

The bootstrap solution

In partnership with its clients, a drug service found it could offer much more than works and scripts

RECENTLY MANCHESTER University estimated that between 3500 to 5000 Wirral residents are regular heroin users.¹ Mersey region, which includes Wirral, has more notified addicts than any other health region. In an area of high unemployment, over 95 per cent of Wirral Drugs Service's clients are out of work.

Against this background, services for drug users are expanding. Most drug users in Wirral use opiates. Many of those in treatment are being prescribed oral or injectable methadone and/or heroin as part of a maintenance programme. The prescription stabilises drug use but also leaves a huge gap in many people's lives. Over a very short time they leave behind the hectic and skilful entrepreneurial activity of finding money and buying drugs, to adapt to the mundane regularity of visiting the chemist once or twice a week to pick up a script.

Keeping busy

It has been recognised that boredom, low self-esteem and a lack of a positive routine all contribute to drugtaking, but these factors are often forgotten during the treatment process. A holistic approach is required to address all the needs of the individual and help them to avoid relapse.

Everybody needs something to do with their time; treatment should involve offering drug users every opportunity to overcome their fears, to gain in confidence, to learn to trust and to start to realise their full potential.

"Drug use will not be addressed by chemicals or counselling alone. There must be a reasoned and resourced attempt to assist the whole person in the community in which he/she operates by choice."

— R. Mackie, Head of Response, Wirral drop-in youth advice service

Alongside the drug services, drug users themselves are working towards creating fulfilling alternatives to the employment which is now practically impossible to find.

To meet these broader needs it would

have been relatively easy to impose a vocational rehabilitation programme, perhaps using current education and training provision. But we felt any programme would be much more likely to work if instead it was designed and implemented with the participation of drug users themselves. In this, Wirral Drugs Service was fortunate in having its own active user group. WASP (Wirral Addicts Support Programme) was created in August 1990 by drug users for drug users, and welcomes new members whether or not they are in treatment.

Drug users themselves are fashioning the tools with which to reconstruct their lives

"WASP is designed to bring drug users together and help individuals develop their own personal effectiveness and self-reliance ... To work together to demonstrate for themselves and the

by

Tommy Wilson & Dave Stewart

Tommy Wilson is a community worker with Wirral Drugs Service. Dave Stewart is a community careers officer with the Borough of Wirral.

Over 95 per cent of drug users attending the Wirral Drugs Service are unemployed. A drug user self-help group based at the service has successfully created non-employment 'career' opportunities for its members with the support of the drug service, the health authority and the local authority's careers service. The group is gaining the respect of the wider community and aims to improve the public image of drug users, as well as improving the self-esteem and enriching the lives of its members.

community that developmental and enjoyable experiences are open to everyone."

— Wirral Addicts Support Programme (WASP)

The WASP group meets once a week. Through these meetings ideas have been generated, projects are being developed, and an attempt has been made to create an environment in which the members develop trust and confidence in themselves and in each other. Drug users seem to find it difficult to develop mutual trust and respect, but WASP is achieving this.

Alternatives to employment

Key positions such as chairperson and secretary are taken on by members but professional support and advocacy have also been important to the group's success. The meetings have included the authors of this article, respectively a health authority community worker and a community careers officer.

WASP has also involved a variety of other professional workers to help its members improve their lifestyles. WASP members wanted to learn word processing skills to create a monthly newsletter, *The Script*, and to write to other bodies and develop fundraising activities. In response, Wirral Metropolitan College are providing a computer trainer just to work with WASP members. The first edition of the newsletter has just been produced.

Photography was another area where there was interest; members are keen to develop their artistic talents and publicise the activities that are currently on offer. The group was also enthusiastic about gaining access to gardening facilities and starting to produce their own flowers, fruit and vegetables. The Wirral Drugs Prevention Team, funded by the Home Office, has provided money both for the photography and for the market gardening.

Outward bound activities offered WASP members the chance to escape from the urban environment and to build up confidence and skills. A full-time worker with the Merseyside Outward Bounds Trust is

From the first two issues of
WASP's Script newsletter



OUTWARD BOUND

As a member of WASP, I would like to pay special thanks to Nigel Gregory.

Nigel is a person who has been assigned to us for outdoor activities. Recently I have been meeting other members of WASP at the lodge, we arrive every Tuesday or Wednesday at 12.00 noon. Upon arrival Nigel informs us of the activities that will be going on, which so far have been rock climbing, abseiling, canoeing and Trust Games. I personally have gained from our visits to Irby Quarry, New Brighton and Wales. I have enjoyed myself every time and gained new friends, new friends that I've trusted with my life, after all they were the people who held my lifeline whilst I was climbing.

Outward Bound is excellent - You should try it some time!

ANYWAY THANKS NIGEL - FROM US ALL

THE GROUP

MAINTAINED? - NOW WHAT?

The idea of being maintained sounds great, but once your life is stable and the need to score has gone, then what?

