



Deal or no deal

They are the pariahs of many communities. But, like problem drug users, some drug dealers seek a way out of the drug market.

Sam Hart on a unique project in Bristol that goes where few services fear to tread.

“That’s a crack house. There’s another crack house. A lot of dealing goes on in that flat there. See that shop – that’s where you find out about all the deals going on in the area.”

Vernon Blanc is driving down the hotch-potch stretch of paint peeling shop fronts and shabby houses that make up Bristol’s notorious Stapleton Road – once dubbed the most dangerous street in Britain.

The area’s vibrant and diverse community has fought hard, with energetic resident-led regeneration projects, to shake off its reputation as the drugs and crime capital of the south west. Yet the Easton and St Paul’s wards, which the road bisects, remain among the most deprived areas in the city. It’s easy to forget that Bristol’s chic city centre with its luxury bars, shops and restaurants, lies just under a mile to the south west.

"This is the ghetto," says Blanc. "This is Bristol's frontline." He speaks from experience: every Thursday for the past year Blanc plunges himself into the 'no go' corners of the city in search of drug dealers. As an outreach worker for a unique project called Switch, it is his job to offer dealers a route out of the drug market and into legitimate employment.

Switch was launched last year amid deep community concerns about the area's escalating crack-cocaine problem. Residents complained that highly visible dealing in the streets was making them feel unsafe. Created from research and the experiences of three Bristol drug agencies – Community Action Around Alcohol and Drugs (CAAAD), IDEAL and Nilaari – Switch set about offering practical support to dealers who want to change their lives.

"We could see that crack was becoming a huge problem in the community," says Nick Bentley, director of IDEAL. "But nobody was engaging with the dealers at all."

Switch workers believe that many dealers are looking for a way out of a stressful and dangerous lifestyle – a view backed by one former Bristol drug dealer: "You never have a still mind. You never sleep comfortably because you don't know if the police or robbers or old friends gonna kick off your door. I wasn't comfortable. It wasn't a lifestyle to brag about."

"This project helps dealers to see that there is an alternative," says Anya Mulcahy-Bowman, development manager at CAAAD. "Dealers have a lot of skills. To be a successful dealer you have to have face, you have to have savvy and a good business head. A lot of these skills are transferable to a legitimate career."

EVERY THURSDAY FOR THE PAST YEAR BLANC PLUNGES HIMSELF INTO THE 'NO GO' CORNERS OF THE CITY IN SEARCH OF DRUG DEALERS

Although dealers are vilified by the press and local communities, the line between victims and villains is a blurred one: many users deal to fund their habit. As such, most agencies will have offered small time dealers help at some point. But Switch is different in that it offers help to economic dealers – those who make a living out of dealing drugs but are not problem drugs users themselves. No easy task as Blanc acknowledges.

"Some of these guys are earning up to £5,000 a week," he says, "They are not going to give it all up to go and work in Sainsbury's."

Switch works by building up a relationship of trust with dealers. On a typical day, Blanc will go into pubs, cafes and shops putting up posters and handing out calling cards which advertise his service. "Or I'll sit on the steps of the crack house and chat to whoever is there and talk about what we do. Of course I'm not expecting everyone to sign up immediately – but I might leave a card – I'll just let them know we're here and we can help them when they are ready."

Going into crack dens to show dealers the error of their ways is not everyone's idea of an easy life. "He deals with some really scary people," said one former drug user who we bump into in the street. "I wouldn't fancy it myself." But Blanc takes it all in his stride and is a popular figure in the area.

"He has got brilliant people skills," says a current drug user. "He doesn't judge people – he just talks to them and puts them at ease."

As a former user and dealer himself who served a three-year prison sentence for pushing heroin, Blanc justifiably believes he

has an insight into the kind of service dealers need.

"I try to give the kind of service I would have liked when I was dealing," he explains. "I was a nightmare. Really chaotic. If people don't turn up for appointments now I don't judge them. I'm not surprised. I'm just there for them the next time." He also believes that his past helps him build up a relationship with a group of people who are naturally distrustful.

"The first thing people ask is 'what do you know?' For me, my past is my CV. In a weird way it helps me get through the door."

And although he has left his drug dealing lifestyle behind, Blanc still lives in the heart of the inner city and drinks in the local pubs: "So I see the local faces when I'm out I know what's going on. It's about them seeing you out there. It's about being a communicator."

Switch, funded by New Deal for Communities, is part-based on a police-led project pioneered in the east coast US city of Baltimore – made famous by the TV show *The Wire* – which offers dealers a path to a legitimate lifestyle. The Baltimore project involves police officers wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan 'Get out of the Game' and handing out leaflets asking questions such as 'Do you spend more time with your lawyer than with your family?' and 'Are you afraid to leave home without your weapon?' Help is offered via a 24-hour hotline.

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In Bristol, the police take more of a back seat. In fact, the project goes out of its way to stress the fact that it is not a law-enforcement agency, for fear of putting off potential clients. "It's about building up trust. It's about stressing that we are not a policing agent," says Mulcahy-Bowman.

Blanc has around 18 people on his books, five of whom are economic dealers. The rest are made up of user dealers and very chaotic users who may have been banned from other agencies because of difficult behaviour.

In the past 18 months, Blanc has helped a former dealer get on a training course to become a plumber and has helped others onto adult literacy courses. But gains with this very difficult client group are always going to be slow. "A dealing lifestyle is all about face – just turning up and admitting you need help is a huge step," says Mulcahy-Bowman. And Blanc uses a softly-softly approach to make gradual changes. "I might just talk about football with them for ten minutes. Then I talk to them about what they want to do and where they want to be. I might go to court with them. Or go down to the housing office, or help them fill in forms. We might down to the gym – anything to break the cycle – to help them realise there is more to life than using and dealing."

Three of his clients are in prison and Blanc is working to get them somewhere to live, jobs and support for when they come out. He also supports their families. "Families can have very low days," he says. "They find themselves ostracised by the local community, even though they have done nothing wrong."

And he is realistic about the type of dealer that they are going to reach. "We're not going to get the big guys right at the top," he says. "But we can reach those lower down the ladder."

This month, the project's pilot phase is coming to an end. An evaluation due to be published at the same time is expected to celebrate the project's successes. But in reality, the project can only hope to have touched a fraction of the city's burgeoning dealing community. Blanc believes that the real gains of Switch lie further in the future. "People don't change overnight – it's a long haul. You need to come back in another 18 months to see the kind of difference we've made."

■ Sam Hart is a freelance journalist