Only cooperation offers chances for youth at-risk

Antwerp’s city directorate for young people at risk, called VISIEr, has the duty and mandate to direct the policy on youth at-risk and youth crime.

This in collaboration between general welfare, special youth assistance, the integration sector, the youth sector, education, police, and justice

Towards an integral policy

From 1998 on, attempts have been made to install an integral policy concerning nuisance and youth crime.

The option of the federal government to support urban renewal (Big City Policy) offered new opportunities. In 2001, next to some coaching projects, a task force was installed to organise a integral and integrated policy.

This task force had the mission to present a policy plan and to develop new projects. In this work group 7 representatives of the named sectors were put together.

To achieve a better profile the name VISIEr was chosen. This stands for vision (visie) on “r” (youth-at-risk, recidivism, respect…)

The base for cooperation

Starting point for VISIEr was that the different sectors are equivalent. No one speaks the absolute truth and different opinions have to be respected.

Through different consultation structures a broad support has been set up.

The first and most important step was to make an inventory on who was working with Antwerp youth at-risk. This inventory showed there was a big need for information, the existence of drop-out groups, a huge willingness to work together and for networking, but also a lot of insecurity about future existence of the organisation, as a result of temporary financing.

As annex a kind of dictionary was made. Each sector has their own company culture and has the tendency of developing an own specific language.

A second important aspect was to define a working frame. The legal frame was quite clear: the International Children’s Treaty was the base for own legislation. Next to that there is the national legislation, with the remark that in Belgium there still is a youth-protection law, where measures are taken to protect children instead of punishing them.

There was a lot of discussion on the theoretical frame. Because there was no consent about existing models, an own VISIEr-model was developed (see appendix).

Essential is that for VISIEr there is no “or-or” discussion: or prevention or repression, soft or hard approach, youth prisons or not. Our model stands for and prevention and repression and assistance/care.
The policy note

Build on the diagnoses of the inventory the note “A integral policy for youth at-risk and youth crime” was presented in 2002. Next to the VISIEr-model, proposals were made for preventive, repressive and care initiatives. Proposals especially based on existing initiatives, networking and filling in gaps. Three priority programmes were proposed: street children, a problematic school career and more measures for youth judges.

City Directorate

The city directorate/policy unit stands independent from the different sectors, but has a formal network in which each sector mandates a permanent representatives ("antenna"). A council, under presidency of the mayor, acts as controlling board. Because of the consumer awareness the “calling name” VISIEr was kept.

Mission

Policy support
- a permanent consultation with the 7 participating sectors is installed
- cooperation with other partners are set up, e.g. the installation of an “European unit”
- supervision of the different youth crime projects in the federal Big City Policy

Project development and –“supervision”
- participation in steering committees of different projects, such as
  o Traject 2: voluntary trajectory coaching for youth-at-risk
  o pleinanimatie: a project where there is an offer of leisure time on different (problematic) squares in the city
  o ADAM: alternative measures for first offenders (minors, with a lot of restorative justice measures)
  o Overstap: a combination of residential (time-out) and ambulant support for first and second offenders (also minors)
  o U-turn: a long term obliged support for hard core criminals (adults), this project has won the Belgian Crime Prevention Award and was nominated for the European award
  o Samen op straat: volunteers make positive contacts with youth-at-risk to raise social control but also to do activities (like indoor soccer)
- development of projects proposed in the policy note, with special attention to:
  o a problematic school career
    - a central help desk that follows up school drop-outs
    - an exceptional way for secondary schools to report crime to the police and justice department by e-mail
    - a guide for schools how to deal with violence
    - information folder about school supporting initiatives
  o street children
    - after school music lessons for gipsy-children
    - the offer of weekend and vacation-jobs (broadened to youth-at-risk in hot spot areas)
  o justice measures
priority was to improve and continue existing experimental projects like ADAM, Overstap and U-turn instead of developing new projects

Installing an information- and documentation centre
- making a social “card”
- developing registration programmes for the different projects
- participating in scientific studies (e.g. crime by others ethnics)
- Follow up of (inter)national trends

Installing a communication structure
- website (www.visier.be)
- newsletter in the form of an e-zine (Frequency VISIEr)

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