

Sustaining the mission

Take heart, we're making good progress, is the rallying cry from Drugs Minister Paul Goggins. DDN finds out more.



'We're getting about 2,000 a month into treatment - and that's ahead of where we thought we would be... If you can make it more immediate, the impact will be greater, and the better the chance of getting them off.'

While drugs are clearly still a huge menace, we need to have a debate that also reflects the progress that's being made, says drugs minister Paul Goggins.

Since switching roles from Prisons Minister after May's general election, Goggins has set about demonstrating that investment is producing results.

Use of Class A drugs is stable, he points out. Use of cannabis 'is actually falling'. And on the harm index that government uses to measure overall impact of drugs 'is showing a reduction - 9 per cent over the last two years. Government statistics also show a drop in drug related crime.

'So there's absolutely no complacency - but nor should we feel completely overwhelmed by a problem we're actually making some progress on,' he says.

The next stage, according to Goggins, is to 'sustain what we're doing'. This is where a large increase in investment comes in. Last year the drug treatment budget was £253m; Goggins promises that in 2008 it will be £478m, giving a local drug action team an increase in its budget of more than 50 per cent.

Huge investment, more people coming into treatment, more agencies working together - particularly for those coming into the criminal justice system - is all beginning to make a difference, he says.

Drug action teams will have a very big say in how money is used, Goggins insists. He says he will be looking for DATs to divide the appropriate treatment programmes on the ground, 'because clearly they will be the ones who understand the level of need in their area and the kind of problems that they have'. Such emphasis on participation is also about making sure others share responsibility for reaching targets - and for this purpose government is attempting to simplify systems and make them more flexible.

Introducing the Community Order in April was part of this process, he says. The range of different components within it, gives agencies flexibility in dealing with individuals - the Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (which replaced the 'rather inflexible' DTTO) is now just one of these options, and should help drug treatment agencies and the probation service to provide 'the absolute right package for a particular individual', says Goggins.

Life as Prisons Minister, before the election, gave Goggins a useful overview of people's journey through prison and the investment in their treatment - but made him realise that there wasn't much happening to support them once they were discharged. The Drug Intervention Programme (DIP - which replaced the Criminal

Justice Programme a year ago) is helping to rectify this, he believes, giving a more coherent approach and helping agencies to work more closely together.

Channelling a stream of offenders into treatment is a heavily emphasised component of government targets. The government's drug strategy, *Tackling Drugs, Changing Lives* states that 1,000 offenders a week must be entering treatment by 2008. Again, there has been good progress so far, says Goggins:

'At the moment we're half way there, we're getting about 2,000 a month into treatment - and that's ahead of where we thought we would be'. Reducing waiting times is also linked to targets, but Goggins is keen to point out that progress to date - down to two and a half weeks, from nine weeks just a couple of years ago - is about motivating people to change, instead of consigning them to a two-month wait from their court order to entering treatment.

'If you can make it more immediate, the impact will be greater, and the better the chance of getting them off really,' he says.

While conceding that it's the job of a minister to set the policy framework and make sure there are enough resources, Goggins is keen to emphasise that he's 'a great believer in acknowledging that it's the front line that makes the difference'.

His latest message in embarking on regional visits over the next few weeks, is 'well done to all those who are making a difference in this way... and don't be dispirited by some of the misleading headlines that sometimes indicate that the whole game is lost'.

Goggins wants workers in the drugs field to see 'that we're making progress' over 'very very tough work' and hopes that taking stock of the difference they are making to lives will renew enthusiasm and commitment.

He points to research on the results of DTTOs, involving 'some of the most chaotic drug users, some of the most difficult offenders in our community' and says that half of people who were able to get to the end of their treatment programme actually stopped offending - 'a fantastic achievement, that's changing people's lives dramatically'. The minister is convinced that the greater flexibility from recent changes to the system will help more people make it to the end of treatment.

For the moment, ahead of target and with the day of reckoning over two years away, he is focusing on positive achievements with the rallying cry for frontline workers: 'keep it up and do better - have the confidence in what you do'. **DDN**