

## **Notes from the Alliance: Methadone and beyond**

*With the flag for user involvement flying high, why do we still tolerate crippling discriminatory legislation, asks Daren Garratt, development manager at the Alliance.*

It's encouraging to note that the Drug Interventions Programme, Drug Strategy Directorate and National Treatment Agency are currently working with the University of Central Lancashire's Centre for Ethnicity and Health to develop best practice guidance on peer led support for ex users. For the Drug Strategy Directorate, one of the main aims of this work is to advocate at a strategic level on behalf of drug users, particularly those who have left treatment in the community and/or in prison. Most importantly, it aims to better develop peer-led support, which has previously received little but lip service. The importance of integrating user involvement and peer-led support with drug treatment within the criminal justice system can't be underestimated, but there remains a very real fear that, unless we can lobby for effective policy change at a strategic level, we may be dooming many ex-cons to fail; particularly those who view user involvement as a way to mobilise themselves, secure employment and give something back to their community.

Why? Because under present legislature you cannot get public liability insurance if you've got a conviction, regardless of the nature of the crime or when you served your sentence. It's a shameful situation that makes a mockery of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, and could seriously jeopardise both the NTA's Treatment Effectiveness Strategy and the Home Office's new peer support project.

Think about it. You've just completed a prison sentence and, thanks to the highly effective, individually tailored drug treatment regime you received you're ready to contact your DAT, get involved in user involvement and, ideally, set-up your own group and provide some peer-led interventions. The DAT is great, the local agency is encouraging and gets you in touch with some local users and neighbouring groups who willingly share their best practice and help you draw up a terms of reference and constitution. You're all set. This is the last step in your recovery. You've found your vocation, you're respected, you've got a purpose, self-worth and the ability to finally stop being defined by the mistakes of your past and build a brighter future. To celebrate, you decide to launch your new group with a big DAT-supported open-air event... but you can't because you can't get public liability insurance, which also means you can't legitimately establish your group and support your peers in your own premises. You're back to square one. What was the point?

This was a painful lesson recently learned by the ever impressive Morph in Southampton who, after arranging and promoting a massive local authority approved community day in a local park, discovered they'd have to cancel the whole thing at the 11th hour because they were denied public liability insurance due to the fact that the organisers had long-spent drug convictions.

We mention tokenism a lot when we talk of user involvement. The new desire of the Home Office to develop this strand of support within the criminal justice system is extremely welcome, but runs the risk of falling at the first hurdle unless we can begin to address this unnecessary barrier.