

This site uses cookies. By continuing to browse the site you are agreeing to our use of cookies. [Find out more here](#)

theguardian

Street pastors take their watch to the beaches to help young people

Whitstable is the latest recipient of church volunteers on patrol to safeguard young people in the seaside town

Mary O'Hara

guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 21 August 2012 15.00 BST



Street pastors are helping young people who may have drunk too much on the beach. Photograph: Philip Nealey/Getty Images

In their matching blue tops, the group walking along Whitstable seafront certainly stands out. And it is meant to. The picturesque Kent seaside resort is hardly a hotbed of social problems, but as the latest town to launch a branch of "[street pastors](#)" it is part of a growing phenomenon.

The pastors are church volunteers patrolling the beach and offering assistance to teenagers and [young people](#) who may have drunk too much. "We set out to listen, help and care for members of our local community with a focus on the safety of young people on the beaches," explains Chris Izzard, founding member and pastor of Tankerton Evangelical Church.

"The young people gather on the beach to party and drink alcohol, which can result in them becoming vulnerable. We carry water, flip-flops and blankets to give out."

The group of 20 volunteers, which formed earlier this year after church leaders consulted with local police and the council about how the scheme would work, began patrolling last month after training including basic counselling skills, and sea safety from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

The volunteers include a veterinary nurse, a tax inspector, a classroom assistant and a number of retired people as well as some church ministers. So far, Izzard says, there has been nothing in the way of criticism of the project and no indication that anyone objects to churches taking on such a role.

"We have been able to rescue a young girl down from London who missed the last train home and lost contact with her friends. We were able to escort her around the town until we found her friends," he says.

Since the scheme launched in inner-city London in 2003 (as a response by local churches to urban violence and gang culture), the street pastors project has had to deal with concerns about it being a vehicle for proselytising. However, according to Eustace Constance, operations director of the Ascension Trust, the charity that oversees and runs 10,000 street pastors across the UK, the scheme is not evangelical.

"Sometimes rightly, churches have been criticised for not being more active within their communities. This is about playing our part. Street pastors started out urban, but now we are in villages and towns all over the country."

Constance says there is evidence that levels of crime go down where street pastors are active, adding that the scheme is endorsed by community workers as well as police.

Simon Cole, chief constable of Leicestershire and Association of Chief Police Officers lead on local policing for and partnerships, says volunteers have widespread support. "Faith-based citizen patrols, such as street pastors, have made a significant difference by helping people and keeping them safe. I have spent time with the local street pastors in my own force and they do a magnificent job."

A study by the University of Plymouth, which set out to see if concerns about street pastors were founded, concluded that, on the contrary, reactions were "overwhelmingly positive" and that while it was unclear what, if any, kind of impact they had on crime, there was no evidence that pastors were evangelising.

Back in Whitstable, Izzard says the aim is simple: "We are there to help and support anyone in need."

streetpastors.co.uk

Ads by Google

[6 King's Bench Walk](#)

David Fisher QC and David Perry QC Chambers UK 2012 Leading Set

www.6kbw.com

[Top 10 Solar Panels](#)

Compare Solar Panel Prices Easily. We Compare 250 Suppliers Instantly

www.SolarPanelQuoter.co.uk

[Church in Loughborough](#)

A growing contemporary church in Loughborough town centre

www.junctionchurch.net

Comments

No comments, displaying first

 Staff

 Contributor

Comments on this page are now closed.