

# **Thames Valley Partnership** Schools in Action Programme

## **Taking Stock and Moving Forward**

An Evaluation with Outcomes  
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# 1. Introduction

## What is Schools in Action?

The Thames Valley Partnership is a charity that promotes and supports good practice in community safety through partnership working throughout Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

Schools in Action forms an important part of Thames Valley Partnership's Young Citizens Programme which has the following aims: -

- Empower young people to make a positive contribution to their communities
- Encourage confidence and self-esteem to make young people less likely to become victims of crime and more able to resist its temptations
- Prevent problems in the longer term by supporting children and young people 'at risk'

The aim of the Schools in Action programme specifically is to encourage schools and school children to undertake community safety and citizenship projects in their community (which is understood to encompass projects working in the immediate school community as well as wider community settings).

Constituent parts of the programme, which has run since 1993, include pump priming grants, practical support and advice and links to other projects. The programme is structured round a competition, which recognises quality projects through cash prizes and awards. One distinctive element is the contribution of the High Sheriffs of all three counties who visit each school and take part in judging the competition and awarding prizes.

Aspects of the operation have been 'inherited' and others have evolved over the past ten years - providing an organic sustaining culture but also indicating a need for periodic review (hence this evaluation!)

One significant development has been a progressive shift in the focus of projects away from overt community safety and crime reduction schemes (road safety and anti-vandalism projects for instance) and towards more projects promoting and exploring citizenship and internal support mechanisms in schools (buddying, school councils etc). In this the programme reflects a shifting agenda both in schools and in the wider community safety debate. Another major change was deliberately brought about by the introduction of the Jubilee Award in 2001/2002. This award is only available to schools or projects catering for pupils with special needs including behavioural problems, disabilities and learning problems and ensures that those schools are not disadvantaged by competing against mainstream schools.

The Thames Valley Partnership consists of permanent and seconded staff from a wide range of professional backgrounds (including probation, police, prisons) and almost all of them, along with the High Sheriffs, are involved, one way or another, in supporting the programme through the year. Schools in Action is funded through corporate sponsorship.

## What is this report about?

As a Thames Valley Partnership Associate, my brief has been to carry out an evaluation of the Schools in Action programme from the perspective of an informed outsider and also to contribute to development as a critical friend.

During 2002/3 I spent time with six Schools in Action projects, interviewed four High Sheriffs and four members of the Thames Valley Partnership staff as well as filling out the picture through conversations with various stake holders, including the Vodafone UK Foundation to provide a corporate sponsor perspective.

Having concluded these consultations and observed the programme in operation through the year, I provided a comprehensive briefing paper for consideration by the key Thames Valley Partnership staff working on Schools in Action. We then spent half a day together, first reviewing and testing my findings and then drawing up proposals and action points for future development of the programme.

The body of this report consists of an abstract of that briefing paper, considering both the strengths of the programme and its limitations. In the final section, by way of conclusion, I detail the specific outcomes and proposals reached as a result of our joint planning session.

## 2. Taking Stock

### Strengths and Successes of Schools in Action

**It is clear that the programme works well for the schools involved and is highly valued by them.**

#### **What is it that participating schools like about Schools in Action?**

The award of small grants is, of course, welcome: -

*For us the money was important for allowing an activity that wouldn't have happened otherwise with a needy and marginalised group.*

However, I think it would be a mistake to see cash as the principal motivator.

The programme is structured around a competition with significant prizes but, again, few schools see that as the main reason to get involved: -

*The competition was not central - the main point was the project itself (the competition might be more of an anxiety generator).*

*We weren't really hooked on the competition (although it was a boost when we won!)*

So if it isn't money or competition, what does turn schools on to Schools in Action? At its centre, Schools in Action represents a deliberate drive to support aspects of children and young people's development which fall outside conventional curriculum constraints. This applies equally to aspiring students in academically successful schools and to projects working with excluded or challenging young people.

Specific motivators for schools to get involved in Schools in Action and, by extension the intrinsic value of the programme itself, can be broken down into constituent parts:

For a start, status and recognition are cited as being very important. In particular, the validation of the sort of project generated through Schools in Action, socially developmental and often extra curricular, is felt to be crucial: -

*The external status of the grant may be even more important (than the money itself) - it proves you have passed muster!*

*The outside element (including a visit) leads to recognition from the 'powers that be'.*

*Schools in Action gives a validity and status to important work outside the straightjacket of the national curriculum.*

Outside visits to the schools play a significant part, providing both status and answerability: -

*The visit helped - it provided the focus for the students to consolidate and pull everything together for a presentation.*

*The students regard an outsider coming to visit as an honour and the visit gives profile*

