
# Reducing Re-Offending Group Evaluation

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# Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis and evaluation of the recently developed Reducing Re-offending Group pilot that was carried out in 2014 by staff at Addaction, a charity that works with people who are addicted to drugs and alcohol. The Reducing Re-offending Group pilot set out to give participants a better understanding of their criminal past and make sense of their actions to support desistance from future offending.

The method of analysis includes describing the model used and evaluating it using feedback gathered from participants and other stakeholders. Data collected from participants via Treatment Outcome Profile forms is also analysed as is official offending data obtained from the police.

The programme is a platform for helping participants understand their own criminality, the effects of their criminality on victims and moving on from criminal and risky behaviours. The feedback from participants and stakeholders alike is very positive – especially in relation to the sessions that included victims of crime. The original aim of the programme was to support desistance from crime and when all the data is brought together it is evident that participants have a better understanding of their criminal past and its effects.

An evaluation of the data collected, in conjunction with anecdotal evidence collected in interviews, suggests that participants who completed the programme have thus far not re-offended and credit the Reducing Re-offending Group as a major factor.

Recommendations and future directions put forward in this report after discussions with the programme facilitator include:

- Enhancing the exit strategy of the course
- Possibility of reducing the amount of sessions
- The need for current project graduates to engage in future Reducing Re-offending Groups
- Continued dialogue and co-operation with other agencies such as Victim Support

# 1. Introduction

It has long been established that offenders with complex needs find it difficult move on from criminal activities. This is further complicated when such offenders have a history of substance abuse which often necessitates the need for committing further acquisitive crimes in order to fund their particular habits. While initiatives exist in order to break this cycle of offending behaviour, it is clear that their success can vary dramatically depending on the structure of individual treatment plans or the responsiveness of the individuals taking part (Lowthian, 2010) especially following periods of imprisonment.

To tackle this problem of reoffending amongst individuals with a history of substance abuse, a new 15 week Reducing Re-offending Group (RRG) was developed by a substance abuse worker at Addaction in order to educate those taking part in various aspects of understanding criminality and its effects. The programme focused on three main areas: understanding personal criminality, understanding the effects of criminality and understanding desistance from crime.

