

## Are we making enough effort to intervene with young people early enough?, asks Addaction's acting chief executive William Butler



Shortly after the 2001 General Election, Addaction held a conference about children and drugs at which the Health Advisory Service launched its seminal review: *The Substance of Young Needs*. Its message was loud and clear – that early intervention was crucial for the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Addaction's surveys of adult drug users at the time, indicated that many had begun their drug use as early as 13 and had gone through their teenage years without coming into contact with drug treatment services. Often it was only after dropping out of education, missing employment opportunities, impairing their health or getting into trouble with the law, that they accessed help. And at this stage the support they needed to change their lives was more intensive, and consequently harder and more costly to deliver.

Too often we track back on the lives of young people when things have gone very wrong and ask – why didn't anyone intervene earlier? For many young people, drugs and alcohol misuse are symptomatic of other

underlying problems that, by the time they reach maturity, have become the main problem.

Now, almost five years after the 2001 conference, the landscape for children and young people's services has altered significantly. With its commitment to putting children at the centre of policy, *Every Child Matters* has become the kind of inspirational policy that has the potential to unite rather than divide a whole range of professionals seeking to make a difference. With the *Youth Matters* Green Paper, it seeks to improve the end-to-end support for children and young people in mainstream and universal services from early years onwards, examining the means of targeting support towards those who are most at risk from harms such as substance misuse.

For 1.2 million children in England and Wales, these risks centre on both the consequences of parental drug and alcohol misuse, and the increasing prevalence of binge drinking among young people. Indeed, estimates from the DfES on drug misuse suggest that 20,000 young people go on to become adult drug users each year, many of whom from our current knowledge, probably began experimenting with drugs, alcohol and tobacco by the time they were 13.

However, since trends in drug and alcohol use and misuse are embedded in culture and among young people, trying to identify and respond appropriately to need still means navigating uncharted waters. But it is clear that without appropriate and effective interventions, the prospects are that much greater for a large expansion in numbers of adult drug and alcohol misusers with entrenched problems in the future. Are all measures possible being taken now to intervene and respond earlier, and are we targeting support to those most at risk? We are still very much at the 'work in progress' phase and while many excellent efforts are being made, much more needs to be done.

While £23 million has been invested in young people's substance misuse services following the updated drug strategy of 2002, we know from national research that there are too few intensive tier 4 services, including a dearth of residential services. We also know that while all children's and young people's substance misuse services are largely dependent for referrals from external agencies, many who could benefit are not being identified and referred when they should be. Despite such obstacles, there has never been a greater opportunity to maximise progress and remove the barriers that have hindered delivery.

Screening for substance misuse problems

requires specialist skills, and while in some areas they are being applied appropriately, there are too many systemic failures in identification and referral. However, we should not underestimate the difficulties of substance misuse being hidden from view by young people themselves and their reluctance to engage with relevant services voluntarily. And while engaging with young people through arrest referral services works well for identification, it also presents a challenge for continued engagement – particularly when young people are presenting with multiple problems, many of which preceded their drug related criminal behaviours.

If wraparound services are not available or delivered in a timely way, if the young person is faced with negotiating complicated routes for help, or with numerous different key workers located in different places and is expected to repeat their story half a dozen times, it is not surprising that many will not show up.

There is nothing more important for us than to close the gaps in support for young people, which is why we believe voluntary sector agencies such as ours must become embedded as real partners with children's trusts in every locality as new arrangements come into force and the agenda is rolled out. Wherever young people are, on the streets, at school, within a youth service, in custody, in care, in mental health services, or in the local GP surgery, there is immense potential for cross-sector working and training, to close gaps. Putting children and young people at the centre of substance misuse policy and practice means being prepared to deal with the inter-related challenges of addressing disadvantage, making inter-agency partnerships equal, changing processes and culture, being accountable and exposing failure.

So, although Addaction and other specialist voluntary agencies offer fine services and want to run more of them, we also want to see more generic youth workers trained to deliver substance misuse services to high standards in appropriate environments for young people. We also know that schools are crying out for expert help to deliver policies that work for substance misuse, and that the field is already offering much training expertise across different statutory sector services.

But whether we are providing specialist substance misuse treatment services or acting as key partners in training and education to generic statutory providers, the contribution of a vibrant voluntary sector is critical to building the capacity of all interested agencies to make the kind of early interventions that can make a real difference to the lives of children, young people and families.

*This article is based on contributions made by Addaction on the Youth Matters Green Paper and at the Young People Now national conference on youth policy held in Birmingham on 24 November.*