



Tim Sampey

Earlier this year, Build on Belief held a well-attended launch event at the House of Lords. Co-founder member and Chief Operating Officer Tim Sampey, recalls that it all started as a racket – badminton that is. Interview by Harry Shapiro

Around late 2004, Terry Swinton and I went to a service user meeting at Blenheim/CDP where I was a client. We were bullied into it really by the manager. We went along because we were bored. It was full of people plotting how to overthrow the commissioner and how to get their hands on the money. Terrible. We weren't interested in the classic service user stuff; sitting in DAT meetings and treatment and care groups, talking to the NTA.

But I was very interested in playing badminton. I got into this while I was in rehab. I had always been a severe asthmatic, so this was the first real sport I had ever done in my life and I loved it. So it was suggested that we go to the commissioner and ask for £200 to buy some rackets and other equipment. We set up a little badminton club at Blenheim/CDP on a Wednesday afternoon. We'd go down there and see if anybody wanted to play. But it wasn't free, it cost a quid and people were saying they couldn't afford it. So we went back to the commissioner and said, 'we want £20 a week on top to pay for courts and buy coffee afterwards'. The commissioner was (and still is) Gaynor Driscoll and she said yes. Blenheim/CDP acted as the banker, we'd go down there, get the money and come back with the receipts. It was a way of playing

badminton for free and getting people on the courts. We did this for about three or four months and then Terry said, 'there's something really interesting happening here. People are coming along, they are enjoying themselves and a sense of camaraderie is building up'.

I'd been getting close to finishing with treatment; I was getting tired of key working and groups, but didn't really know what to do next. I hadn't worked for 15 years and had a criminal record. Terry said, 'why don't we set up a social club on a Saturday?' I had the same problem as a lot of people; back then my parents weren't talking to me, my wife had just left and all my friends were still on drugs. Weekends were terrible.

So we went back to Gaynor and told her what we wanted to do. She said, 'write a business plan'. She has always been phenomenal like that – she came to service user meetings and I could always ring her up and ask to come over for a coffee and a chat. So we drew up a little business plan and went back to Blenheim/CDP and said, 'Can we use the building on a Saturday?' It's important to emphasise how revolutionary that was in 2005. We were both still clients – Terry was still scripted – and we wanted to set up a little weekend service that wasn't abstinence-based. It also had to be fully independent of Blenheim/CDP to give

us a sense of empowerment, of owning it and we had some confidence because of running the badminton club. For the first year, out of our service user budget, we paid to have a member of staff on the premises but they weren't allowed to come downstairs from the office without our permission. Terry had this wonderful expression, 'It's easy. It's like running a pub without the alcohol. You've just got to break up the fights. No problem'.

Back then, we had no idea of conflict resolution other than, 'do you want to step outside and repeat that?' None of that stuff. It was very chaotic. But we wanted to own it ourselves.

So what went on at the club?

When we started, we just did sandwiches, tea and coffee and showed a film. That was it. We had to build up a volunteer team and back then Terry and I would ambush anybody. We'd go into a drop in centre and say, 'what are you doing at the weekend?' My girlfriend and her daughter volunteered, so did Terry's girlfriend. My only line of conversation at parties was, 'what do you do at the weekend?'

We built up to about 75-80% of the volunteers in recovery and developing the club became a very organic process. It had been going for about six months

before we said – ‘why don’t we do ‘check in’ and ‘check out’ like they do in the rehabs?’ Everybody sits down at the start of the day to say how they feel right now; this is what my week’s been like and so on. Then when we finish, we clear up and sit down and talk about what we did today, what made us feel good, whether we could have done something better.

What was the ethos of the service?

It has always been a non-abstinence based service which means that anybody can come in, so long as you can control your behaviour – so nobody so drunk they can’t stand, or so stoned they just gouch out, or so wired on crack that they’re not in control. We don’t differentiate between drugs or alcohol and have never followed any particular model of recovery.

Didn’t this create tensions between volunteers who were in recovery from different perspectives?

