

# Crossing the great divide

Getting former drug users into employment is an obvious goal, but the gulf between the old lifestyle and getting a paid job can seem vast. **DDN** visited a peer mentoring programme in Brighton to hear about those vital first steps into the world of work.



**Journey guide: Matt Taylor, national project support officer, is first point of contact for new applicants. He guides mentors through their placements, projects and homework and is 'always there with a kind word of encouragement and calming influence'.**

**T**here's a pleasant buzz of activity in the peer mentor office, based at CRI's headquarters in Brighton. The office is crammed with desks and people, but no one seems to mind squeezing past one another to answer the phone.

In one corner, Louise and Peter compare folders of study notes. For both of them, this is a far cry from the lives they were living just a few years ago.

'I had a chaotic lifestyle,' says Peter. 'I was homeless, living on the street, and IV drug using.' Louise had missed out on education at school and had fallen easily into drug use. 'I suffered at school with low self-worth and lack of confidence. I wanted to do something for a long time, but was too fearful,' she says.

For both of these people, the peer mentoring service has opened doors – not just to their own life beyond recovery, but to

the chance of education, training and a 'real' career.

The programme offers a first step into the world of work, says Jane Bailey, CRI national volunteer manager, who cheerfully steers the hubbub from her desk in one corner. It's a little known side of CRI, she explains. 'Most people think we're just about criminal justice work, but we are also about working with young people at risk, families and parents, people experiencing homelessness and victims of domestic violence. Volunteers, peer mentors and advocates work alongside these services to provide additional support to service users.'

Alongside her, Matt Taylor, the national project support officer, dives to answer the phone – part of a busy routine that includes encouraging people to get involved with the service and stay with it through every stage. Former service users engage with the programme by starting a 12-week training

course in mentoring or advocacy skills and drugs and alcohol information, which is accredited to level 3 by the Open College Network. This essential first stage gives a thorough grounding in models of practice – it will teach someone who is only familiar with the fellowship model of recovery about cognitive behavioural therapy for example – as well as practical skills such as action planning and problem solving.

'Participants also learn how to keep themselves safe – it becomes a form of support,' adds Bailey. They are then matched to a placement for between four and 12 months as a peer mentor or advocate. The final stage is to progress into a volunteering role and take additional external training, such as an NVQ in health and social care, a City and Guilds Progression Award, a diploma in counselling skills – or maybe training in IT or administration.

'Some don't realise how much they're taking on,' says Bailey. But whether they complete the programme or not – and three quarters do – parts of it will still equip them to deal with life more easily. The expectation of the programme is that it will get them into formal education and training.

For those who stick with it, the value of their experience is obvious. Steven now has a paid job with a drug service in Leeds – a situation he couldn't have imagined just over a year ago, when he was a 'skinny and pasty 30-something shoplifter'. A run in with the police left him with a ROB (restrictions on bail) and he was introduced to Sally, his mentor, who helped him with housing and benefits and helped him 'gradually piece together [his] excuse for a life'. As he stabilised, he was encouraged to start on the 12-week peer mentoring course, as the first step to becoming a mentor – though at the time, he says, he didn't think this was important: 'I just wanted to be around people like myself who were trying to get some structure in their lives.' But completing the mentoring course gave Steven the confidence to do other qualifications, including delivered learning, and he now volunteers at ROB, where he first met Sally and began his journey.

'Perhaps for the first time I truly feel equal to my peers and



now feel that I am in a position to give something back,' he says. 'I am just about to start my NVQ 3 in health and social care, which may lead to full-time employment – something I never thought possible a year ago! As for the drugs, well I've been clear for a year now and am learning how to handle the troubles life throws at me.'

Of course it's not always plain sailing, and CRI are ready with a lapse policy from day one. 'We recognise people have problems,' says Jane Bailey. 'Some people decide they're not ready for it yet and we help them recognise what they need to put in place, whether it's a stint in rehab or steady one-to-one working.'

Dan is among those who took advantage of the lapse policy to continue with the programme. He had initially come into contact with CRI as a homeless drug user, when the Street Services Team found him a place in a hostel; then again through his CARAT worker, when he was sent to prison. On release, the DIP team got him engaged with the Foundation Programme, and he applied to do peer mentoring. He was told it would take at least two years to get the knowledge and experience to work in the field, so it was 'not a short cut into the field as [he] first thought'.

Along the way he 'reached a hard and painful place in [his] own recovery'. He was taken away from frontline working, in line with the lapse policy, but was able to continue with his training and was given administrative duties at West Sussex DAAT. After a period of stability, he was able to rejoin frontline work at the Family and Friends Project, where he became lead volunteer. He then returned to the peer mentoring programme, completed a 'train the trainers' course and delivered training to a group, and now – two years on from meeting his peer mentor co-ordinator – has just been appointed as a sessional drugs worker with Phoenix Futures, his first paid job in the field.

