



Steve Cox has been service user engagement co-ordinator at Drug Solutions Birmingham since October 2005. He tells DDN about empowering service users and reaching out to those sections of the community traditionally under-represented in treatment.

A day in the life

I've held the role of service user engagement co-ordinator since the inception of this role nearly two years ago. My main purpose is to develop service user involvement at Drug Solutions Birmingham (DSB) – we're part of The Swanswell Charitable Trust and we're contracted from the Birmingham DAT to deliver shared care in GP surgeries and probation offices. Service user groups have been in operation since October 2005, and there are two groups meeting weekly.

I clock on at nine and hopefully clock off at five, but that's not always the case. My workload varies from day to day – often I'll facilitate a service user group, but members of the groups are starting more and more to chair the meetings and facilitate the groups themselves. This direction is something we've really been encouraging, through a series of development and training opportunities.

I worked in learning difficulties before heading off into the drug treatment field – service user involvement is well established in the learning difficulties environment, so I found it an easy transition to move into my current role. Service users have become a key part of the development of new workers, and some are involved in sessions where drug use and drug users' experiences are relevant to the learning experience.

Yesterday myself and some members of our groups and other service user groups in Birmingham attended a training session by the Oxford User team, organised by Birmingham DAT. Today we've got a user voice representative coming in to talk to staff

about her role and to discuss SMART recovery, a group that's recently formed in Birmingham.

What I enjoy most about the role is undoubtedly empowering service users. It's good to see people attend the groups, start to get involved then go off and find work, go to rehab, go to college or on to DAT and NTA service user involvement initiatives. It's seeing people really develop and gain confidence like that that really motivates me.

We're getting to a really interesting stage now because we're sitting down and developing an organisational service user policy. The consultation group includes myself, staff, service users and a member of the board, and hopefully by Christmas we'll have a draft and be able to spread what we've been doing across the whole of the trust – they've also got projects in Coventry, Rugby, Leamington and Nuneaton, which includes drug and alcohol and young people's services. The service users have also been involved in a staff and service user review of the retention in treatment policy, looking at ways of being creative in how we communicate more effectively with service users, how to retain them in treatment and make their treatment more service user focused.

At service user meetings the doors open at two o'clock and there's about half an hour where people can just chill out, grab a coffee and catch up. After the formal meeting we have a break, and then for the last hour we do free complementary therapies. These have progressed now to the point where there's a separate clinic offering just complementary

therapies every Friday – Reiki, auricular acupuncture, Indian head massage and reflexology.

At the end of 2006 we completed a research project with the help of service users called HIDDUN (Hidden Drug Users' Needs) which aimed to reach out to particularly hard to reach groups that have been under-represented in treatment, such as female drug users, parents, drug users with disabilities, BME groups, stimulant and poly-drug users and LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender] drug users. We went out into the community for this, with stands at events and festivals, and with service users actively involved in interviewing people who'd never engaged in treatment. This project was presented with an award by Birmingham DAT, and there is a lot of motivation from the service user groups to build on that and take it further.

By far the most challenging aspect of the role is that there's just not enough time – there's so much to do and the most important thing is just to get it all moving in the right direction, but we have made a lot of progress.

The skills I find myself using the most are those I've needed in other roles or aspects of my career – counselling, social services, complementary therapies, education and advocacy. It extends me in all aspects of what I've trained for and had experience in, so it feels almost like everything's come together in this. It's the perfect role for me to be doing right now and couldn't imagine doing anything else. **DDN**