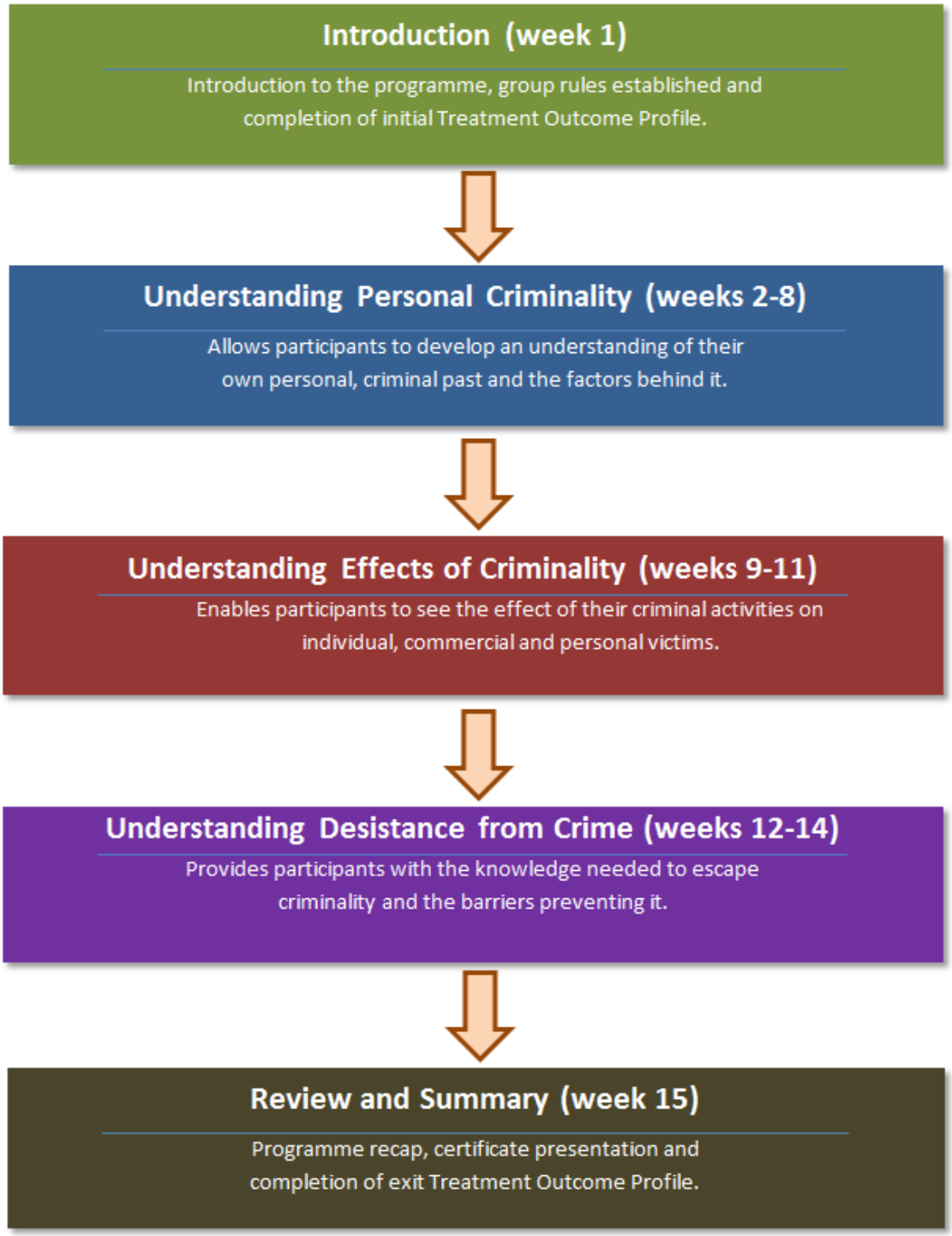
The pilot took place in 2014 and was attended by 10 men (of which 6 completed the programme) with a history of offending and substance abuse. Individuals were aged between 25 and 47 and all were either in long term accommodation or living with someone else. The people taking part also had different periods since their last conviction with some having several months and others having several years. Programme participants were chosen for their suitability and were deemed the most likely to benefit from such a programme in terms of successfully re-analysing their criminal past and desist from offending. Their suitability was based upon whether they were likely to actively engage with the group and join in discussions as well as benefitting from group interaction.

This report will present and evaluate the pilot programme to see whether the programme has achieved its original aim of reducing the offending behaviour of participants and will utilise discussions with programme participants as well as key stakeholders.

The outcomes of the programme along with recommendations as to the future of the initiative will also be put forward.

## 2. Reducing Re-offending Group Model

A diagram of the programme model is set out below and shows the main components of the course. The main parts of the model will be evaluated and explained further in the following section.




**Each session is 1.5 hours long and slideshows are used to deliver session content. Participants are actively encouraged to engage in debates. Several sessions feature guest speakers.**

# 3. Reducing Re-offending Group Discussion

The Reducing Re-Offending Group (RRG) was designed with the purpose of educating participants in various aspects of criminality and to help them understand their own journey through crime and the factors affecting it. It can be broadly split into three separate parts with the first eight weeks focusing on understanding criminality and the factors behind it, the following three weeks discussing the effects of criminal activity and the next three weeks analysing desistance. The final week was devoted to recapping the programme and presenting certificates. The main facilitator of the programme designed and conducted all the sessions and has an academic background in Criminology as well as working as a substance abuse worker for Addaction.

To assess the success of the programme, participants filled out an initial Treatment Outcome Profile (TOP) form (similar to the framework developed by the NHS and used in drug and alcohol treatment programmes) in the first week and a final form in the concluding session provided by Addaction. The TOPs recorded drug/alcohol use, criminal activities and health/social functioning.