Oddly, no. There were arguments over ‘what is recovery?’ and because I drink alcohol socially, some people said, ‘oh, you’re not in recovery’. But we were building something that was really working, so we never got into that whole debate and by bringing in all these different points of view, it meant that whoever came through the door, they had somebody they could talk to.

So what happened beyond tea and sandwiches?

We did struggle for a few years; it was hard to get volunteers (we couldn’t operate with less than four). Some people thought what we were doing was brilliant, others thought it was outrageous. Nothing serious happened at the club, some arguments, the police were called a few times, so there was a risk element to it, but we were very lucky that we had Gaynor and Jean Daintith (head of adult social care service for Kensington & Chelsea and the DAT chair) firmly behind us. They both had pretty fearsome reputations, so those people who were against us, didn’t want to get into it for fear of upsetting them!

Blenheim/CDP were very good. We hassled them for volunteer training; conflict resolution and confidentiality – we realised that there were times when

you had to break confidentiality – where somebody was a risk to themselves or others – and where children were concerned of course. If the person is in treatment, I will ask if I can talk to their key worker and usually they are fine with that. Only on two occasions have I had to call social services directly.

After about two years, we went to Saturday and Sunday. Then we started to add in other things based on the skills of the volunteers; so we started an art workshop, photography, music and I found a shiatsu massage therapist. It was very quiet up to then – we were lucky to see get ten people in. We relentlessly went round libraries, police stations, treatment services, putting up posters. Then around 2007, it began to click; ‘one day I was on my home to see my mother, and Terry phoned to say we had 14 people in and it was a chaotic. Four years later, we had 50 people in and then we found out what chaotic really meant.

We started writing our own training for volunteers; drug and alcohol awareness, harm reduction, needle exchange, communication skills. We began to ask ourselves the question; ‘we are giving these people £6 for travel and sandwich. What do they want?’ Well, a lot of them want to work in the field, so that’s why we started the training and social events and the award ceremony where we book the town hall and invite the commissioner, local politicians and service providers. So we created this support network for the volunteers which became quite important – and we started getting calls from people from all over London who wanted to volunteer; we had one woman who would drive up from Maidstone. We built up to a team of 50-60 volunteers with anywhere up to 50 people coming in.

So where does BoB come into it?

Up to then, we had been the Kensington and Chelsea Drug Service User Reference Group (DSURG) which I always thought was a commissioner joke because it’s an anagram of DRUGS. And through all that time, Blenheim/CDP has been our banker. But the sums of money from the commissioner were growing – up to around £100,000 – largely now to pay proper wages for me and Terry because it had become a full-time job plus we had manager here in the head office in Earl’s Court and in other services that we were now running in Kensington &

Chelsea, Hammersmith and Ealing. Yet we were still on the Blenheim payroll and they were sorting out tax and national insurance. But it was getting a little difficult with their accountants, so everything had to be formalised. We looked at becoming a social enterprise, which didn’t really work for us, so the only logical step was to become a charity.

I asked everybody at our meetings what we should call ourselves and nobody could come up with anything. So I just came up with the name Bob, it sounded nice and friendly and informal (a bit like the government drug website Frank). Then I was having dinner one night and it came to me what the letters could stand for; Build on Belief. And that was that.

It seems that BoB is as much an organisation for the volunteers as it is for those who those in off the streets?

Yes. It is a form of interactive aftercare. People volunteer, they get training and start building their self-esteem and belief in re-integration. And so it works on two levels. It provides a weekend service in K&C (meaning K&C had a seven day a week service); we can refer people to treatment having done an initial assessment. And we have people that cross over; at the House of Lords launch, we presented awards to two guys who had been coming in off their heads for some time until one day they said, ‘How can we become you?’ We said, ‘sort that out and you’re in’.

So where is BoB at now?

We are commissioned by K&C to provide a weekend service here and in the north of the borough and a recovery café here during the day – and we are subcontracted to provide similar services for CRI and Central and North West London NHS Trust, a mentoring service in Kingston and another service in Hammersmith.

We’re a London-based service and we are not preparing to step outside London. If you want to provide a weekend service, we are the only people to go to and we are often included in the tenders of the large service providers. What we want to do is to roll out the model across London.

For more information, go to www.buildonbelief.org.uk.