



I believe in people helping people and the power of empathy. And this client group has got that – they can engage with other people in recovery better than anyone else.’

Linda Sawyer is talking about the service users whom she not only helps get back into the job market through her day job as progress2work consultant for social exclusion agency Working Links, but also sees as a huge and untapped labour resource for the substance misuse field itself.

‘There are many, many clients I’ve met who – when they get into recovery – want to give something back by working in the field,’ she says. ‘But it’s very hard for them to know where to start – where to access training, whether that training meets DANOS standards or simply how to begin trying to achieve what they want to achieve.’

That’s why for the past six years she has been dedicating all of her spare time to working towards setting up Clean Break, a scheme designed to help those previously trapped in a cycle of addiction to build a career in the substance misuse field and help meet the growing need for properly trained and qualified staff. Her efforts were recognised when she was named East Midlands Drug Worker of the Year award in the Home Office’s 2007 Tackling Drugs, Saving Lives awards.

Moreover, she is approaching the situation from a slightly different angle to many people in the field. ‘I haven’t spent years working in this sector,’ she says. ‘I’ve worked in social exclusion for a long

time but basically I come from a recruitment and training background, so what I have is that ability to see supply and demand.’

The original impetus came from witnessing a dramatic increase in the number of people sleeping rough on the streets of Nottingham. ‘Every time I stopped to talk to them and ask them how they found themselves in this situation they always told me that they had problems with drugs,’ she says. ‘I felt I had to find out what I could do to help this particular client group.’

She is now co-ordinating a range of organisations with links to the substance misuse sector in Nottingham to build a supported programme of learning to help those in recovery build careers in the field. ‘When I started investigating what was in place to help them move from a place of recovery – however tentative those steps might be – into a place of self actualisation and working in the field to help other people, I realised that there really wasn’t anything available.’

Working Links itself has helped around 90,000 people such as the long-term unemployed, lone parents and people receiving incapacity benefits to overcome barriers to returning to work since its inception eight years ago. Her managers there have been very supportive, giving her two days a week off to develop Clean Break, and a major milestone on the road to setting it up was an event she organised at the Nottingham Ice Arena last October. The aim was to encourage people to come

forward to form a steering group, and more than 60 people attended, including two chief inspectors from the Nottinghamshire constabulary as well as service providers and people from the education, training, prison and probation sectors.

‘The key thing was that they were all working with this client group,’ she says. ‘This project is about collaborative working, and all of them signed up to give their commitment – whether it was to supply clients, training, premises or help with things like feasibility studies. It was a phenomenal response.’

Perhaps the biggest coup, however – and where the award will undoubtedly have played its part – was getting Home Office Minister Vernon Coaker to attend. ‘The timing couldn’t have been better,’ she says. ‘Winning the award has validated what I do. All of a sudden I’ve got this credibility. It meant that Vernon Coaker listened to me when I went to see him and said “this is the model that I want to create” – he understood it absolutely. The award has been phenomenal in terms of raising awareness for the project – I’ve been on TV, on the radio and in the press. I couldn’t have bought a better publicity campaign.’

The idea now is that the project moves forward as a social enterprise, with sustainable and democratic principles at its core. ‘My job is to facilitate the steering committee, and draw on their expertise of dealing with this client group from different angles,’ she says. ‘Everyone will still have



Many people in recovery from a substance misuse problem feel the need to put something back and so are ideally placed to help others in a similar situation. **David Gilliver** talks to a Nottingham-based drug worker whose recognition of this vast untapped resource helped win her the East Midlands Drug Worker of the Year award for 2007.

A virtuous circle

their real jobs out there, but we'll form a social enterprise that can bid for money to do what we want to do – we'll go to the European Social Fund, the Learning and Skills Council, Job Centre Plus.'

Clean Break will then act as a vehicle to deliver contracts and training, and as a specialist recruitment service. 'It means we'll train our own labour pool for the substance misuse sector and help the sector by providing staff. It will be an organisation borne out of other organisations with a common purpose – we'll not only provide a unique path of training, learning and support for people to get into this kind of work, but we'll provide all these other things on top, so we'll become something in our own right, a multi-faceted model. It will cater for the needs of both the individual and the industry – there are agencies who are doing the recruitment service for this sector, or doing the training or working with this client group, but I don't know of any organisation that does all three.'

Having the proper support in place for those in recovery, however, will be central to the project. 'Obviously what we could never do is put someone who's in recovery straight into a rigorous programme of training, because we'd be setting them up to fail,' she says. 'If they go into something that's difficult and demanding and calls on all their time management skills and ability to manage all of the other issues in their lives, it could send them into a relapse. So the project is based around a supported pathway in recognition

of their vulnerability and the fact that they bring a lot of issues to the table. Instead of throwing them in at the deep end they'll have a mentor to support them and engage with, and they'll study at a manageable level with advice and guidance at their fingertips at all times.'

Phase one of the training process will focus on personal development, and if the clients choose to, they can then go on to phase two, which is the nine DANOS core competencies. If they want to go further, phase three focuses on the 14 specialist competencies. The clients are fully mentored throughout the process and are then able to become mentors themselves. The aim is that those taking part see themselves not as victims but as agents of change, able to embrace social responsibility rather than evade it and integrate life skills and professional training with a change in the attitudes and behaviours that may have contributed to their previous problems.

'Let's say someone comes out of prison and has been clean for two years,' she says. 'Phase one is all about building them up – things like emotional intelligence, citizenship, connecting with people and being true to themselves. In phase two they then become a mentor for the phase one people, so they're living and breathing the whole peer mentoring programme from day one. If they go to phase three, they then mentor the phase two people.'

'The idea of using that wonderful, amazing human resource was the kernel for me,' she

continues. 'Supporting, encouraging and developing it, and creating an opportunity for that resource to then help address the problem, which is people coming out of substance misuse into recovery. It's people helping people helping people – people who actually know what it's like to be homeless, who know what it's like to be in prison. For quite a lot of them helping others is their dearest wish.'

Although it does not directly provide funding, Working Links will continue to incubate Clean Break until it can stand on its own two feet financially. 'We're still a long way away from launching,' she says. 'The need and the desire are clearly both there but the question is how we make it work in practical terms.'

So aside from the undoubted help it has been in getting the project up and running, what has winning the award meant to her? 'I was delighted to win it,' she says. 'My boss nominated me, my friends nominated me and so did the clients. They'd all seen me working with clients day after day – going into prisons, hostels and outreach projects, but also doing all this development work in my spare time. And ultimately it's all about the clients. Some of them have come from being almost dead with pancreatitis to full recovery and fulfilling work. It's a joy to see that.'

For more information on Clean Break or to get involved contact Linda Sawyer on Linda.Sawyer@workinglinks.co.uk