## 3.1. Introduction and Understanding Personal Criminality

The first session was an introductory session that outlined the purpose of the RRG and allowed participants to define a collective definition of crime as well as establishing a set of group rules. The next seven aimed to provide a deep understanding of offending and the factors behind it. While other programmes may exist that utilise a similar methodology in an attempt to allow participants to better understand their paths, the RRG uses themes that would be recognisable to any University Criminology undergraduate student and is essentially a 'crash course' in criminological theory. Themes discussed in the RRG range from labelling theory to the criminogenic effects of imprisonment. Models that address the need for participants to understand factors behind their criminal behaviour can be successful in reducing reoffending (Fox et al, 2013) and the RRG aims to educate individuals about risky behaviours so that they can understand why such behaviours are criminogenic. This is also supported by exploring socio-economic factors and how they can impact personal, criminal careers.

## 3.2. Understanding the Effects of Criminality

Understanding the effects of crime on victims was the second phase of the programme and was crucial to the overall impact as confronting victims of crime can be a powerful experience and can help in the rehabilitation of offenders. Three types of victim were represented: commercial, individual and personal (family/friends). Each week had a different guest speaker which allowed for participants to meet with victims and facilitate the delivery of that session. These three sessions, in

particular the commercial and individual victim sessions, have elements of restorative justice which can be beneficial for both parties taking part. The potential benefits of restorative justice have been increasingly acknowledged by scholars (Doak, 2012) in recent years and look set to be a mainstay of future criminal justice policies. The importance of victim oriented sessions is clear from the literature in this subject and the sessions are an integral part to the delivery of the programme as a whole and how well received the sessions were by the participants will be discussed later. The three sessions provided a platform for the participants and guest speakers to engage in a two-way dialogue and allowed for a better understanding of offenders and victims alike.

### 3.3. Understanding Desistance from Crime

The following three weeks related to learning about desistance and how to move on from offending behaviours. In effect, the previous sessions provided a background for understanding the mechanisms behind offending and the victims of it. After participants gained this knowledge, the final few weeks were vital in explaining how this can be used to move on from their criminal past and the problems that may arise. The final weeks cemented the concept that desistance from crime is a choice and built upon the previous sessions that developed a reflective appreciation of the life experiences that shaped past decision making (Garbarino, 2011). Factors associated with maintaining desistance from criminality were also explained such as employment and forming legitimate relationships. A key session involved using an ambassador from Addaction to explain his personal biography and his journey through addiction, crime and subsequent recovery and was used as a visual representation of recovery and desistance is possible.

### 3.4. Review and Summary

The final session was split up into different parts. The programme was recapped and the group discussed what they had learned over the previous weeks and were encouraged to reflect upon which parts had the greatest impact. Certificates of completion were then presented to the participants who had successfully completed the programme which formally acknowledged that they had attended the programme and graduated. This was an important moment as some participants had never completed something of that length before and gave individuals something to take away with them on top of their new found knowledge.

## 3.5. Delivery

All the sessions involved PowerPoint presentations and group debates. Individuals were actively encouraged to join in debates as group bonding was imperative to the delivery of the programme. Therefore, group dynamics are a key tenet of programmes like this and would not be effective without adequate group interaction. Multi-agency involvement was also vital in the successful delivery as strong links with such agencies allows for continued use of guest speakers to support the programme.

Several of the sessions used an ambassador who has a history of offending and substance abuse to facilitate the delivery of the programme as an example of someone who has completed the journey of recovery. The ambassador, a volunteer at Addaction, was approached by the programme designer and asked if they would like to participate.

# 4. Participants' Evaluation

To properly assess the programme, it is important to evaluate the opinions and recommendations of the actual individuals who were involved with the programme. In order to complete this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three of the project graduates which focused on their journey through the programme, their experience/evaluation of the programme and a self-assessment of their offending behaviour before and after the programme. The three respondents were all male with two in their mid-30s and one in his late 40s.

The sample was acquired via convenience sampling as they were currently taking part in other activities at Derwentside Community Drugs Service in Consett and were approached by the programme facilitator as to whether they wished to take part in the interviewing process. The interviews were conducted in accordance with Northumbria University's ethics guidelines and the Data Protection Act. All respondents were given an information sheet detailing the process and what the aims of the project were as well as signing a consent form. As the sample only consisted of half the participants who successfully completed the programme, it is possible that the views recorded may not be representative of the whole group.

From discussions with the people who participated in the pilot, it is evident that they are extremely positive about the programme and what it achieved. It appears that some were reluctant to participate in the programme initially but changed their opinions once they had attended and noted that going to the group each week added much needed structure to their weekly routines.

