

Learning to fill their free time was an essential part of staying clean that Tim Sampey and Terry Swinton needed to master. They found a solution that went beyond their own recovery, as **Michael Clarke** explains.

## Get set for the weekend!



Tim Sampey (right) and Terry Swinton (second right) with fellow Saturday clubbers

If **Tim Sampey and Terry Swinton** had been asked in December 2003 what they would be doing in three years' time, neither could have imagined that they would have just celebrated the first anniversary of a Saturday Social club they helped set up.

At the time they were both still hooked on heroin and desperately trying to kick respective 28 and 10-year heroin habits.

But after getting involved with the Blenheim Project in Kensington, the pair began a journey of recovery which culminated with the former drug users not only beating their addictions, but also giving something back to the community.

Sampey and Swinton now co-ordinate the running of the clubs as members of the Service Users Drug Reference Group, for Kensington and Chelsea Council's Drug Action Team.

The Saturday Social Club at the Blenheim Project drop-in centre in Portobello Road provides service users with a relaxed, friendly environment on Saturdays where they can listen to music, take part in art workshops, use the Internet, play games, and get hot food and refreshments.

They can also chat, make new friends and build up a support network with people who can completely relate to their situation. The pair have also just set up

a weekly gym and swimming club.

It is a far cry from the situation they were in several years ago. Sampey, 45, from North Kensington, started using illegal substances as a teenager.

He says: 'By the time I was 19 I had had my first heroin habit – that lasted until I was 42.' On 12 January 2004 he flew to Spain and tried a private naltrexone detox programme. It was a date that ended up having enormous significance for him, as that was the last day he used heroin.

He remembers returning to London and visiting the Blenheim Project: 'People think that once you are off the drugs that life will be fine – but it isn't like that,' he says. 'The Blenheim Project were very supportive. It is the best place I have ever come across.'

Then he met Terry Swinton, who was on a methadone programme having stopped using heroin on 5 May 2004. A 37-year-old from North Kensington, Swinton began using heroin when he was 26. He came off all drugs in July 2006 and has been clean ever since.

After being advised to attend the Blenheim Project, he was offered counselling and complementary therapies and attended the drop-in centre every day for a year.

When he met Sampey, Swinton was involved in trying to set up a Service Users Drug Reference Group

so they could advise professionals on what worked and what didn't.

'I asked to attend a service users' meeting at Kensington Town Hall and found I was listened to, he explains. 'Tim came to a meeting and we chatted about the idea that service users could do some good if we were given the right opportunities.'

Sampey had talked him into playing badminton and at a following Service Users Drug Reference Group meeting they suggested setting up a badminton club for people in recovery. They were given £500, bought some rackets, hired courts and started the club.

'We felt strongly that the treatment system of the borough was very good, says Sampey. 'However at the time there was no aftercare – and aftercare is vital.

'When you come off drugs you have a life to rebuild. If you are abandoned at that point you are bound to go back onto the drugs. You have time to fill and we wanted to come up with something that would fill that time.'

The pair wrote a business plan and negotiated rental space with the Blenheim Project, and the idea of a Saturday Social Club was born. They celebrated their first anniversary of the club last December, attended by Mayor Tim Ahern.

'The club provides a very relaxed environment where people won't feel judged,' says Sampey. 'There are no professional workers and so visitors know they are with people who have had the same problems as them.'

'This gives them inspiration to continue their own journey of recovery,' adds Swinton.

As well as the social club on Saturday afternoons, there is the new gym and swimming club on Saturday mornings, a badminton club on Sunday lunchtimes, a women's group being set up for Monday evenings and a cinema club for Friday nights – all designed to fill the time between Friday and Sunday when services are shut.

They are also putting together training courses for service users and volunteers involving life and work skills, assertiveness, self-esteem and communications.

'This whole thing has done the world of good to me,' says Sampey. It's given me a huge buzz to have helped design, build and organise these clubs. I've never been responsible for an organisation before.'

Swinton agrees: 'I've now been involved in project management, accounting, group facilitation and communication. It's changed my life.'

**Michael Clarke is at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.**

**Visit the Blenheim Project's website at [www.theblenheimproject.org](http://www.theblenheimproject.org)**