



**John Bucknall**, children and young people's commissioning manager for Warrington DAT, has transformed his own negative experiences into a career protecting others from the extremes of drugs and alcohol.

# Where there's life there's **hope**

**In the years 1981-82 brown heroin hits the streets of Merseyside in a big way. Those drug users who had spent most of their time smoking weed, snorting Charlie and taking LSD were all of a sudden chasing a black oil up and down a piece of aluminium foil.**

Dirty black faces and black marks on your teeth were all the fashion along with going to sleep every two to three minutes then waking up to find the cigarette you had been smoking had burnt a hole in your tracksuit bottoms or your quilt cover.

As the years went by, more and more people started to walk about with sunken cheekbones and pupils so pinned you could hardly see them. It became the fashion to steal off each other or travel around the country stealing from shops or people, in the pursuit of the warm feeling heroin can give you. People started to go to jail on a regular basis, where they would spend weeks climbing walls as they went through the process of cold turkey. Drug services opened up across the country trying to help people get rid of this monkey on their back, but few were able to do it and continued to spend the vast majority of their time in search of the golden brown powder.

I was one of those drug users from Merseyside whose life became entrenched in the search for that lovely warm feeling inside my stomach. I spent the vast majority of the 80s in and out of jail for shoplifting or for failing to surrender to the courts. I became isolated from my family, my community and

most of the time I walked with my head down to avoid people who had previously known me.

Near the end of the eighties I start to get really fed up with my life and very often thought about ending it all. I had been in detox three times but had always gone back to the brown when I returned home. In 1993 I decided I would try rehab and checked into Phoenix House (Wirral). All that challenging group work and structure... I thought my head was going to explode at times, but I managed to get through it.

During my time in Phoenix, I decided that I wanted to help other drug users change their life and in 1995 I started to work as a volunteer for the Lighthouse Project (formerly Merseyside Drugs Council). For the next two years I volunteered in several projects and attended college to gain some formal qualifications. I was offered a full-time job by Lighthouse in 1996 and went on to work there as a keywork and shared care worker for four years.

My next job was service user involvement coordinator for Wirral DAAT, which was a wake-up call for me. I had forgot what it was like to be a service user and all the preconceptions services and people have about you. Anyway, it was an exciting job and the group (Inner Action) was able to influence services and the DAAT to the extent that some services changed the way they allowed access into their services. The group was acknowledged by the NTA and the Healthcare Commission for the work they did to improve

services for users, and four of that group have now moved on to become paid advocates in other areas.

In the last three years I have worked as a manager of a multi-agency children and young people's drug and alcohol service, which involved supervising professionals from organisations who had previously supervised me in a different way, such as probation services and social services. I am now a young people's commissioning manager, and I have also acted up as a DIP strategic lead for the last six months. I am currently in the process of starting my own training and consultancy business and have recently achieved two teaching qualifications to go with my Diploma in Psychotherapy and NVQ 4 in Management.

It's now 25 years since brown smokeable heroin hit the streets of England, and as I look around I still see some of the people I used heroin with standing on street corners waiting for dealers to drop off. Of course quite a few are no longer with us and I often think about them and think why. Why did so many young, intelligent, kind people have to lose their lives?

As the current drug strategy comes to an end, I hope we can continue the progress we have made in educating children and young people about drugs and alcohol. I also hope we continue to improve services for drug users – but most of all I hope we can reduce the number of deaths caused by substance misuse.