> *"It's changed my view about getting involved with things like this."*
>
> (Respondent 2)

Participants spoke highly not only of the content of the course but also the group dynamics and how they bonded as a group and became more confident as the sessions went on. It is clear that group dynamics and how they interact with one another is a very important aspect of the RRG and is just as important as the actual content. Due to the delivery of the programme relying on regular group debates, it is obvious that this has had a positive impact on the confidence of individuals and this itself appears to be a main therapeutic effect of the programme as well as the content.

> *"Usually I wouldn't [want to get up and speak] but now I'd get up straight away if I had a presentation to do."*
>
> (Respondent 3)

A culture of respect quickly developed in the group which allowed for debates that included all members of the group to have an equal say and get their views across. This begs the question as to whether the RRG would be appropriate for any individual wishing to take part or would rely on

agencies specially picking individuals who they believe would benefit. Respondents commented that individuals would probably need to be "the right kind of person" who is willing to engage properly and be an active member of the group.

> *"Others will not be suited to it and others will be."*
>
> (Respondent 1)

When asked about the key moments of the RRG, all respondents spoke about the impact of the sessions relating to victims. The victim oriented session allowed participants to see the impact offending can have on other individuals in society and can begin the process of recreating inter-social bonds with communities ruptured following risky behaviours (Hopkins, 2012) or at least realise that such bonds can be damaged. The session with the individual victim of crime was particularly powerful due it having a beneficial effect on both parties with respondents commenting that they were able to reassure the victim that they were not targeted for any reason.

> *"I thought the victim support thing was fantastic… It touched everybody… The fact that we could alleviate her fears and make her feel safe in her own environment. It felt so good that you could give something back."*
>
> (Respondent 1)

Other respondents commented on the session relating to 'forgotten' victims of crime such as the family and friends of offenders which was facilitated by the use of a guest speaker. This was very effective as respondents were able to relate to the stories being told.

> *"The [session] with the mother, for me, a lot of the stuff was very similar that's went on with me."*
>
> (Respondent 3)

Respondents spoke about how well the course was structured and that it provided a platform for re-examining their own behaviours in a new light. This was the first step in the journey through the programme which permitted participants to make sense of past actions. The second step was essentially to confront these past actions by meeting victims of crime and take responsibility for them. Once this had happened, participants could learn how to move on from old habits and behaviours.

The main facilitator of the programme spoke about enhancing the exit strategy at the end of the course and put forward his ambition to secure some form of employment for individuals who had completed it successfully. Respondents reacted positively to this suggestion and commented that it would add an extra incentive to taking part.

Respondents were also keen to re-engage with the programme if it were to be run again and would seek to be involved in it in a facilitator capacity to help deliver the programme.

> *"The course made me want to go out and help other people"*
> (Respondent 1)

In terms of taking a more evaluative view of the programme, respondents did not comment on the structure or content of the course but focused on other barriers that may affect the success. As previously mentioned, respondents remarked that some people would be more suited to the programme than others and great care needs to be taken to select suitable candidates that would respect the group rules and engage fully with the process. Transport was also a concern as respondents noted that people taking part in future courses may not be able to afford to travel to the location.

From discussions with the participants, it is apparent that they are positive about the programme and that it exceeded their original expectations. Group dynamics and group bonding clearly play a big role in the success of the programme and it is important that this is replicated in any future endeavours of this kind. While the respondents were positive about all aspects of the programme and commented that it did help them understand their past behaviours and the factors behind it, it is evident that the victim focused sessions had more impact and much of the discussions revolved around this.

# 5. Stakeholders' Evaluation

Feedback relating to the programme was sought from other stakeholders from various agencies in the North East. The stakeholders are involved with providing other avenues of support for the participants of the programme in different guises (NHS, Probation Service etc.). Other stakeholders include Victim Support who reported back on the sessions relating to understanding the impact on victims. Feedback was collected via emails collated by the RRG facilitator.

The support stakeholders, who have links to the participants involved in the actual programme, echoed the sentiments expressed by the respondents during the interview process and were enthusiastic about the possibility of future involvement and the RRG moving forward. Two themes in particular emerge from the feedback and relate to the actual group dynamics and the sessions involving victims.

