

## Notes from the Alliance



### Staying tuned

We have the government's ear as we gear up to the second service user involvement conference, so let's keep an eye on what matters, says Daren Garratt

**IT SEEMS BARELY FIVE MINUTES** since we hosted the inaugural DDN/Alliance 'Nothing About Us Without Us' Conference in January, but we're already planning next year's event, and we're determined to make it as genuinely user friendly, inclusive, relevant and effective as we possibly can.

The uncertainty that many of us shared before the launch of the government's new drug strategy was reflected in the way we tried to structure this year's afternoon session and second-guess implications around the future direction of user involvement in this country.

Now that we have the strategy though, we need to ensure that we use any and all mechanisms available to us to comment on how various strands directly affect the lives of users, and we believe next year's conference will provide us with the perfect opportunity to do that.

In the words of some of the attendees contributing to the final roundtable exercise at this year's conference, it was clearly felt that, service users 'must be allowed to use their voice and be heard without fear of punitive measures' and 'if DATs and the NTA fail to provide direction then it's even more down to the service user groups to push even harder to get their point across'. So this is what we intend to do.

The Department of Health are also keen to understand user responses to new approaches in treatment, such as contingency management and heroin prescribing, and as a result will not only be working closely with us in structuring the 2009 conference to address these issues, but also support us in hosting a series of nine regional events, that will each focus on a specific strand of the strategy and allow us to consult with users on a truly national level.

And as we have the ear of government now, let us use it, and use it effectively. Targeted user involvement initiatives that aim to ease capacity, improve delivery and support workforce development appear worryingly absent from the current strategy, yet are a cost-effective solution to providing sustainability in a time of financial uncertainty, and decision-makers need to be reminded of this.

Furthermore, and at the risk of drawing up unnecessary battle lines again, anyone who has an interest in public health must concede that harm reduction needs to be a cornerstone of any effective drug strategy, as it is an evidence-based means of saving lives. Yet we seem to have taken our eye off the ball, and allow advancements like the roll-out of extra pharmacy based and outreach needle exchange provision in Northern Ireland and the ongoing positive discussions about establishing needle exchange pilots in Scottish prisons to go unacknowledged and uncelebrated.

Hopefully, we now have the means to collectively redress this balance.

**Daren Garratt is executive director of the Alliance.**

*The second DDN/Alliance service user involvement conference will be held in Birmingham on 29 January 2009. For more information, email [ian@cjwellings.com](mailto:ian@cjwellings.com)*

## Comment

### Criminal injustice?

Returning to the drugs field after an absence of eight years Phil Coles is 'appalled and dismayed at' the state of drug services

**IN THE LATE 1980s EARLY 1990s**, agencies such as Lifeline came under fire from all angles regarding their drugs education publication *Smack in the Eye*, which laid the foundations for true and honest drugs work to be carried out. At the time it came as no real surprise to anyone when the organisation hit the headlines in the UK press for using lottery money to 'show junkies how to hide their stash'. However, many agencies embraced this honest approach to getting information across to users in a format everyone could understand.

Harm reduction, though nothing new, became the trendy buzzword. The term is now bandied about as if social workers, 12 steppers and prohibitionists never objected to it. But how it has been watered down! When you hear that projects funded by the Home Office employ the philosophy of harm reduction, it really does beggar belief.

'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime', rang the mantra which would see funding ploughed into services that force people into treatment. This in itself raises questions about the fairness of treatments available to users who are not in the criminal (in)justice system. No one will admit to it, but people asking for help are being told by well-meaning workers to go out and nick something from the local shop, get caught, get a criminal conviction, get your methadone!

DIP and CRI initiatives focus on reducing crime and offending, and while workers may be doing all they can to provide a client-centred service, the emphasis is not on the wellbeing of clients from a Home Office perspective. A clear example of this is that they do not offer needle exchange and only work with Class A drug users.

In South Wales, the contract for DIP and CRI monies was put out to tender after just two years of service delivery. In West Wales the winning contender was Group 4 Security Services. In Cardiff and Gwent, the lucky winners were Kaleidoscope and the Cardiff Crime Reduction Initiative – both with the best interests of people's wellbeing at heart, I'm sure. So much so, that existing service users of the DIP are to be wiped off the books and dumped (I can't think of a more appropriate, politically correct word) on the local community addiction unit, who, like most other services are already inundated and working to long waiting lists.

Also, users presenting with mental health issues will not be accepted by DIP and CRI. These members of our society have historically struggled to get access to one service or the other, being pushed back and forth between providers for decades. It seems their luck is still not with them.

According to research by Ronno Griffiths and Zetta Bear, anything between 50 and 98 per cent of heroin users who access services for help and treatment were sexually abused as children. Many suffered neglect, under-stimulation, bullying, torment, were victims of circumstance and lacked opportunities. A more vulnerable group of people you couldn't create.

If ever there was a time for service user involvement, or a spot of activism from workers in the field, it is now. How much more jackboot legislation is this country willing to take before drug users are executed Thailand style? Well, they had to start somewhere!

**Phil Coles, Cardiff**

*These are the author's views and do not necessarily reflect those of his current or former employers.*