For some the visit from the High Sheriff is felt to be highly significant: -

*Make no mistake for us, the High Sheriff's visits were very important - they provided focus, an event to remember, an opportunity for success, recognition and an opportunity for parents to celebrate. The personal qualities of the High Sheriffs and their wives, as well as their status (next to the Queen) has been excellent with very challenging young people.*

However, being visited by the High Sheriff specifically is only considered crucial by some projects: -

*Any representative from Thames Valley Partnership could serve to give status - it shows that what we are doing matters and also that we are answerable for the money.*

The clear structure and timetable offered by Schools in Action provide a context for work which might otherwise suffer from lack of focus:

*The motivation is not the money (which, for us was just lubrication) but the catalyst for action. The structure provides something to aim for and a way of looking outward. It puts it in a context and makes it more than just an idea out of the blue.*

*The documentation we received gave us the focus for what we needed to do. The Young Citizens handbook is our bible.*

Sharing ideas with like-minded professionals is important: -

*Reading about other people's ideas in the Schools in Action literature was really vital.*

*It was really good to be able to go to the presentations to share ideas.*

Efficient and accessible administration was specified as significant by almost every school and should be celebrated as a fundamental rather than incidental factor in the success of the operation: -

*I find the Thames Valley Partnership very accessible and user friendly - people at the end of the 'phone can listen and give you a proper response. There is a degree of common sense and flexibility.*

*The application is quite simple; groups are supported and get feedback.*

I had the impression that this contrasted strongly with an expectation of other competitive or grant giving structures being obscure, time consuming or unhelpful.

### **What do the team at Thames Valley Partnership value about Schools in Action?**

For Thames Valley Partnership staff it is important that Schools in Action allows schools to be innovative, think more widely and take a leap into difficult territory. The programme also provides staff direct access to the 'real' world of schools, distinct from much of the Partnership's more strategic work. Witnessing concrete progress during visits to schools and celebrating young people's achievements at the presentation event both provide important validation of the Partnership's wider vision: -

*The activities are really important, they are rewarding and useful and it is always enjoyable getting out to do the actual visits.*

The structure of Schools in Action is felt to have evolved and become tighter over the years, a specific instance being the introduction of the project record book which has strengthened and streamlined the process.

The programme can also have wider benefits, for instance bringing private sector funding directly into schools and raising the profile of the Thames Valley Partnership's work through ongoing contact with new High Sheriffs each year.

### **What do the High Sheriffs like about Schools in Action?**

Involvement with Schools in Action has been of central significance to some High Sheriffs:-

*In my opinion it is very useful for some High Sheriffs to have this handle to work with. For many it is the most interesting aspect and it may be the most beneficial.*

Like many schools, the High Sheriffs feel that the structure, timetables and targets provided by Schools in Action add particular value. Recognition and celebration of achievements beyond the academic curriculum are seen as important: -

*Young people have the opportunity to achieve recognition and will be applauded and encouraged*

*It challenges schools to become involved and to tackle projects which are not strictly on the curriculum. Many children don't get this at home.*

The potential for wider tactical benefits through the involvement of High Sheriffs is also acknowledged: -

*High Sheriffs can be enablers - they have contacts and links and can sometimes generate funds.*

*Involvement helps on a broader scale to raise the profile of the Partnership. It impacts not only on the understanding of the High Sheriffs but also of their circle and contacts.*

## What does a corporate sponsor gain from working with Thames Valley Partnership on the Schools in Action programme?

It is acknowledged that the small scale of Schools in Action projects and their local impact can make them unlikely to yield big or easy pay-offs in terms of publicity. Without this obvious incentive, it was interesting to hear the views of Vodafone UK Foundation, one of the programme's corporate sponsors. Clearly, involvement with Thames Valley Partnership contributes to a company's vision of its corporate responsibility but why get involved and stay involved with this particular project?

*Thames Valley Partnership are brilliant at giving feedback - they have high expectations and question themselves - a lot of organisations don't. With Thames Valley Partnership we don't have to initiate the 'proving' because it is driven by their own in house standards. The partnership working is really good. We get a prompt and accurate response to any requests for information and so on.*

*Schools in Action offers motivation and structure - there is a beginning a middle and an end and recognition of achievements by the young people.*

*I've found that it isn't the big grants of money that always have the most effect. There is much more going on than that. In fact Schools in Action delivers much **more** than we would expect for the money. I like the small grants aspect - which we couldn't possibly administer ourselves. We are spoilt by getting a whole lot going at a grass roots level which also shows real results we can feel confident in.*

## Drawbacks and ideas for development

Clearly Schools in Action is a well regarded and well delivered programme. But what could be done differently? Are there different choices that could be made? In this section I highlight a range of challenging points raised with admirable forthrightness by a variety of stakeholders.

