



# The knowledge

The Substance Misuse Skills Consortium is a sector led initiative tasked with delivering ‘an inspirational, recovery-orientated workforce’. The Consortium’s chair, **William Butler**, describes how it came about and why it is vital that treatment providers now step up and demonstrate their support for its work.

Delivering the recovery ambitions of the drug strategy will rely heavily on the skills and abilities of staff to engage with people in a meaningful and effective way and support their integration within broader society. We established the Substance Misuse Skills Consortium in 2010 to ensure that services and their staff can grow and sustain these abilities.

The Consortium is an independent, sector-led initiative seeking to harness the ideas, energy and talent within the substance misuse treatment field. It has nearly 150 voting member organisations,

and another 100 associates benefiting from its resources. Its work is managed by an executive representing a broad range of service providers, membership organisations, service users, training and education organisations and professional bodies. Recognition of the Consortium’s drug strategy role in supporting the delivery of the recovery agenda gives us a sound endorsement on which to build. But it also sets a challenge to which we – and by that I mean the entire treatment sector – must respond.

It was the many challenges facing

the workforce which prompted the establishment of the Consortium. The last decade saw a huge – and welcome – expansion in the size and diversity of our workforce. The system focussed on the reduction of waiting times; engaging service users and reducing harm. We are now faced with a substantial and challenging transformation of the agenda, which focuses on people’s individual recovery journeys with the goal of leading to them leaving treatment free of dependence. Many of the skills required aren’t new: motivating

people, supporting change, working collaboratively with service users and effective care planning. But just because they aren't new doesn't mean that all staff are able to use them or are doing so successfully. We need to be honest about this and work hard to address any shortfalls.

The renewed focus on recovery is also generating a wealth of fresh and innovative thinking, in particular how to foster and work in harmony with recovery communities. But we have to embed recovery frameworks in a way that both delivers results and develops evidence to support our practice. Since many of the challenges to our current practice have come from service users themselves, it is vital that we work with them as genuine partners to build treatment and recovery systems we can all be proud of. And we have to support the workforce in regaining the positive sense of itself required to deliver the changes.

But as we make progress we need to be careful not to generate new problems or undermine previous gains. There is always the risk of rushing people out of treatment before they are ready or neglecting the skills required to reduce harm. The drug strategy seeks to build on the foundations of the last ten years – we need to ensure our skill set does the same.

The Skills Consortium's broad aim is to support managers and practitioners to deliver services and interventions that are purposeful, evidence-based and effective. Our opening offer to the field in November 2010 was the Consortium's website and the 'Skills Hub': an online gateway to nearly 200 resources to support effective drug treatment practice. These include guidance, toolkits, manuals, training and the evidence base for interventions. It is all built around a framework for skills in drug treatment, drawing the mass of different interventions and techniques together into one model built around a treatment journey. This free resource will help services, managers and practitioners to deliver purposeful and effective interventions. But the Skills Hub is far from complete. We need people to share resources they have found useful and lessons they have learned from implementing 'new' interventions.

There are three broad strands to our current work programme. First, we will continue to develop the Hub, establishing priorities for new resources and improving shared learning about the

implementation of 'new' interventions. Second, we will seek to develop a consensus and sector-led approach to training, continuing professional development and qualifications, based on an understanding of the appropriate roles and responsibilities of staff across the treatment spectrum. We will work with the relevant sector skills councils, further and higher education providers and awarding bodies to ensure that the sector has a progressive qualification and accreditation framework that meets its needs.

## THE LAST DECADE SAW A HUGE – AND WELCOME – EXPANSION IN THE SIZE AND DIVERSITY OF OUR WORKFORCE

Third, we will foster a sector-led consensus and approach to developing the evidence base and the body of research to support effective treatment systems, focusing on emerging thinking about recovery-oriented treatment

systems, practice and communities. This means working with relevant research bodies, government departments and clinical institutes to inform their priorities and approach.

We are holding our first national conference in London on 6 June 2011. The larger part of this event will be an opportunity for members to present their responses to the recovery agenda. They will learn more about what the Consortium can do with their involvement, and consider how the Consortium can become self-sufficient.

In this time of increased competition and innovation it is vital to share clear examples of effective practice. The establishment of an independent sector-wide and led Skills Consortium is a major opportunity and a substantial challenge to enhance the reputation and quality of our field. Together, our joint endeavours can produce something outstanding, potentially far outstripping any single organisation's workforce offering. So it's time to get involved!

[www.skillsconsortium.org.uk](http://www.skillsconsortium.org.uk)

■ **William Butler**, chair, Substance Misuse Skills Consortium

### COMMENT BY PAUL HAYES

The Substance Misuse Skills Consortium is a welcome innovation by the drug treatment field, for the drug treatment field.

The skills of the treatment workforce are crucial to delivering a recovery-oriented agenda. That is true not only for practitioners but for their managers too.

Neither national guidance nor local commissioning is any substitute for concerted efforts by the providers themselves to ensure that their staff can promote and sustain change for their clients.

The NTA has been proud to support the initial stages of establishing the Skills Consortium. However, the initiative has now reached the point where it can be self-sustaining. So we are equally eager to step back and allow members themselves to press ahead under their own steam.

The key to the success of the Skills Consortium is that it is sector-owned and sector-led. It is genuinely representative of the broad range of those who provide drug and alcohol treatment and recovery services.

Whatever changes are being made to the structure of the healthcare landscape through the government's reforms, it will be these member organisations that are commissioned to provide effective services on the ground.

It is therefore vitally important that individual employers take responsibility for ensuring their employees can deliver on their contracts.

It is also through these providers voluntarily working together to create a recovery-oriented system that we will ensure there is a national framework for drug treatment services that gives consistency across the country.

The Drug Strategy gave a clear role to the Skills Consortium to develop a skills framework that supports the recovery agenda. I am heartened to see so many providers step up to that challenge, ready and willing to exploit the opportunities they have been given.

■ **Paul Hayes**, chief executive, National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse