information about the funding programme can be found here: [www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/innovation-and-learning/our-it-themes/alcohol-misuse-1](http://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/innovation-and-learning/our-it-themes/alcohol-misuse-1)*

*An independent evaluation of the programme, 'Thinking Differently': Evaluation (2017) by Jill Clark, Karen Laing, Dorothy Newbury-Birch, Ivy Papps & Liz Todd, can be found here: [www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/innovation-and-learning/publications/thinking-differently-evaluation](http://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/innovation-and-learning/publications/thinking-differently-evaluation)*

## Background

The Thinking Differently programme was funded by a partnership of six grant-making organisations. It was launched in 2013 in order to trial innovative, preventative interventions designed to reduce alcohol-related harm in Scotland. Three projects in Midlothian, Glenrothes, and Rutherglen and Cambuslang explored to what extent young people could become agents of change and influence behaviour changes for their peers, parents, and the community respectively. The projects all worked towards achieving the following long-term outcomes:

- Reduce alcohol-related harm and associated risky behaviour by young people
- Build practical, sustainable skills and knowledge to empower young people, parents/carers and the community to take action to address local alcohol concerns.

The following tips have been drawn from learning gathered through the Thinking Differently programme via an external evaluation, end-of-year reports provided by the three funded organisations, and quarterly learning sets at which the funded organisations shared information with each other about what worked, what didn't work and why



## Developing your project

### 01 Work with others to develop your outcomes (the differences you hope to make)

At the start of the Thinking Differently programme the funders set the outcomes. This meant that the three projects were restricted in how responsive they could be to the ideas of those they were working with, which, in turn, impacted on levels of engagement. As the programme progressed it became clear that for projects to be truly youth-led and meaningful for young people, the young people needed to be the ones who chose the direction of travel. With this in mind we suggest that you:

- **Involve the client group in the early development of the project** so that they can help to identify outcomes
- **Speak honestly to your funder(s)** if you see a tension emerging between what they are saying and what your client group is telling you. Most funders are keen to develop good and trusting relationships with those they fund and it will enable you to discuss potential or emerging barriers.

## 02 Take time to develop strong partnerships with other agencies

All of the projects involved new or existing relationships to some extent and agreed that the partnerships were effective at both sustaining alcohol activities and enhancing the range of support available to the client groups. Nonetheless, partnership working is not always easy and so there are some things you should consider when building partnerships for this type of work:

- Ensure there is a shared vision of the project and the differences it is trying to make
- Build relationships with key staff members in partnership agencies as this will help to reduce the referral time
- Create and review a shared referral process. Getting this right takes time and collaboration but is essential for ensuring that those being referred are the ones who are likely to benefit most from the project.

## 03 Don't underestimate your staffing requirements

A specialist skill set is needed for this type of work. For one organisation, attracting suitable sessional and part-time staff proved to be challenging and impacted on the operational running (over the project duration). Potential challenges like this should be included in the project's risk register so that they can be reviewed regularly and mitigated where possible.

## 04 Provide clear referral guidance criteria

The Thinking Differently projects found that the most effective referral criteria placed the emphasis on three key areas:

- Lacking protective factors
- At risk of or involved in early risk-taking behaviours
- Lack of opportunities

These should be discussed and agreed with your partnership agencies to ensure everyone is clear about the selection criteria.

## 05 Talk to your funder

Throughout the Thinking Differently programme a positive relationship based on trust was developed between the funded organisations and the funders. The funded organisations have all said that they valued this relationship as they felt more able to be honest about their projects and challenges which arose.

Most funders are keen to develop a similar relationship with their grant holders: they would much rather know when something isn't working and support you to improve it than find out at the end that the project was delivered exactly as planned but didn't make the positive difference it had hoped. No project will be perfect so talk to your funder and be honest with them; that way you will both learn a lot more.

## Working with different client groups

Each of the three organisations funded through Thinking Differently were working with different client groups: one worked primarily with whole communities; one primarily with parents; and one primarily with young people. Across these different groups a number of key themes have emerged which should be considered by anyone looking to develop a similar project or approach.

### 06 Know that it takes time to build positive relationships with those you are working with

Before your project can begin to make a positive difference for those you are working with, you first need to build a relationship of trust with them. This takes time but is an essential part of the process. Some things to consider are:

- **Don't expect quick results.** This type of change takes time and you (and your funders) need to build that into the project planning
- **Factor this time for relationship building into any grant applications you make.** This is particularly true if you are seeking to support behavioural change which positions young people as the agents of that change
- **Make sure you have the young people's consent** before they are referred to a group so that it doesn't become something which is forced onto them.

### 07 Think about the resources and capacity of those you are working with

Some of the Thinking Differently projects found that young people were more likely to attend the group when transport was provided to collect them from home. Also, those that weren't involved in any extracurricular activities were more likely to appreciate the activity element of the programme. Similarly for community-based work the geographical context, including attitudes of the local community, other local organisations and available facilities, could all impact on what you can achieve and how.

By considering the practicalities for the groups you're working with you're more likely to develop a project that really meets their needs.