We should recognise that the programme provides a sophisticated service, far removed from the relatively simple task of small grant administration. As such it is not cheap to run (estimated annual running cost, including grants and prizes, is in the region £65,000) and it is far from being 'low maintenance'. Significant demands are placed on the Thames Valley Partnership team - the majority of whom are committed to the programme, to a greater or lesser extent, at some point during the year.

The administrative burden is considerable: -

*On paper it should be straightforward but in reality it's really hard to get hold of people (in schools). You could spend weeks trying to pin them down and fixing and co-ordinating High Sheriffs' visits is very demanding.*

Liasing closely with school based projects is a specialised and time consuming task which does not always sit easily with the priorities of seconded staff with other community safety specialisms:

*An hour or two to visit is fine - it's the effort and distraction factor before hand, trying to contact the right person in school and so on, that's always bugging you.*

*I'm not sure being in schools has made much difference to my work - oh it was lovely and may have been personally developmental - but as a specialist secondee I'm not sure there's a cross over to my work.*

An annual timetable which attempts to match the school year to the High Sheriff's year can exacerbate these administrative problems. The High Sheriff's year (April to March) doesn't fit well with the school year and generates a 'bottle neck' of visits and judging in January, February and March. Schools also experience difficulties generating projects and seeing them through during a part year (ie between September and March).

Although Schools in Action is a generalist programme, offering low threshold access to any school in the Thames Valley area, actual coverage of schools is proportionally quite small (there are approximately 1,000 schools in the area - see the summary of statistics). It is not always easy to establish contact with as wide a range of schools as the programme would wish. The Unitary structure of the Berkshire Local Education Authorities presents particular difficulties in recruiting schools to the programme.

There can also be conflict between an open access approach, making the programme available to all schools, and an understandable urge to focus participation where it will be most effective. A significant amount of refocusing has already happened through the introduction of the new Jubilee Award for special schools in 2001/2002.

*I'm pleased to see it embrace more difficult situations and special schools where challenge and recognition can go along way with staff as well as children. Dividing the awards has given more focus. We could maybe benefit from more focus still.*

However, it is far from self-evident what a tighter focus would really mean. Would the programme focus on areas of perceived greatest need or on schools where the community safety agenda has so far made little impact or, alternatively, on schools where similar work is already taking place and where there is a better chance of successful implementation?

Entry to the scheme doesn't stress or insist on the competitive element and this is appreciated by many schools. However, the current, possibly ambivalent, attitude to the competition does have a down side:

*Sometimes we don't follow through enough, it can be disappointing when we give a lot of support and they don't enter the competition. It feels like something is missing at the end.*

*High Sheriffs sometimes find it disappointing when nothing comes in (in terms of a competition entry).*

Others would prefer to move away from the element of competition altogether and focus more on celebration and sharing of good practice and good ideas: -

*The self esteem of the presentation event is good. I propose you could forget the competition though. Everyone could take their stuff to a non judgmental presentation and get the recognition which is really valuable.*

It is clear that many High Sheriffs have enjoyed their involvement in Schools in Action greatly and have found it to be a profitable use of their time and office. However, I also feel that new High Sheriffs may struggle to grasp what Thames Valley Partnership in general and Schools in Action in particular are all about. This is not in itself a bad thing - a valid objective may be to widen the understanding of people of influence. However it is probably important to remember that issues of central importance to Thames Valley Partnership (such as peer mentoring or restorative justice) may represent new and possibly alien territory for some of the Sheriffs. Several specific objections may reflect a value system at odds with that of the Partnership, but they nonetheless need hearing: -

*Most of the projects coming through were exactly the same sort of idea and I have my doubts about the usefulness of school councils.*

*Projects are worthy but how useful are they in the over all run of things? It's all very well meaning but... Frankly it is 'de minimis'.*

*It would be more meaningful to hand out more money to less schools. More schools might have applied. I'd have found it more valuable to give out bigger amounts.*

*Is this a good use of High Sheriff's time? It may be educative for us but is it a good use of our time? The Sheriffs had to sit through the best part of a day sorting the awards.*

Schools would welcome more opportunity to meet, share ideas and celebrate achievements as a very positive development.

