

# Newton's law

EVERYONE IN THE DRUG FIELD is all too familiar with the strictures of evaluation – we all find ourselves increasingly subject to the contracting-out process and every contract includes requirements for an evaluation of effectiveness and a monitoring of progress. But now it's time to turn the tables and to ask the man responsible for England's strategy (which is also the basis for strategies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) the 64 million dollar question: just how well is *Tackling Drugs Together* performing?

"I think it's already been successful in a number of basic areas", says Tony Newton, chair of the cabinet sub-committee which oversees the strategy. "I think we've got a considerable consensus amongst both the statutory and voluntary agencies in the field, and among the professionals concerned. We've got much better coordination nationally and much better coordination locally, in a way that is producing what I would call 'added value', and we're beginning to see a very encouraging development of partnerships of various kinds, including partnerships involving the private and voluntary sectors at the local level."

But what about the rigours of external evaluation? The strategy includes three or four key performance indicators for each of the aims, and so one could assume that these would provide the answer as to the ongoing effectiveness of the measures outlined in *Tackling Drugs Together*. But such indicators can really only measure *process* and *activity*, rather than *outcome*, something which Tony Newton acknowledges. And while he clearly anticipates that the indicators will be further developed, he doesn't want them to be continually changed.

"The very fact that they are in place will be building up from a baseline and I hope we shan't keep changing from that baseline. Having got these indicators, I think we now need to assess them as we get additional information. I accept that it is early days at the moment and there are no conclusions that I can draw except of the generalised kind – but we've got the indicators in place that will over time enable us to begin to make those more definite evaluative judgements."

*Tackling Drugs Together is 18 months old – young in the eyes of many, but half way through its life.*

*Whitehall is already reviewing progress and will be working on*

*Tackling Drugs*

*Together 'Part Two'*

*during the first half of*

*1997. So just how well*

*is the strategy doing*

*and what does the*

*future hold? With the*

*election countdown*

*well underway, we will*

*be talking to the main*

*political parties about*

*their drug policies in*

*the next issue of*

*Druglink.*

*For this issue, and for*

*a bit of context, we*

*interviewed the*

*political architect of*

*Tackling Drugs*

*Together –*

*Tony Newton*

## A long timeframe

And so it seems that, for the time being, snap judgements have been avoided. "In some cases – perhaps two or three years – you might at least begin to feel you've got some basis for making a judgement, but that might be a fairly tentative judgement. And of course in some of these areas you've seen the sort of increase that has led to current levels of concern. Simply a levelling off of the increase in, shall we say, public concern about drug-related crime will be something you would take some satisfaction in, though obviously what you actually want to see is those figures coming down again."

It is clear, therefore, that for Tony Newton the strategy is not a quick fix, and he draws comparisons with the work he did as a health minister in the 1980s. "Ten years ago I would have been sitting around a table in the Department of Health working on the anti-AIDS strategy. Now in that case, it is probably nine or ten years later that you're beginning to be able to make claims about the achievements of the preventative strategy that was put in place at that time. It's not a perfect parallel with drug misuse, but you're certainly looking at a longish timescale."

The most obvious time for review and evaluation is in 1998, when the strategy officially ends. "But that doesn't mean that anybody could conceivably think that you say 'Right, that's it, we've finished with the anti-drug strategy'. I've always said that neither I nor anybody else thinks that this is the strategy which can solve the problem in three years, but it does seem sensible to start off with a strategy that reflects a timescale within which you could begin to make a judgement about whether you at least got the structures right."

## Structurally sound?

So have the structures been 'got right'? Coordination and cooperation are the keys to the strategy, both on the national and the local levels and at both levels new structures have been created: the Central Drugs Coordination Unit (CDCU) on the national side and the local Drug Action Teams (DATs) and Drug Reference Groups (DRGs).

by  
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The man with the plan: but will the next person who sits in his chair see *Tackling Drugs Together* as such a success?