Basically you have two choices: (i) Sit on your butt all day or (ii) get up and do something with your life - but what? The chances of getting a job are remote, so what else can you do?

- Get a hobby → Occupies time
- Join a club → Make new friends
- Voluntary Work → Helping the Community
- Outward Bound → Learn new skills
- Attend College → Learn new subjects

I got so fed up doing nothing, I decided to return to college (discussed the idea with a Careers Officer at the W.A.S.P. Meeting). Not having done any studying for the past 12 years, this was a frightening thought. However, it was probably the best thing I could have done! My confidence has increased, I have new mates with whom the conversation doesn't revolve around "Gear". Hopefully, if I pass my exams, I can go onto better things. I'm not saying college is everybody's idea of fun (it's not mine) but it has helped me a lot... it may help you.

If you want something to happen, make it happen - Believe in yourself - there's only you who can do it!

W.A.S.P. are helping in organising activities to get people involved in:-

- Photography
- Computing Skills
- Market/Alotment Gardening

They are also trying to organise (with Wirral Metropolitan College) a "Pre-College" Course, for those people who would like to learn something new but haven't yet got the confidence to go to college → this will be run for your benefit - make it work!

If you are interested in any of the above, attend a W.A.S.P. Meeting held Thursdays 7.00pm → 8.30pm. Dave Stewart, Community Careers Officer will be there or he can be contacted on Tel: 666 3296.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- CONTACT THE AUTHORS. Phone Tommy Wilson on 051 653 3871 or Dave Stewart on 051 666 3296.
- SEE ALSO "A sense of worth" in the last issue of Druglink for more on productive alternatives to employment.

attached to the Wirral Drugs Service, and is now offering a selection of challenging experiences for drug users.

Among other WASP fundraising initiatives, over £300 was raised during a sponsored walk organised by the *Wirral Globe* newspaper. Two new community careers officers have just been appointed and are working in partnership with the outreach drug worker in Wirral.

What all this amounts to is that drug users are being offered much more than a drug service; they are being offered the tools with which to reconstruct their lives, and to a large extent are themselves fashioning those tools.

In the long term we are trying to persuade funding bodies to support a project, designed through consultation with WASP members, to offer accreditation for skills developed in leisure, recreational and vocational activities taking place in a sheltered day centre environment. The aim will be to improve access by drug users to a wide range of education and training opportunities. Other ideas include skills sharing, cooperatives, video production, a minibus for WASP, and a credit union for drug users.

During the last two years ideas such as these have become reality. People outside the drugs field are starting to realise the potential of this talented group and the value of helping them work together by offering them the support they deserve.

An important objective for WASP is that the community starts to see drug users in a new and better light, and it is an objective they are achieving. People are now able to say, 'I am a member of WASP', and explain why it exists and what it does.

Official support

Wirral Metropolitan College has already offered a display stand for the group at an open day. The positive attitude of Wirral Health Authority is demonstrated by its invitation to WASP to nominate two representatives to meet with the Wirral Drug Service's management committee quarterly throughout 1992. Two years ago nobody would have considered giving drug users such recognition.

WASP has been fortunate to have found a highly motivated group of drug users, and also to have had professional support from a

variety of disciplines. A recent feasibility study undertaken for the Birmingham Drugs Prevention Team highlighted the need for multidisciplinary support to nurture the development of the WASP model of user self-help. "The key to success of work being undertaken in Wirral is clearly interdisciplinary team work, particularly between the careers service and community drug teams."²

Without the encouragement of Wirral Drugs Service, and its practical help in providing accommodation and support, it would not have been possible for WASP to have developed in the way it has. Another key to WASP's development was the creation by Wirral Careers Service of community posts, enabling careers officers to work in community settings with young people and adults in cooperation with other professionals. It was this new style of work, closer to the community, which led within the careers service to an appreciation of the needs and potential of drug users.

The authors of this article have worked alongside the WASP group - not taking it over, but encouraging and opening doors for funding and support by linking with others. For us, 'career' is defined as 'a pathway through life'. Everyone has their own path, but most people need help in finding the right direction. Some drug users can access mainstream education and training provision, but many get stuck in the 'enforced leisure' trap and need help to start to move again. The benefit of having a careers officer regularly attending WASP meetings has been to retain this 'personal career' focus for WASP members and to help them access existing opportunities and open up new ones.

But it is WASP's members who deserve most of the credit for the achievements and recognition they have gained. They have shown that people need more than prescribed drugs to start living again. Drug dependency sucks in many additional problems; traditional treatment methods are not enough to help people regain control of their lives.

MEMBERS OF WASP have shown that their own lives can be transformed through their involvement in the group. By taking on the posts of responsibility within the new organisation, they have created role models that should inspire other drug users to look forward. They deserve credit for their strength and determination in working towards creating a better deal for all drug users in Wirral. ■

1. Chadwick C. et al. *Wirral's enduring heroin problem*. Liverpool University, 1988.
2. Macmillan J. *The employers' guarantee scheme feasibility study*. Birmingham Drug Prevention Team, 1991.