

## Getting started with user involvement projects

**With a little money and imagination, user involvement can really take off and prove its worth, says Dawn Hart, Project Director at Centre for Public Innovation**

There is no national strategy for drug user involvement – even the phrase means different things to different people. Terms such as ‘participation’, ‘consultation’ and ‘empowerment’ are used, but with no common agreement as to what they actually are.

As part of a Greater London Drug and Alcohol Alliance study, published earlier this year (1), the Centre for Public Innovation (CPI) looked at levels of involvement across the capital and found that they varied widely – from nothing in some areas, to well developed in others. The work also showed that a variety of different approaches were used (from user forums, to employing involvement coordinators) and at different levels (from users being consulted in questionnaires, to being invited to DAAT meetings).

CPI’s main effort was to pilot a quick and cost-effective way of getting good buy-in from users in two different parts of Lambeth in south London. We decided to use an approach called Real Time Community Change (RTCC), which encourages local people to take the lead in delivering change by giving them assistance, on-going help and small amounts of financial support to quickly start up short projects. Generally grants are for between £2000 and £5000, with projects running for three to six months.

Key to the RTCC process are ‘sparkplugs’ – people at grassroots level who are the catalysts for change that CPI believes exist in every community, even in groups of problematic drug or alcohol users. According to Siphon Mlambo, who led CPI’s efforts in the borough:

‘Sparkplugs know what the problems are and they usually have very good ideas on how they can be solved. RTCC provides them not only with funds to turn their ideas into reality, but also on-going and easily available vital support and mentoring, and does away with much of the energy-sapping strategic application and evaluation processes. This way, they get quick wins and soon see the results of their efforts. And what that means, is that they become more committed and find ways to sustain their work.’

After attending a Lambeth user forum, Siphon found two groups in the borough who were keen to try out the self-help tactics. Both had entrepreneurial ideas for projects they wanted to get off the ground

and he worked with them to formulate these into simple presentations, which formed the basis of their funding bids. The funding ‘applications’ were made in person to a panel of stakeholders at a special workshop session. Decisions were made the same day, and funds made available just a few days later.

### The Sanctuary Club

One group was made up of members of the local Alcohol Recovery Project, who knew that what they wanted most was a social club, where they could meet in a non-judgmental and temptation-free environment. Their target was ‘anybody who feels they may have a drug or drink problem who needs a safe place to socialise outside treatment, where they could combat isolation and boredom’.

The organisers were tasked with finding suitable premises, carrying out all the business negotiations and logistical work to get the club up and running and then to publicise it to create a membership. This team had to overcome many problems and obstacles, but did manage to find a venue and sign a lease. They discovered new skills when liaising and negotiating with a host of local bodies and people, including councillors, police, banks and landlords. They also had to buy equipment for IT, a games room and a café – all on a grant of only £2,500.

The Club was officially opened by the Mayor of Lambeth and now runs one evening each week, with a steadily growing client base. It’s so successful that Lambeth’s enthusiastic DAAT Coordinator, Becca Walker has already promised further funding to make sure it continues and is confident that it will be a very good return on her investment.

Involvement in this innovative project has had other unexpected side benefits too. Not only are the founder members managing to running a thriving enterprise, but their confidence, language and self-esteem have grown tremendously.

### Fear and Loathing

The second group, connected to the Stockwell Project, highlighted the lack of clear and simple information materials that would be read by drug users. They called their project Fear and Loathing

and set out to use a grant of £2,500 to design, print and distribute two publications.

One was a card with information about local treatment services, the other on harm minimisation information. Both leaflets were professionally designed and several thousand copies have been distributed in the neighbourhood through their own network.

An immediate result was an increase in the number of people accessing services, which it is hoped will continue. The leaflets have also been well received by local professional agencies and the authors are likely to be commissioned to help in other information campaigns. And they are keen to put their new-found skills into action again.

## ‘The work in Lambeth challenges the widely-held belief that users are unreliable and incapable of organising or managing resources.’

At the end of CPI’s involvement in the two projects, a ceremony to publicly acknowledge and reward the efforts of the users was attended by the NTA’s head, Paul Hayes. In welcoming the work as a practical example of how users can indeed be effectively involved in service development, he commended RTCC as an approach that allows change to be directed and led by community members, rather than by professionals.

The work in Lambeth challenges the widely-held belief that users are unreliable and incapable of organising or managing resources. We found that it needs more than money though. Couple it with the extra ingredients of sympathetic help, trust and belief, and great things become possible. Not only did the two groups meet their targets, they produced outcomes that far exceeded expectations and had a big impact on how the statutory services viewed their capabilities.

*An account of the study is available in a GLADA booklet Lessons Learned, single copies are available free from the Centre for Public Innovation, tel 020 8675 5777 or email [info@publicinnovation.org.uk](mailto:info@publicinnovation.org.uk).*

**You can learn more about CPI’s Real Time Community Change approach to user involvement at a one-day specialist training course on 25 May in central London. Full details are available from [laura.hollis-ryan@publicinnovation.org.uk](mailto:laura.hollis-ryan@publicinnovation.org.uk) or visit [www.publicinnovation.org.uk](http://www.publicinnovation.org.uk).**