*Meeting and sharing and encouraging between the schools - more of this would be good. I would have liked to meet with other schools early on - particularly people in similar situations.*

*It would be nice to have a more general opportunity for students to meet and see what others have done*

*Successes should also be celebrated more widely - in the Times Educational Supplement, for instance.*

There was also enthusiasm for setting up partnership working with other schools: -

*What I'd really like to do is link up with another school doing buddying.*

Directing school communication where it is most likely to be effective (most often the Pastoral Deputy or Head of Year) was recommended. On the other hand, establishing projects at senior management level was also recognised as a priority if real lasting change is to be achieved: -

*In order to make a real impact; developments need to be mainstreamed by putting them in the school development plan*

Finally, it should be noted that various stakeholders want more, and that they want more of different things! Some want more thorough briefings for High Sheriffs, more consistent competition entry, better and more consistent documentation of projects from Thames Valley Partnership link staff, more even geographical spread of entrants or, simply, more schools entering and greater coverage on the ground. At the same time it is recognised that the programme already exerts heavy demands and, indeed, that: -

*Schools in Action has the capacity to soak up every bit of extra capacity at Thames Valley Partnership if we let it.*



### 3. Moving Forward

#### Core Purpose and Specific Outcomes

Having completed the consultation process, a briefing paper was circulated to five members of the Thames Valley Partnership team. The team spent half a day working with the evaluator to consider the findings and decide what, if anything, should be done in response.

A wide range of options for change was considered. Some of these indicated relatively minor adjustments, whereas space was also allowed to discuss more radical options for revising or refocusing the programme.

#### Core purpose

The group concluded that the value of Schools in Action continued to lie in the opportunity it offered for the full spectrum of schools across the Thames Valley to embark on innovative projects outside the conventional curriculum constraints. That this wide target group would result in limited 'market penetration' was an inevitable and accepted consequence. This large and varied catchment of potential applicants is likely to require an increasingly rigorous selection process. The principle of 'added value' has been established and will play a significant part in ensuring that the strongest applications from already strong schools will not necessarily always win through against more tentative or fledgling proposals which, with support, could make a real difference. Rather than being prescriptive, the programme will continue to respond to the judgement of the schools and school pupils in particular in deciding what kind of project is suitable for them.

#### Specific outcomes

- **A Revised timetable** will establish a tighter deadline for applications, create more time to support schools and allow for simpler and more streamlined administration.
- **Assessment meeting.** This is to be set earlier to allow decisions to reach schools before they break for October half term. The aim is that this assessment meeting will allow a small, focussed Thames Valley Partnership team to make considered judgements about the applications from across the whole area (rather than the previous practice of dividing them by county). This meeting will determine which projects to take forward but will also, crucially, establish the degree and type of support needed and will allocate a member of the team to provide that support to each project.
- **Number of projects.** It was agreed to place a realistic upper limit of 30 projects to be accepted and properly supported each year.
- **Grants** should be to an agreed maximum of £500 per project, which should be in proportion to the needs of each project and not a standard allocation.
- **Role of High Sheriffs.** It is often difficult and time consuming for all concerned if the High Sheriffs are to be fully involved the grant allocation and judging process. It is proposed to refine the High Sheriffs' role, involving them where they can best be valued and, in particular, where their unique status will be appreciated in recognising the efforts of young people.

- **Judging** criteria should be revisited and kept consistent with application criteria which now focus more on citizenship type issues rather than explicit crime reduction topics. It is also proposed that the judging function should not require the High Sheriffs to return after their year has ended but is carried out instead by the team with the help of external/independent judges.
- **Prizes.** The range of prizes is considered to have become unduly complex. It was agreed that these should be consolidated to three Thames Valley prizes of £2,000 each and that these should be awarded in three categories – primary, secondary and special. However, there should also be an enhanced award, in the form of a cup or plaque, for all participants who submit evidence. Rather than presenting a separate category of prizes, High Sheriffs could opt to make a relevant contribution to a project which particularly caught their interest.
- **The Celebration event** should involve fewer presentations and place more emphasis on celebrating and sharing good practice.

## A Summary of Participation Statistics

Statistics for participating schools are available for 4 years (1999/00 to 2002/3). This sheet summarises of those statistics and highlights some points which may be of interest.

- **Total (different) schools participating** 97

- **Participating schools by county: -**

Berkshire schools	24
Buckinghamshire schools	33
Oxfordshire schools	40

- **Participating schools by sector: -**

Primary schools	42
Secondary and middle	35
Special schools/projects	20

*(Within this special category, 18 are in Oxfordshire or Buckinghamshire and 15 are new since 2001/02)*

- **Total number of schools taking part each year**

1999/00	24
2000/01	25
2001/02	33
2002/03	40

*(The greater part of the increase is accounted for by newly participating special schools/projects in Buckinghamshire in 2001/2 and newly participating special schools/projects in Oxfordshire in 2002/3)*

- **Of the 97 schools involved, 78 entered once only**

- **Total schools of all types across the 3 counties (DfES 1998)**

	Oxon	Berks	Bucks (inc MK)	Total	SiA coverage over this 4 year period
Primary	234	272	286	792	5%
Secondary	45	59	44	148	23%
Special	18	14	21	53	38%*

*\* Because Schools in Action statistics include special provision/projects within mainstream schools, the coverage of officially designated special schools is not in fact this high. However, the proportional impact on the special education sector is significant and has been increasingly so since 2001/2002.*



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