## 5.1. Drug Service Stakeholders

It is evident that the participants enjoyed the atmosphere of the group and that they bonded throughout the duration of the course and built up a rapport and an atmosphere of trust and respect.

> *"They enjoyed the content of the course and the comradeship they built up with the other members of the course."*
>
> (Senior Drugs Practitioner)

> *"[My client] felt a valued member of the group and was supported to express his views without feeling threatened or intimidated."*
>
> (Social Worker)

The feedback and evaluation relating to the sessions that revolved around meeting victims was also very positive and stakeholders recognised the importance and impact of these sessions and commented on how the participants received the sessions.

> *"[My client] described getting a great deal out of meeting victims of crime… and admitted that it gave him a greater insight into the consequences of offending."*
>
> (Offender Manager)

In addition, stakeholders also noted the importance of having an ambassador involved in the delivery of the programme who has a history of substance abuse and offending noting that many of the participants in the group had not seen a "visible recovery" before attending the group sessions and this was very beneficial.

## 5.2. Drug Service Stakeholders

The positive comments extend to other stakeholders involved in Victim Support and suggest that the sessions relating to victim impact were beneficial not only for participants but for the guest speakers. The session in which the guest was an individual victim of crime seemed to provide closure by alleviating her fears and assuring them she was not specifically targeted. Victim Support put forward that they would welcome future involvement in the programme which is significant as participants identified such sessions as a key part of the course with the greatest impact. The account below describing the therapeutic effect of offenders and victims meeting together is well documented (Wemmers, 2009) and shows that the effect is two-way and can benefit both parties.

> *"The greatest outcome for me was to see how they received the victim story and understood how crime can impact people for a long time… I also believe, following discussion with the victim, that it was beneficial for her to attend… She felt some closure after attending."*
>
> (Victim Support)

# 6. Outcomes

The outcomes and analysis of the success of the programme can be determined by utilising the TOPs and offending data from the police in order to see whether the course resulted in reducing offending. The TOPs consist of an entry and exit questionnaire that is completed by participants of the programme. The questionnaires contain three sections, the first section establishes drug/alcohol use in the previous four months, the second section relates to criminal activity in the previous four months and the final section consists of questions about psychological and physical health. There are limitations that exist when using such questionnaires with the main drawback being that they are a self-assessment and may not be accurate or reliable. However, the forms still allow for reporting crimes that may not have been dealt with by agencies such as the police and therefore provide a reflection of participants' offending behaviour.

## 6.1. Offending Data

As only a single pilot has been conducted, it is difficult to assess the true impact of the programme but the data, when used in conjunction with interviews, is encouraging. The six Individuals who completed the course have not been caught reoffending by the police since completing the programme. The table below outlines the ten participants who took part in the course and their offence history as well as documenting any subsequent offences recorded by the police since completing the course. Six of the ten individuals completed the course.

**Table 1. Offence History of Participants (Official Police Data)**

| Participant | Last Conviction | Total Number of Offences | Months Since Last Conviction | Course Completion | Offences Since Completing the Course |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **7/5/02** | **4** | **150** | **Yes** | **0** |
| 2 | **30/05/08** | **4** | **78** | **Yes** | **0** |
| 3 | **13/11/01** | **1** | **156** | **Yes** | **0** |
| 4 | **24/08/12** | **22** | **27** | **Yes** | **0** |
| 5 | **12/08/11** | **8** | **39** | **Yes** | **0** |
| 6 | **12/05/11** | **74** | **42** | **Yes** | **0** |
| 7 | 12/11/12 | 87 | 24 | No | 0 |
| 8 | 26/08/14 | 100 | 3 | No | 0 |
| 9 | 25/03/14 | 11 | 8 | No | 0 |
| 10 | 4/09/14 | 44 | 2 | No | 1 |
| | | 355 | | | |

(Source: Official data from Police National Computer)

