

Peter Farley

## Can these bones live?



**This article is compulsory reading. The government keeps telling us that 'volunteering' is the way ahead and that statutory provision only has itself to blame if it loses ground to the voluntary sector. Here, you can find the reasons for this ideology. And take note, you statutory dinosaurs - Keith Hellawell agrees with every word**

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**V**oluntary drug agencies find themselves at a crossroads. The direction the sector takes at this moment in time will be critical - both individually and collectively - for the organisations involved as well as for the future of drug work in the United Kingdom. Government, as the ultimate embodiment of the statutory sector, has acknowledged that the voluntary sector has a unique contribution to make to the nation's efforts to tackle drugs. But the statutory sector, in failing to truly understand or appreciate the nature of what it values in the voluntary sector's service delivery, is in danger of stifling its very existence.

The greatest risk comes from the

failure to appreciate the damage that can be caused by the erroneous premise that the ethos and functioning of voluntary agencies is no different from that of statutory agencies. The effect could be likened to suddenly trying to force a racehorse born and bred to run 'on the flat' to go 'over the sticks', especially when it has no inclination to do so. This would be particularly perverse when the horse has already proved to be a competent and successful flat racer. Too often, voluntary agencies are being forced to jump over fences and while they are generally able to do so, the effort involved is clearly having a detrimental effect on performance and morale.

### Hearts of gold . . .

Undoubtedly, the birthplace of most of this nation's caring endeavours has been the voluntary sector – it is the womb of welfare. But whenever the unique contribution of the voluntary sector has been recognised and acknowledged, the statutory sector seeks to adopt it as its own and absorb it. Whenever this has happened, the voluntary 'spark of inspiration' has been extinguished and work is standardised into the conformity of the state system. In recent times, the way government has taken the concept of the caring community and transformed it into 'Care in the Community' demonstrates what mutations can be brought to life.

In the Old Testament, Ezekiel, finding himself in the Valley of Dry Bones, was asked the rhetorical question by God, "Can these bones live?". He learned that only when the flesh came on to the bones and the breath or spirit entered the body, did they come to life and "stand up on their feet – a vast army". *Tackling Drugs To Build a Better Britain* can be seen as the bones of this nation's response to drug misuse. They can be fleshed out, principally by specialist drug services but they can only come to life – and be truly effective – if 'spirit' is breathed into them.

Clearly, there are many committed individuals within the statutory sector, but the system limits the extent to which their zeal and enterprise can be effectual. If left to the statutory sector to infuse the spirit, our response to drugs would be little more than a zombie. The essential spirit, the passion, has to come from the voluntary sector.

### Control freaks

The danger at this point is that those who control the statutory sector, in their hamfisted attempts to understand the essence of the voluntary sector, will try to coerce voluntary drug services to take the road to standardisation and conformity. Forcing a round peg into a square hole simply destroys those aspects of the response to drugs which only the voluntary sector can provide. Where else can sufficient measures of flexibility, innovation, enterprise, vigour, boldness, drive and the willingness to take risks be found?


We need to ensure that voluntary drug services are not frogmarched into obscurity and eventual extinction, going down under the 'friendly fire' of statutory systems and conventions. While we must of course acknowledge that they can no longer take the route of complete independence, they must be helped to choose the 'third way' – the one they naturally favour, the way of mutual respect and acceptance. To make this choice they need to know that their commitment to the principles of cooperation and coexistence is reciprocated.

The statutory sector can in part accomplish this by undertaking to do, on behalf of the voluntary sector, what it does best. This includes ensuring that individual drug services are liberated of the need to feel they have to compete against one another and that each is best-placed to avail themselves of appropriate funding opportunities. The statutory sector has the systems, personnel and necessary resources to carry out many tasks which are imposed on voluntary agencies with ease.

### Monitoring the monitors

Additionally, it should be the statutory sector's responsibility to set up and manage systems for evaluation and monitoring. These systems should only be put in place following full consultation with the field, where they include provision for peer audit and where they enable the optimum data to be obtained, with the minimum of disruption to service delivery. It is beholden on those who establish systems for evaluation and monitoring to ensure that a disproportionate amount of time and effort is not spent meeting their requirements.

All drug agencies (statutory as well as voluntary) must be able to demonstrate to purchasers that they provide quality services, which are efficient as well as effective. Quality standards are already being produced through the QUADS (Quality in Alcohol and Drug Services) project being developed jointly by Alcohol Concern and SCODA. Voluntary projects have been involved in the national QUADS pilot not just because they want to contribute to the process and jump over the statutory funding fences. It is also because they believe it is essential that 'quality'



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should be the hallmark of their services.

It is vital though that voluntary drug services are not completely dependent on statutory funding, as this greatly reduces their ability to operate independently. A way must therefore be found to release them from expending excessive energy on fundraising. Perhaps government could pick up some of the shortfall that remains after all avenues of funding from statutory, corporate and charitable sources have been exhausted.

Ultimately, the statutory sector must also accept that they are standing at the same crossroads, facing the same choices and needing to make the same adjustments. They must have the same courage to take the risk of setting out in a new direction in the knowledge that they will not be doing so alone. The voluntary sector have proved that it's possible to find a way through uncharted territory. It now needs both parties to commit their efforts, energies and resources to travelling together. If we are to make the best of it, it will mean taking turns to lead, being ready to redistribute the load whenever necessary and even at times being prepared to let the other party lean on you.

There is too much at stake for either sector to be partisan or to insist that things are only done their way. The route of mutual respect and acceptance, of cooperation and coexistence may very well be the road-less-travelled, but it is the only one if we are to have any chance of reaching the goals set out by *Tackling Drugs To Build a Better Britain* ■