

Turning ideas into reality

An innovative project has found that, in the right conditions, drug users can spark change in their community.

Dawn Hart on how a social business, two user groups and £5,000 may show the way forward for grassroots action



User friendly: the Stockwell Project's flyer

USER involvement is a priority of the national drug strategy – it aims to increase the active involvement of drug and alcohol users in planning and policy-making decisions that affect their lives.

But for years, it has been supposed that drug users are unable or unwilling to help themselves or others, that they will spend all their money to feed their addiction and that they are therefore unable to be involved in community or civic projects. The fact that drug use is illegal has fuelled society's fear of drug users, as well as myths surrounding their behaviour. As a result, investors and supporters of community action have been inclined to write them off as 'too difficult', too controversial and too risky to work with.

But the social inclusion agenda now demands that drug and alcohol users are as involved as any other group in society – and this must go beyond tokenism.

A pilot scheme in Lambeth carried out by the Centre for Public Innovation (CPI), a not for profit consultancy specialising in drugs, health and crime, recently found that, in the right conditions, drug users can be engaged in small-scale projects and become more active in civic functions.

CPI used a programme called Real Time Community Change (RTCC) to trial two projects involving groups of drug and alcohol users. The Real Time Community Change tool encourages local people to take the lead in delivering change by giving them assistance and small amounts of financial support, usually between £2,000 and £5,000, to start up short projects quickly. Key to the process are 'sparkplugs', the individuals who act as catalysts for change and whom the CPI believes exist in every community.

Sparkplugs know the grassroots problems in their communities and have good ideas on how they can be solved. Real Time Community Change provides them

with the funds to turn an idea into reality and does away with energy-sapping application processes and evaluations.

Members of the Alcohol Recovery Project desperately wanted a recreational club where recovering drug and alcohol users could socialise in a 'temptation free' environment. The team overcame numerous obstacles, managed to find a venue and sign a lease, negotiated with councillors, police, banks and landlords and resourced it with IT, games equipment and a café, all for £2,500. The Sanctuary Club was opened by the Mayor of Lambeth and has a steadily growing client base. It's so successful that Rebecca Walker, Lambeth's enthusiastic DAAT Coordinator, has promised further funding.

In the other pilot, two members from the Stockwell Project saw a need for clear and simple information sheets that would appeal to drug users. Using a £2,500 grant, they set about designing, printing and distributing 10,000 information flyers and cards. Containing information on harm minimisation and treatment services in the local area, both leaflets were well received by their peers and professional agencies in the vicinity.

All concerned have commented that the RTCC involvement has shown that users can directly and successfully be involved in service development and other areas that affect their lives. It quickly became clear the projects had a positive effect on the sparkplugs. Staff and users acknowledged changes in confidence, language and attitude alike. In addition to the achievement of successfully bringing their projects to fruition, both groups now talk enthusiastically of changes in their self-esteem and a new confidence that users can indeed make a very real contribution to service provision. ■

Find out more about CPI's RTCC approach to user involvement at a one-day training course on 25 May in central London. Full details are available from HollisRyan@publicinnovation.org.uk

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