

WORD OF MOUTH

An expanding network of current and former problem drug users will energise the recovery movement in the UK and create social entrepreneurs. By **Alistair Sinclair**.

Recently, in *Drink and Drug News*, I questioned whether we'd reached the point where we could reasonably claim there was a recovery movement in the UK. I said we needed to hear from new voices if we were to see a healthy and dynamic movement form, and that these voices could be found within the community. I wrote that there was a need for new community-led 'recovery networks' and touched on what the UK Recovery Federation (UKRF) has been doing to support emerging networks in the UK.

Here I want to outline the UKRF vision for these recovery networks. It's a vision borne out of two UKRF conferences involving nearly 600 people (the majority of whom were in recovery), a consultation on what our principles should be and lots of events and meetings in many different parts of the country. We have been influenced by the work of Faces and Voices of Recovery (FAVOR) in the US, William White in the substance use field, Larry Davidson in mental health and John McKnight in community development. Writers and thinkers like Saul Alinsky, Paulo Freire and Myles Horton have also had an influence, as have Antonio Gramsci's writings on education and John Bowlby, DW Winnicott and Bruno Bettelheim's work on attachment and dependency.

At its core, our vision for community-led recovery networks reflects the experiences of our members, and this includes people who work in services, who have engaged with the UKRF, supported it and helped shape its values and methodology. At this point they are the unsung heroes of the UKRF, the silent

voices who don't end up on conference rostrums, write articles for journals and blogs nor have reputations as leading lights of recovery. Rather, they work within services and communities, often unpaid and with very little recognition, to support and empower those who have very little power, through established mutual aid groups and the generation

WE BELIEVE RECOVERY IS BIGGER THAN AN INDIVIDUAL'S DRUG STATUS. IT'S A PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION, OF EMPOWERMENT, A JOURNEY TOWARD RENEWED MEANING AND VALUE FOR INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES

of new forms of mutual aid rooted in political advocacy and diverse forms of social networking.

Recent work undertaken by the RSA in their *Whole Person Recovery and Connected Communities* projects has highlighted the importance of access to wide social networking opportunities in the development and sustaining of 'recovery capital'. It's not just what you know, but who you know. 'Contagious recovery', a concept that's been promoted by David Best amongst others, rests on the premise that if you hang out with people

who are healthy you are more likely to become and remain healthy.

William White has written extensively of the importance of generating pathways from cultures of addiction to cultures of recovery. All good stuff. But how do you do it? The UKRF believes that we can make a start through the generation of recovery networks that are open, inclusive and founded on a number of very simple basic values; we are more alike as human beings than different, all human beings have the same basic needs, and every human being is of equal value. A strong recovery network will be made up of people in long-term recovery, people in early recovery, people who are recovering and recovery allies. How people chose to define themselves will be up to them.

The Service User Recovery Forum (SURF) on the Wirral puts it rather nicely: "You're in recovery if you say you are". Whilst this view had generated consternation in some, who prefer definitions of recovery that place abstinence at the centre, it has enabled SURF to begin to generate a network that is open to a wide range of people from very different backgrounds. The Merseyside Recovery Network (in which SURF members play an active part) brings together people from abstinence and harm reduction-focused arenas, as does the newly emerging South-East Recovery Network and others around the UK. We hope the networks will grow, through the establishing of diverse relationships, to encompass all those who want to support recovery within the community at individual, cultural and structural levels. And that they

will seek to address the medical, social, psychological, spiritual, economic and political recovery issues within their communities.

The UKRF has consciously avoided a definition of recovery because we believe recovery lies within individuals and communities. They must define what recovery means to them. However we believe there is a need for a set of core values and principles around which diverse individuals and groups can locate themselves. We have developed a set of UKRF recovery principles, building on the work of the Centre for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) in the US.

