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Beryl Clinton is Co-ordinator of HALT, the Humberside Alliance on Tobacco.

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# 'Smoke-free Soccer' scores in the Humber region

*Footballers make excellent role models for young people*

The 'Football in the Community' nationwide scheme has proved very popular with football clubs, schools, families, and above all with boys and girls in the 9–11 age range. A 'healthy alliance' to develop a smoking education initiative between Hull City Football Club's 'Football in the Community' scheme and Humberside Alliance on Tobacco (HALT) was established in October 1996.

There is a pressing need, from a public health perspective, to discourage young people from taking up the smoking habit. Tessa Jowell, Minister of State for Public Health, resolved at the Anti-Smoking Summit on 14 July 1997 to reduce smoking levels 'for good'.

### Local smoking levels

A survey of young people by the East Riding Health Authority in 1996 produced some figures for regular or occasional smokers among schoolchildren. Between the ages of 11 and 15, the percentage of boys in this category was found to increase from 3% to 20%, and for girls from 3% to 42%. The survey suggested a slightly higher percentage of Year 10 female smokers (34%) than the 30% recorded in the East Riding Health Authority's *Young People's Health and Lifestyle* survey, 1996.

We believe that the project described here is an excellent vehicle through which to realise the aim of reducing smoking levels in young people. The reasons for young people taking up smoking in the first place have been well researched and documented, and the most important factors appear to include:

- parental smoking;
- advertising;
- peer-group pressure;
- celebrity or role-model influence;
- the belief that 'smoking is cool';
- personal factors such as low self-esteem and low academic achievement.

Picking up the 'role-model' factor, it is widely believed that professional footballers do not smoke, as it impairs their physical capacity, and they therefore form a credible model for young people. If we are to communicate the dangers of smoking to this generation, the messages that they hear must relate to their lives and experiences — and football is an important part of most young people's lives.

### An audience of 10,000

In the East Riding Health Authority, the 'Football in the Community' scheme is based at Hull City Football Club, and it has direct contact with over 10,000 young people of all abilities and backgrounds through three main strands:

- term-time coaching and educational sessions;
- holiday soccer schools;
- school visits by football players.

All of the Hull City players are non-smokers, and it appears that by developing this smoking education initiative through the medium of football in general, and the children's local club

in particular, the message is related to the real world. The contradiction between trying to achieve their sporting potential and damaging their fitness by smoking is fully exposed.

As the scheme is based on participation as opposed to excellence, it presents a superb vehicle for smoking education alongside the promotion of physical activity.

### Coaching the coaches

The project involved 1500 9–11 year-olds in ten primary schools, of whom 500 also took part in after-school sessions, but training the coaches was also a very important part of the scheme. Health Promotion specialists from the East Yorkshire Community Healthcare NHS Trust and Hull & Holderness Community Health NHS Trust ran an afternoon session with nine coaches, examining the following issues:

- update on smoking facts;
- why young people smoke;
- health consequences of smoking;
- raising the issue with young people;
- putting no-smoking messages into practice.

The school-based initiative extended over the first six weeks of the 1997 summer term. During this period a 'smoke-free' culture was promoted in all elements of the initiative. The coaches wore 'Smoke-free Soccer' T-shirts, and each participant received a 'Smoke-free Soccer' photograph of the Hull City team. They were also encouraged to complete a *Smoking — Myths and Facts* questionnaire, shown on the next page. Five hundred of these were returned, the prize being a football shirt signed by the Hull City players. Seven of the players visited the schools, having been briefed about smoking issues beforehand.

### Heightened health issues

Part of the evaluation was conducted by health promotion specialists talking to the children. They reported an increased awareness of smoking-related issues, and the reasons for not smoking; this was confirmed by the coaches, who compared the pilot schools involved in the 'Smoke-free Soccer' scheme with the ones that previously participated in 'Football in the Community'. In addition, the coaches commented that there appeared to be an increased willingness by the children to discuss health issues.

Feedback from the children indicated that

classroom-based smoking education work was given a boost by raising the issue through the medium of football. When asked why footballers don't smoke, responses included:

*Clogs up lungs*  
*Can't run fast*  
*Lose energy*  
*Decreases stamina*  
*Increases heart disease*  
*Can get cancer*  
*Lungs turn black*  
*Run out of puff*

The coaches praised the training they had received from the Health Promotion specialists, and said that they now felt better able to discuss smoking issues with their young charges.

Future plans include the following:

- to develop the training package for coaches;
- to extend liaison with the schools so as to reinforce the 'Smoke-free Soccer' messages;
- to extend the 'Smoke-free Soccer' philosophy to all Football in the Community activities at Hull City;
- to encourage the club to make the Family Enclosure wholly or partly no-smoking;
- to encourage replication of the scheme within the national organisation of Football in the Community.

In addition, an alliance with the University of Hull has been planned, leading to:

- A video featuring Mark Hateley, the Hull City Manager, and John Davies, the Football in the Community Co-ordinator. This focuses on smoking, fitness and football.
- A pack for teachers, to support the coaching programme.
- A pack for pupils, linking with the video.
- A more quantitative method of evaluating outcomes, by monitoring the pupils' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour and comparing them with a control group.

The South Humber area has developed the scheme with Scunthorpe United FC and Grimsby Town FC, under the slogan *Keep on Kicking — Stay Smoke-free*. They extended the coaching to leisure services staff, with very positive results.

I hope to be able to report on further developments in due course.

### Evaluators reported an increased awareness of smoking-related issues