Since the first CRI peer advocacy service opened in Southwark (featured in *DDN*, 31 October 2005, page 6), schemes have opened across the country, from the south coast to York. The latest, Staffordshire's T3 Project, will introduce peer mentoring for young people, through a specially adapted version of the programme for 16 to 21-year-olds.

'A key feature of the entire programme is taking things at a steady pace, having lots of landmarks to achieve along the way, and getting people out of drug services and into college,' says Jane Bailey. 'It's about setting a realistic timeframe – but also about creating interesting and challenging opportunities that keep people coming back for more.'

The scheme is fully focused on getting people into employment. But, she adds, 'for many who have not had any long term experience of employment, this journey needs to be gradual – and we need to be encouraging and supporting people to maintain the changes they have made through treatment along the way.' Equally important, the support doesn't stop, and they are not left high and dry: 'We are committed to working with volunteers, mentors and advocates as this supports our aim to stay involved for longer,' she says. 'People who have come through services are then supported into further training and volunteering, which gives them continued support for a crucial 12-18 months beyond treatment.' **DDN**



### **Peter: From chaos to ambition**

'I came from a chaotic lifestyle ... I hadn't really done anything like this before. I didn't know how to access it or which route to go down. But rather than being thrown in the deep end, it gave me the opportunity to learn from others.'

'I've found it an enjoyable experience. It's a lot of information to take on board, but it's given me a broad knowledge. I want to work in this field and get a progression award and a diploma in substance misuse. Ultimately I would like to work with teenagers.'

### **Louise: Never too late to learn**

'I wasn't educated. I suffered at school with low self-worth and a lack of confidence. This felt like taking a risk. I struggled with writing, but I did it. At college I had a placement and I have my own clients now. I can give them advice, and that makes me feel good. I will probably have to start at the bottom when I get a job, but that's OK. This is a stepping stone to anything.'

### **Dan: On the other side of the fence**

'On my first street shift, I was teamed up with a police officer in the spirit of multi-agency working. I was blown away when I saw who it was: Sergeant S used to arrest me and send me to prison in my using days.'

'What a turnaround – here we were working side by side to help people who were on the streets to access support and get into accommodation.'

*Dan was a peer mentor with Street Services Team and is now employed in a substance misuse service*

### **Laura: Giving others confidence**

'Today I have agreed to help a group of peer mentors complete their evidence requirements for the OCN accreditation.'

'Some people lack confidence in their own ability, while others have struggled to keep their work organised. I can relate to all of these anxieties. The atmosphere is relaxed and everyone is motivated and capable. We cover a lot of ground.'

*Laura, former peer mentor, is now volunteering, doing the one-year Progression Award and volunteering with a needle exchange.*

### **Miriam: Managing training alongside recovery**

'Having been successful in my own recovery programme, I wanted to use my learning to help others through their treatment. The learning was realistic and practical for me to do as it was only one day a week at first, so I could combine it with my continued recovery needs. The other learners became friends with similar ambitions and we became our own peer support group. The placement opportunity meant I could put my learning into practice fairly quickly.'

'I am also getting treatment for hep C, which has been very hard going. But I wanted others to see that it is still possible to develop and learn while going through this – and it has also helped me get through the rough patches.'

'Eventually I aim to become a support worker within this field, preferably within a Drug Intervention Programme.'

*Miriam is a CRI peer mentor, who has just learned she has won the Adult Learning of the Year Award 2008 from the Brighton and Hove Learning Partnership.*

### **Alison: Essential practical help**

'The other day I was able to support a chap whose flat had previously been vandalised and boarded up following a visit out of town. He previously had some rent arrears and believing he had been evicted, was sleeping rough for a few months.'

'I met him in a Southwark substance misuse service and was able to contact the council, housing department, benefits agency and police, and he was re-established in this flat.'

*Alison has been working as a peer Advocate for the Southwark Peer Advocacy Service. Last month she received a Southwark Stars Award for giving over 100 hours voluntary support and for her contributions to the local community.*

### **Tom: Back on track**

'I joined the ABC Project at a very low point in my life, having had to resign from a job I loved, due to alcohol problems spanning 15 years.'

'My involvement with the project has helped me enormously to regain self-respect and confidence. I have made new friends and am now looking to return to paid employment, having been dry for 11 months.'

*Tom is a volunteer mentor with Bromley Aftercare Service and doing an NVQ in Health and Social Care.*

*Some names have been changed at interviewees' request.*