## 08 Putting alcohol upfront, as the main message, doesn't always work

All of the Thinking Differently organisations asserted that this type of focus needed to come later, particularly if the organisation was working with young people from disadvantaged and/or vulnerable backgrounds. This is because misusing alcohol is often a symptom of more deep-rooted problems and so time needs to be taken to develop a relationship of trust and to build the young person's self-esteem before trying to tackle any other issues.

It is also worth noting that each of the Thinking Differently projects took an early intervention approach which meant that those involved were not always displaying risk-taking behaviours. As a result, addressing alcohol misuse as the primary focus may have put some people off engaging.

### What worked:

- Enabling your client group to help shape the activities and decide what issues would be addressed was found to increase engagement for all of the projects
- Addressing alcohol-misuse as part of a wider programme of health-centred activities was found to be more effective than focusing on alcohol misuse alone
- Young people appeared to be more engaged with issue-based work when it was delivered within the school setting and during school hours.

## 09 Recognise that peer relationships can be both facilitators and barriers to involvement

The evaluation of Thinking Differently found that many young people are keen to help others; peer education, peer activism and group work were shown to be promising ways for young people to influence others with respect to a range of complex social issues. There was also evidence that when young people were in the role of peer-educators they were able to produce and convey a range of messages about drinking behaviour which were well received and that, in some circumstances, led to behaviour change.

Nonetheless, there were some lessons learned about what worked in terms of selection criteria for groups:

- Pre-established friendship groups can be difficult to work with as they already have a certain power dynamic which project staff have to negotiate. For example, one of the Thinking Differently youth groups collapsed because a group of existing friends seemed to exert peer pressure on each other not to engage
- Recruiting a group made up of small friendship clusters facilitated a positive group dynamic



## 10 Recognise that the needs of your client group might change

Because you are working with people who will have various things going on outside of your project or service, their needs might change. Although you will have developed an initial plan for your work you should also ensure there is some flexibility so that you can respond to needs and gaps you see as they emerge.

## Evaluating your project

### 11 Know that any positive changes will take time to appear

Early intervention projects are notoriously difficult to evaluate because it is often going to be many years before you can see the intended difference emerging. However, it is not impossible:

- **Adopt a steps of change or logic model approach to evaluating your project.** This will help you to identify some of the early differences which should be achieved before long-term behaviour changes can take place. For the Thinking Differently projects these included steps like increased confidence and self-esteem, increased awareness of how to keep themselves safer and increased access to group work activities.



- **Clarify the purpose of your evaluation,** especially if it's part of a multi-strand project and/or involves different partners. You should consider what the scope of the project is, what you can realistically learn in the timescales you have, and whether your data collection links back to the outcomes you have set. If this isn't agreed at the start you might spend a lot of time gathering things that aren't useful.
- **Speak to your funder(s) to make sure you (and they) have realistic expectations** about what can be achieved and evidenced within the duration of the grant. Most funders would be more than willing to have this conversation.
- **Access support for self-evaluation if required.** The Thinking Differently projects were supported in their data collection by researchers at Newcastle University who were conducting the external evaluation. Feedback from this was positive and the organisations felt that it had helped them to increase their knowledge about what to capture and given them confidence in doing so. There are a number of freely available resources but if you're unsure where to look, speak to other organisations you know or your funder(s) and they might be able to signpost you on.



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## Revisit self-reported scores with individuals at a later stage in the project

One organisation noted that when individuals were asked to reflect on their own happiness and wellbeing at the start of their participation with a group, they often gave overly positive ratings which project staff suspected were inaccurate. When returning to these scores at a later date, the young people often realised they had scored their happiness and wellbeing too highly and rectified this. This change in scores was often attributed to an improvement in either the ability to critically self-reflect or in the relationships which had been developed with staff.

Returning to self-reported scores, or recording feedback retrospectively, might therefore give more accurate information about the impact of your project and enable you to better understand what change has taken place and why.

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This report was published by  
**The Robertson Trust** in August 2017

Our thanks go to the organisations that delivered the Thinking Differently projects featured in this report:

**Healthy n Happy Community Development Trust - South Lanarkshire**  
**MYPAS, Midlothian**  
**YMCA Glenrothes, Fife**

## Next steps

Some of the Thinking Differently projects have been extended until 2018 to enable further learning to be gathered and shared. As a result we anticipate that there will be additional learning points published in the coming years.

The external evaluation report provides more detailed information and lessons for future work.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or evidence which you would like to share around this area please do not hesitate to contact Christine Scullion, Head of Innovation and Learning at The Robertson Trust, by email at [christinescullion@therobertsontrust.org.uk](mailto:christinescullion@therobertsontrust.org.uk) or by phone on **0141 353 7308**

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**Robertson House**  
152 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4TB  
**tel.** 0141 353 7300  
**web.** [therobertsontrust.org.uk](http://therobertsontrust.org.uk)  
[@RobertsonTrust](https://www.instagram.com/RobertsonTrust)

Scottish Charity Number SC002970  
VAT Registration Number 130905442

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