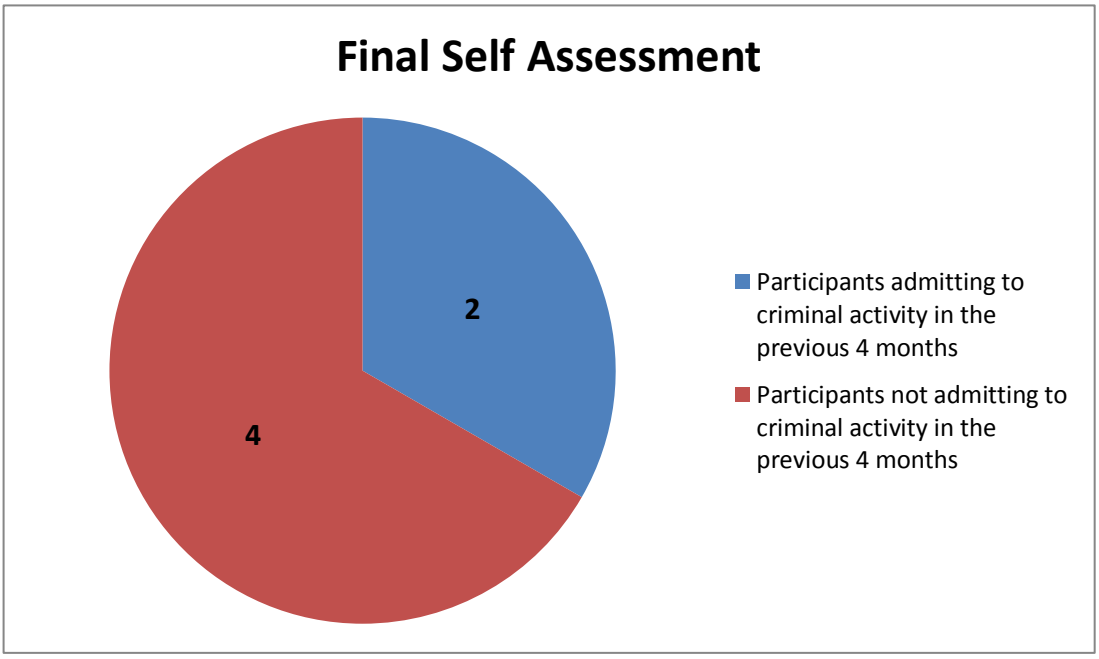
The data above shows that those who have completed the programme successfully have not re-offended. Whether or not these individuals would have offended if they had not taken part is unclear, but what is evident is that when used in conjunction with the qualitative accounts examined

earlier a picture emerges of individuals re-assessing their attitudes towards their own criminal pasts and reluctance to fall back into old offending behaviours. The figures above indicating arrests for offences confirm that, thus far, they have succeeded in that respect. Three of the participants left the course for legitimate reasons (i.e. to take up employment) and one was removed from the programme for breaking the group rules and has since reoffended. It must also be noted that the participants who successfully completed the programme have long gaps since their last offence and this may be a reason as to why they have not offended because they were already at low risk of offending regardless. The table also highlights the extent at which the criminal histories of the participants differ, with some being prolific offenders and others having very low numbers of offences which could indicate that some are much more likely to offend than others and especially when combining it with the length of time since last conviction.

The police data tells only part of the picture and the TOPs can be analysed to show the self-reported criminal activity. In the initial TOP forms, all six (100%) of the individuals who had completed the course admitted to committing a criminal act in the previous four months for which they were not arrested for and all had admitted a wide range of offences ranging from burglary to assault.

The final TOP forms completed at the end of the RRG measured crimes committed since starting the course (i.e. in the past four months). The chart below displays the analysis.

**Chart 1. Offence History of Participants (Final Self-Assessment)**




(Source: Data from 6 Treatment Outcome Profiles)

The initial reporting, before starting the RRG, showed that all participants had committed a criminal act in the previous four months. The final assessment shows that 2 (33%) of the 6 participants had committed a criminal act since starting the course. One of whom admitted to drugs possession while the second admitted to several offences. Given the offence histories of the participants reported in the official data coupled with the self-reporting of a range of offences, the reduction in offending (albeit for a four month period) is apparent but not complete. There are many other factors that can affect re-offending and although the participants interviewed were positive about the RRG their personal situation can also change their likelihood of re-offending. For example, a person's age and housing situation can have an effect and all factors need to be taken in to account before concluding that the RRG was responsible for stopping offending behaviour.

