



Few drug services cater for the relatively high number of gay drug users in the UK.

Lyn Matthews on a project in Liverpool which is taking the needs of the gay drugs scene seriously

You'll never walk alone

LIVERPOOL has had a small, but lively, gay scene located near the business quarter in the city centre for as long as I can remember. Over the years the scene has continued to flourish and thrive and there are now several bars and clubs which cater for Liverpool's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities.

The Armistead Project is a healthy lifestyle organisation for gay and bisexual men situated in the heart of Liverpool's gay quarter. Named after Armistead Maupin, the American writer and gay activist, it provides free condoms and lube to all the venues in and around Liverpool's gay scene. The project, established in 1997 and now with 5,000 people on its database, offers advice, outreach and support on all issues concerning sexuality, health and drug use.

In line with the findings of research studies around the world, drug use amongst the LGBT community in Liverpool is higher than in the general drug using population. In May and June 2004, Armistead surveyed 50 gay and bisexual men to gauge levels of drug use and risk behaviour. The survey found more than two thirds of those questioned used drugs. It became clear through interviews with the men that the main drugs being used were cocaine, ecstasy, ketamine, amphetamine and GHB. Several of the men questioned also used Viagra, which they obtained either from the illicit market or were prescribed to them by their GP. On top of this alcohol was used in combination with all of these drugs, as well as amyl nitrate, which is regularly used to enhance sexual pleasure and relax the sphincter by young and old gay men alike.

But the presumption by service planners that drug use among gay men is mainly recreational – and therefore not deserving of much focus – is wrong. A fifth of those surveyed in Liverpool reported they had experienced problems as a result of their drug use. Drug use has a significant impact on sexual health and in many cases can assist the spread of HIV infection. The regular use of stimulants can lower the immune system severely,

leaving an individual more likely to contract an opportunistic infection if exposed. In America, the use of crystal meth has led to HIV figures rising dramatically amongst gay men over the last few years.

Despite all this knowledge, it would appear that very little drugs work is being undertaken with LGBT groups in Britain. Outside London there are very few drug services, like Armistead, that meet their needs. Even the National Treatment Agency's website has little information regarding drug use amongst LGBT people.

Armistead, with the support of the local DAAT, maintains close links with bar and club managers, bar staff and door security at all of Liverpool's LGBT venues. This not only helps Armistead staff gain access into the venues, but also means information is shared or concerns can be expressed by both parties. Drug awareness training has been delivered to staff at venues, to both improve their understanding of drug issues and their confidence in dealing with drug-related incidents. Door security staff at all the gay venues are given a pack containing rubber gloves, local sex clinic service opening times, a condom and information regarding blood borne viruses and drugs, in an effort to engage with them and bring them on board. This has certainly helped to increase their knowledge on drugs and sexual health issues and the way they deal with clubbers and drug use.

If drug services are to fully embrace diversity, as the government has promised, then they also need to be embracing those from LGBT communities. Sexuality has not routinely been recorded in drug service data, so numbers of those who are using services are not widely known. It would also be naive to think that homophobia does not exist within services or is practised by professionals. There is a real need to reach out into LGBT communities, present a positive image and breakdown negative stereotypes. In the words of the old Tom Robinson song 'Sing If You're Glad To Be Gay', it would certainly help if we sang in harmony with them and accept gay drug users and their sexuality. ■

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Lyn Matthews has been a drugs worker in Liverpool for 15 years