### **DATs – the mainstay**

Tony Newton characterises the success of *Tackling Drugs Together* as resulting from “a greater sense of partnership at every level and a feeling of greater dynamism”. Many of those in the field might argue that the dynamism had always been there, but most would also acknowledge that the partnership philosophy is something new or at least it is now better developed than in the past.

This new sense of partnership stems from the creation of DATs and the new emphasis on cross-budgetary and cross-authority working. At the time of the original Green and White Papers many people were doubtful about the practicality of the DAT concept and in particular wondered whether the senior level of commitment would be forthcoming.

Even the task master expresses surprise at the degree to which DATs have responded. “This is going to sound appallingly complacent, but I haven’t actually got a particular sense of disappointment at the moment, and I’ll tell you why. The fact is we got the Drug Action Teams put in place on a remarkably short time scale which at the outset I wasn’t sure could be met. They produced some really quite good plans in a shorter time scale than I thought they were going to be able to achieve, and you’ve been able to sense the difference in the spirit of partnership, again more fully and quickly than I might have anticipated”. He goes so far as to say that “the way in which they picked up and ran with the Drugs Challenge Fund this summer, again on a very short time scale,

was extremely impressive and encouraging”.

DATs are just one part of *Tackling Drugs Together* that is being evaluated. But whatever the outcome of this ongoing research, it is clear that Tony Newton has no intention of changing the relationship that central government has with DATs, which are largely responsible for delivering the necessary results.

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“The basis of this strategy was to be as pragmatic and as non-prescriptive as possible, leaving a good scope for flexibility at the local level about precisely who sits on DATs, precisely what the structure of DRGs is, and what the coverage is, because about a third of DATs have decided to take alcohol as well as drugs and we’ve deliberately wanted to leave room for that kind of flexibility. So I’m not really looking to impose a sort of centralised judgement on the way everything is done, and what goes with that is a view that what you’re seeking to foster are partnerships in which everybody feels a sense of ownership and are genuinely committed to – not setting up a rival bureaucracy which is seen as taking away some of their resources”.

Some DATs have pooled not just ideas but also resources and the Drugs

Challenge Fund provides money to support such joint initiatives. But pooling resources is not a simple matter and some people have been talking of ‘top-slicing’ budgets to provide a ready made pool of money for DAT activity. This is clearly not an option that is entertained by Tony Newton.

“I think if you went down the top-slicing route there would be a risk that a DAT would almost come to be seen as a rival organisation to all the people that you want to be contributing to the effort. What I really think is most productive and best, therefore, is that they should feel that the pooling of their resources for particular purposes within the DAT is something they all want to do, not something that is being forced on them by central government because I think that in almost every walk of human life, people who want to work together will work together, better than those who feel that they are being made to work together.” He adds, “If you went very far down that path of top-slicing, I think you would probably have to look at legislation to put DATs on a statutory basis, and again you would be going down the path of setting up what could all too easily become yet another bureaucratic institution rather than a focus of partnership between all agencies”.

### **Cooperation goes up as well as down**

While Tony Newton sees partnership on the local level as being unexpectedly successful, he believes that partnership on the national level has been every bit as strong. “There’s been a breakthrough in cooperation at the national level. You

could call it a 'culture change' in the way in which departments have been working together, but that is partly related to the way in which the CDCU does business. If the CDCU was seen as an expanding empire, that would rapidly set up resistance in all those who would see their activities as being taken over. So it's important that it should remain a small coordinating unit".

Just as he sees the Drugs Challenge Fund as an example of success on the local level, so too does he see it on the national. "Two years running and I've actually persuaded four government departments to take some of the money they had and put it into this pool to fund projects throughout the country."

Another example he gives is that of the police and Customs, which "have developed joint Performance Indicators, and for the second year they are doing their drug seizure figures at a combined launch. That may seem a small point, but it is not so very long ago that you would not have expected police and customs to be doing these things jointly".

Although there is no formal evaluation of the CDCU's work at the national level, the success or failure of the DATs will obviously reflect on the Unit. There is however an implicit assumption in everything that Mr Newton says that the CDCU will continue as it is, neither being wound up nor significantly expanded.