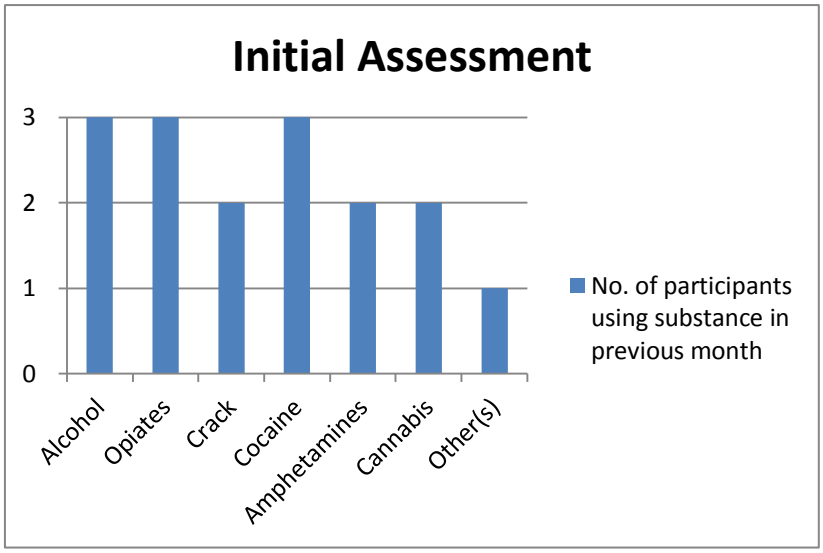
The TOPs also provided an insight into why they wanted to change their offender behaviours with respondents commenting on "not wanting to go to jail" as a recurring theme. The data and statistics do not show the full picture and must be used in conjunction with the qualitative interviews to properly assess the impact of the RRG. From discussions with the participants, they cite the RRG as a big factor in wanting to change their behaviours because it made them more aware of their actions and the factors underpinning them.

## 6.2. Substance Abuse

The amount of drug abuse and alcohol usage reported was also in decline when comparing the initial and final TOPs. Examination of the final TOPs showed that 50% of the participants who had finished the course successfully abstained completely from alcohol and drugs for the previous three months.

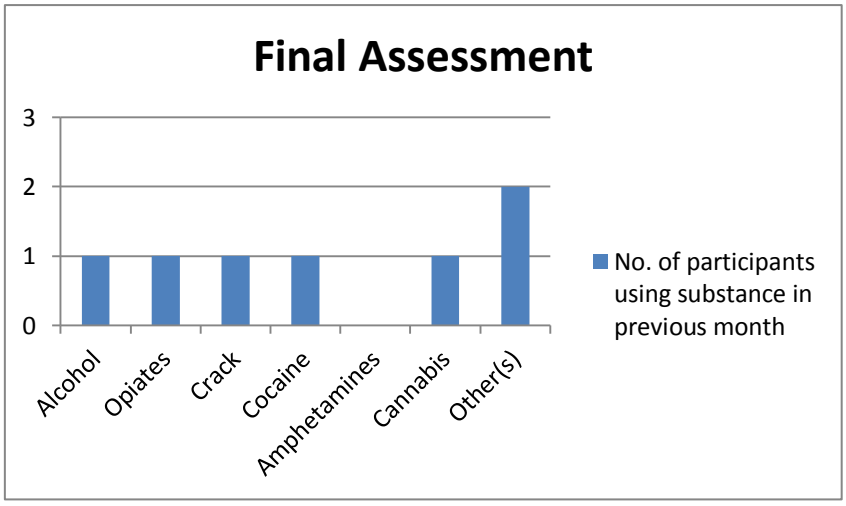
Below is a set of graphs showing data from the TOPs. The data presented shows the amount of individuals who had reported using drugs or alcohol in the previous month.

