

Addaction's Next project is proving a successful route to professional training and employment. **DDN** reports from the first anniversary celebration.



After addiction... What's Next?

When Linda Bush started managing the Next project, she noticed that progress into work by service users was really uneven: 'Some were confident, but others were unsupported. They lacked confidence and were not necessarily being given what they needed. They were full of skills, but didn't know how to use them.' The project, funded by the European Social Fund and the Association of Local Government offered a way of opening doors.

In May last year Bush took on her first group of trainees, with a mission of taking them forward to work in the field. Bringing them into the project, she asked them, 'you've been a client; what does it take to be a worker?'

The next three months were dedicated to finding out, by piecing together knowledge on all areas of the field through two days' training a week. Modules addressed personal development as well as professional training in drugs work. Half way through the training, students were offered an administrative work placement in a substance misuse service for one day a week.

Eighteen months on, ten people from this and subsequent groups are in full-time employment at organisations including Westminster Drugs Project, Thames Ridge Bondway and Addaction.

More than 100 people have completed the course over the past year, 61 per cent of them ex-offenders and 3 per cent who have been homeless. Seventy per cent of participants now have jobs or have entered

further education. Another 18 have started the Smart Scheme – professional training leading to a level 3 NVQ in social care – and 32 are in voluntary work or further training. Equally important, the students have a chance to gain work references and referral on to other services, to embed them in future employment.

At last week's celebration of the project's first anniversary, where many of the participants were presented with certificates from the Open College Network by Addaction's chief executive, Deborah Cameron, Bush's pride was discernible alongside that of successful students'.

'Some projects require a period of clean time; we don't,' she emphasised. 'They can start on their first day out of rehab. Their achievements are down to commitment, talent, dedication, and a fantastic staff team [of Frankie Sikes, Laura Ponti and Rebecca Lundberg].'

'It's a disgrace that more skilled people don't get back into employment,' commented chief executive Deborah Cameron.

'The Next project gives us a pool of able and skilled people from different backgrounds. We now need to think about all kinds of employment opportunities.'

The Next project is open to ex-substance misusers living in London boroughs who have completed a course of treatment or a 12-step programme and are no longer using. To arrange an assessment interview, call 020 7017 2868.

Chula joined the course after completing rehab and has used it as a springboard to teaching others.

I'm now a structured treatment practitioner for Westminster Drugs Project, where I've been for about a year. I'd been drinking and smoking from the age of nine; then onto marijuana at 12. I was smoking dope all through school and throughout my teens. I experimented on everything I could get my hands on.

It went from bad to worse over the next few years. I lost my family and friends. My life was falling to bits. I didn't have a lot of hope.

A counsellor kept saying I should go into treatment, but I kept thinking if I tried a bit harder I'd be able to stop. In February 2003 I woke up and realised I couldn't stop by myself.

I came out of treatment drug free. Having used drugs for 17 years, to be drug free was amazing. I was inspired by counsellors, and wanted to give something back. I realised I had only just started to work on myself.

I found Progress 2 Work and got to know about the Next project. I learned about all kinds of things, including models of addiction and harm reduction. I facilitate groups of ten to 15 people now.

There's not a bit of wasted

information from that course; I keep a file on my desk. The information now reaches other people who need it.

Michelle was in the first group to start the Next project, having 'kind of got there by mistake'.

I'd phoned Addaction to ask about voluntary work and they suggested I came down to do an assessment. I felt like a square peg in a round hole. Amazingly they phoned me back and said I'd got on the course.

I thought 'you lot can't tell me anything about drugs'. But I was so wrong. I struggled, but I learnt so much. The course was about personal development for me. I thought I'd have the ex-junkie label for the rest of my life.

The staff were so supportive. But what I learnt was that I really love to give something to others. I didn't believe I wanted to give anything back to society at first.

I don't have the junkie label anymore. I'm a mum of three. I had learnt to commit to recovery – now I've learnt to commit to a career. I got my first month's wages this morning. I can pay my rent for the first time!

I would say to others: 'Put one foot in front of the other. Keep turning up.' Now I've got a job. **DDN**