### Action versus Prevention?

Right from the beginning of *Tackling Drugs Together* there has been an element of confusion (deliberate or otherwise) over the relationship between DATs and the Home Office's Drug Prevention Teams. Should the Drug Prevention Initiative be integrated into the strategy, or should its teams be disintegrated? "It may well be that the Home Office would like to review the relationship," says Tony Newton.

"But let me say something quite straightforwardly – I can see that it doesn't look very tidy on paper, but my approach in this, as in other matters, is very pragmatic. The fact is they were there. They were doing a useful job, and it seemed to me that the sensible course, having set up DATs and DRGs on a more national basis, was to reckon that the Drug Prevention Teams would collaborate with the DATs.

"Where DATs and Drug Prevention Teams overlapped, they would work together, where there was no Prevention Team, the creation of a DAT would enable people to take advantage of some of the lessons learnt from the work of the

Drug Prevention Initiative.

"Now as I say, I can see that is not a structure you would invent if you were starting with a blank sheet of paper, but you never are, and one of the strengths I believe of the whole way of doing things in Britain (not least here in Parliament) is that you don't start constantly saying let's try and invent the perfect structure on a blank sheet of paper – you try to work with, and build on and develop what you've got".

### Environmental damage

One of the long-standing criticisms of *Tackling Drugs Together* has been that, both on the local level in terms of DAT membership and on the national level in terms of policy, it fails to take social and environmental aspects of the 'drug problem' into account, and that it is therefore far too narrow in its outlook.

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But Tony Newton believes that under the present structure, such connections can be (and are being) made. "You can begin to see some of these links developing in a natural kind of way", he says. "They are acknowledged in the structure of the Cabinet Committee [which has ministerial representation from the Department of the Environment]. But I'd be reluctant to go down the path that meant that DATs became bigger and bigger. Part of their strength is that they are relatively small units, attended at a reasonably senior level, rather than the sort of meeting that constitutes a public rather than a private meeting".

"Where links exist, then I am more than willing to look at ways of taking account of those and reflecting them in the strategy. Interestingly, several DATs have not only put in Drugs Challenge Fund bids which can be seen as relating to regeneration in run-down parts of towns and cities, but a number of DATs have also put in bids under the Single Regeneration Budget. We don't yet know the results of that, but they have seen that DAT work against drugs can make a contribution to the regeneration of some of our run-down city areas where drugs

are a very significant problem."

And he also allows for the possibility of stronger and more formal links with the broader social and environmental issues. "I'm not ruling it out. The Prevention group of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs is currently doing some work which could lead them to make some comments in this area – they are expected to produce a report in 1997".

### The future in your hands?

There is a thread running through everything Tony Newton says about the future development of the strategy that if something is found useful, he will be prepared to consider its inclusion. "I obviously want to see the new partnerships that *Tackling Drugs Together* has promoted, consolidated.

"I'm not looking at taking the thing up by the roots in the next year or two. But alongside that, we need some stability and developing structures and partnerships – I make no secret of the view that this is not a problem that is going to be manifestly solved in three years. We all need to review the early experience in determining how to carry it forward".

If there's a message for the field in this, it is that he wants to be shown that ideas work in practice.

"The sort of position I would like to be in, in ten years time, is to feel that those partnerships have developed and deepened and had a real effect on the ground, to be able to point to trends of diminishing drug misuse and public concern about drug-related crime. And to be able to look back with some satisfaction at the extent to which that has meant we have a significantly smaller problem in this country than we would have had, had we not done that."

The chances are though that Tony Newton will have moved on long before then. With an election just weeks away, we have to wonder whether the next person to sit in Tony Newton's chair will have the same commitment to local and national partnerships as he does. ○

What do you think about Tony Newton's views on *Tackling Drugs Together*? Have DATs worked? Does the CDCU fulfil its national role? Is the Drug Prevention Initiative redundant? If you work with DATs or have been affected by the national strategy, write in and tell us what you think. We will endeavour to publish your letters as part of an open forum. We're also looking for questions from the field to put to the main political parties in the next issue of *Druglink*, so, once again, please send in your views on the future for Britain's drug policy.