**Chart 2. Substance Abuse Reporting Before RRG (Self-Assessment)**




(Source: Data from 6 Treatment Outcome Profiles)

**Chart 3. Offence History of Participants After RRG (Self-Assessment)**




(Source: Data from 6 Treatment Outcome Profiles)

There is a general decrease of amount of people using each substance (with the exception of 'other'). While this is encouraging and shows a decrease in overall drug use in the previous month, it is difficult to know whether this was due to the RRG or other treatment services used. It should also be noted that in the final assessment graph, most of the substance use was by one individual (admitting to 5 substances).

## 6.3. Health and Social Functioning

The course appears to have had less impact on participants' health and social functioning with very little change when analysing the initial and exit TOPs.

**Table 2. Data Relating to Health and Social Functioning**

| | Initial Assessment | Final Assessment |
|---|---|---|
| **Physical Health** | 12.0 | 13.0 |
| **Psychological Health** | 7.7 | 9.2 |
| **Social Health** | 13.8 | 13.7 |
| **Quality of Life** | 12.8 | 13.7 |

*(Mean score measured on a scale of 1-20 with 20 being good)*

(Source: Data from 6 Treatment Outcome Profiles)

The table above displays the mean self-assessment scores from all 6 participants who completed the programme. The change is very minimal and could suggest that participants did not receive support from other services in order to improve their health and social functioning especially in relation to psychological health. However, self-assessments of this kind are not entirely accurate and rely on subjective terminology which participants can interpret the meanings of the questions in different ways.

One thing that is clear from the forms is that respondents were particularly positive when reporting their experience of RRG which averaged out to 19.7 out of 20 (on a scale of 1-20 with 20 being 'good') which ties in with what was discovered in the qualitative interviews with participants.

# 7. Future Directions and Recommendations

There are several options available for enhancing the future direction of the programme should it ever be rolled out further. The recommendations and future directions of the programme come from discussions with the staff involved who were involved in developing the programme.

What happens to the participants once they have completed the programme (the exit strategy) is an area that needs to be developed as there is currently no strategy in place such as entering employment or work experience upon completion. Enhancing the exit strategy is an issue relating to the pilot, and the key facilitator and designer of the programme has been keen to develop the exit strategy by contacting local firms who utilise positive discrimination in their employment strategy. This is an excellent step which could allow for future employment opportunities for individuals who complete the course and provide an incentive.

A future direction could also involve adapting and streamlining the programme in order to make use of the time more efficiently by condensing certain aspects of the programme. It is apparent that the sessions relating to victim impact were particularly well received and should remain in their current format. However, the first eight weeks regarding understanding criminality could well be reviewed further and possibly condensed with the aim of reducing the length of the programme if desired.

Graduates of the programme, or other former service users, should be encouraged to engage with the programme as a course facilitator if it were to be rolled out in the future. Staff and participants alike were particularly positive about the involvement of a former offender during the pilot and this seems to be an integral part of the programme delivery. Respondents during the interview showed willingness to take part if such an opportunity arose.

As identified earlier from discussions with participants, any future implementation of this model would rely on identifying suitable candidates who would engage properly with the process and actively take part in group debates and discussions. Service providers are in a particularly good position to do this as they are best placed to identify such individuals in a similar way to how the pilot's cohort was established. However, care must still be taken to allow the programme to be inclusive and not just be aimed at people who were at very low-risk of re-offending anyway (McGuire, 2002).

Finally, there could be an opportunity to redesign and improve the TOP forms so that they adequately assess the impact of the programme. An improvement would be adding the "what stopped you?" part of the crime recording as a separate section to allow for a fuller response.

# 8. Conclusion

The pilot RRG appears to have been a success in so far as it achieved its original aims of educating participants in various areas of understanding criminality and promoting desistance. This is supported by evidence from official police data regarding offences committed by participants as well as information recorded by the TOPs.

While it is difficult to credit the RRG completely with promoting desistance due to the small sample size, discussions with participants of the programme revealed that they were very positive about the programme, in particular the sessions with the victims of crime which they described as the key moment of the course. Stakeholders with connections to the participants of the programme also spoke highly of the course as did representatives of Victim Support who expressed interest in participating in the future.

The programme could be developed further and delivered to other groups in order to fully assess its impact and effectiveness. It is an approach to rehabilitating offenders and supporting desistance from crime and could be used in conjunction with other support packages in order to deliver the best outcomes for service users.

# 9. References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