

RETAIL THERAPY

An innovative Brighton scheme is attempting to drive a wedge between shoplifting and drug use. **Jon Silverman** investigates

There was a time when entering a shop in Brighton city centre meant a game of hide-and-seek for Phil: seeking out targets, then hiding from security staff as he shoplifted goods to sell for the cash he needed to feed his drug habit. But it wasn't a game, it was Phil's work.

"I'd be at it from nine in the morning to 10 at night. Once the main stores had closed, I would rob off-licences and garages. I was on crack and heroin costing a minimum of £200 a day. Often it was much more. I used to steal to order. People would tell me what they needed and they would pay me about half of the retail value."

Phil was frequently caught and taken to court. He was given more community sentences and fines than he can remember. It was when he was on the point of being sent to prison that his life began to change. He met Peter Hatfield, drugs outreach worker with the charity Crime Reduction Initiative. "Phil's name had been flagged up as one of 20 persistent and prolific shoplifters," says Peter. "Between them, they had more than 900 convictions and we decided that Phil was a good target for intervention."

Sussex Police and the Brighton and Hove Business Crime Reduction Partnership, a grouping of 240 shops and businesses, drew up this list of 20. With Home Office funding of £80,000 and the collaboration of the local drugs team, the Brighton shoplifting project was born – a groundbreaking initiative to tackle the principal motive for retail crime.

"Although the 20 shoplifters on the list had convictions for various offences," said Peter, "the common factor was drugs. So, we needed to address the factors behind the drug-taking."

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Since the project started almost half of offenders have shown improvement

In Phil's case, these factors were a need to get treatment, and access to benefits and accommodation (he had been sleeping rough). "It's astonishing that during his long offending career, Phil had never been put on methadone or given any kind of treatment or rehab order by the courts," adds Peter. "So he was just being punished and offered no support. Once we got him into a proper residential treatment programme, he began to improve. Since the project started two years ago, I have worked

Crime reduction in action: clockwise from top left, a self-help seminar, Brighton Pier, on the streets, the briefing



with 43 offenders and about two-thirds have shown improvement, reducing or stopping drug use and committing less crime."

The project has the backing of the Brighton drug and alcohol action team. "Retailers had been telling me about the problem of persistent shoplifting but little was happening to tackle the underlying causes," says John Patience, the team's development officer. "Since we had already done some work with the police on sharing information, it seemed sensible to launch the project. Not only are there benefits to offenders but shop staff feel safer too. The issue now is how to keep it going. We had £22,000 from the Home Office Safer and Stronger Communities Fund to help us this year, but, beyond that, the future is more uncertain."

For Phil, though, the future looks a lot brighter than his past of drugs and crime. "Some of the shop security staff recognise me from the old days but now I don't have to dodge them. I can even stop for a chat."



Details of the Brighton Crime Reduction Initiative can be found at www.crinet.co.uk

THE HIGH COST OF CRIME

Crime against business is estimated to cost Britain a staggering £19bn a year. In Brighton, retail theft costs each business a minimum of £5,000 annually. The Brighton and Hove Business Crime Reduction Partnership was formed five years ago to fight back. "My task is to feed the names and photos of persistent shoplifters to the police and to Peter Hatfield and John Patience," says Lisa Perretta, the charity's manager.

"Among the group that the project has targeted, retail crime has dropped by 50 to 60 per cent so it's clearly having an impact. We also run a town-link radio network that keeps the stores in contact with each other and with me so that information can be passed on in real time. But it's a never-ending battle to keep shop theft under control."

Lisa acknowledges that although shoplifting in the town centre, covered by her partnership, has gone down, overall

shop theft in Brighton has risen. It is this displacement that concerns David Read of the Home Office business crime team. "The message from the project is mixed," he says. "There have been some excellent drugs interventions. And people who have been shoplifting since they were young have been weaned away because their drugs problem is being tackled. But in other parts of Brighton, shoplifting is still a problem. It's a fertile area for more work to be done."

The Home Office business crime strategy was launched in 2003. Among a range of initiatives is Shopwatch, in which shop-floor staff are trained as special constables to combat retail crime. It began in London and Birmingham and is now running in 10 police force areas.

For more information, see the business crime minisite www.crimereduction.gov.uk/businesscrimeminisite01.htm



Brighton's vibrant retail heart has long been a magnet for shoplifters