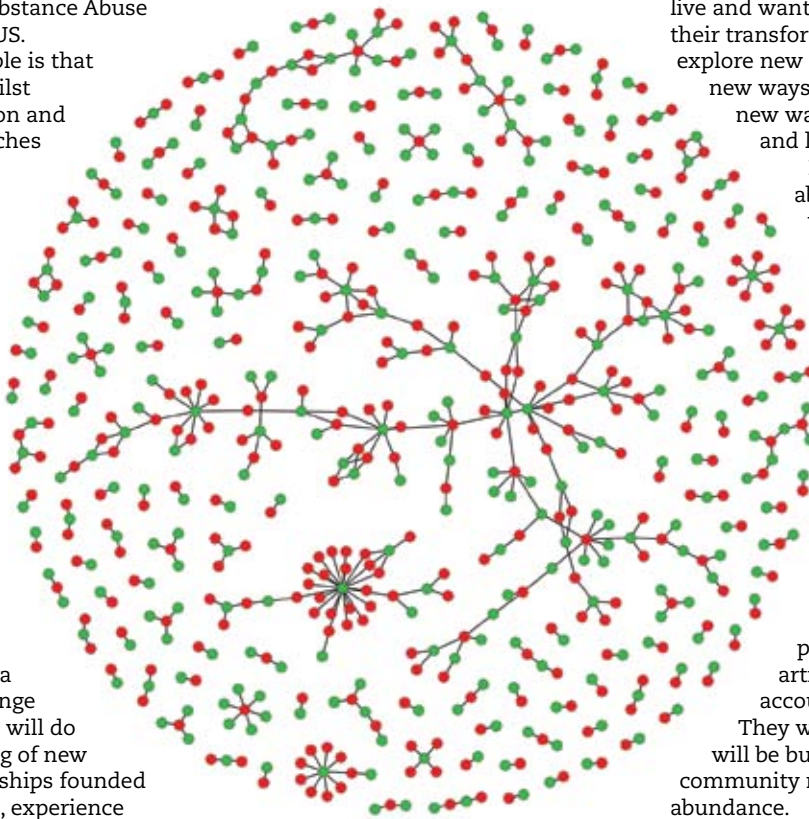
A central UKRF principle is that “recovery transcends, whilst embracing, harm reduction and abstinence based approaches and does not seek to be prescriptive”. We believe recovery is bigger than an individual’s drug status. It’s a process of transformation, of empowerment, a journey toward renewed meaning and value for individuals and communities. There is a need for individual change but, perhaps more importantly, there is a need for change on cultural and structural levels. Power inequalities lie at the heart of discrimination and stigma and recovery must challenge these. Recovery networks will do this through the nurturing of new open and honest relationships founded on the strengths, abilities, experience and passions of network members.

What will recovery networks do? We believe that if they adopt the values and recovery principles promoted by the UKRF they will do all kinds of amazing things. William White has written extensively on the strengths and abilities everybody has within ‘cultures of addiction’ and the importance of first developing a cultural understanding and then supporting people in applying their strengths within cultures of recovery.

These cultures need to be defined, developed and nurtured within the community, hence the importance of open and inclusive recovery networks embedded within communities and community-led. In the emerging

Merseyside Recovery Network we have focused on the development of shared values and the ‘mapping’ of the many talents, skills and abilities that members have. This process has helped the group form, to learn about each other and to begin to plan the things they want to do.

The UKRF believes that recovery networks have the potential to generate a huge number of new social entrepreneurs. By identifying strengths within communities, with a focus on the development of diverse and open



relationships, we believe recovery networks can generate wide ranging opportunities for network members and the wider community. They can play a crucial role in the development of recovery-oriented services, by supporting them in the establishment of core recovery standards and by aiding communities – through the promotion of a DIY culture that places social cohesion, connectedness and renewed meaning at its heart.

Many people in recovery, and I use the term in its widest sense, have found new forms of meaning and value outside of, and far beyond, the pervasive cultures of unhealthy dependency in which many

of us live. Recovery networks offer hope and optimism. They place a great deal of faith in the abilities and passions of people who are often perceived and portrayed as the afflicted. They offer the possibility of change.

The UKRF believes that we will see recovery networks in every region of the UK, every locality, city and town. These networks will be connected with each other, sharing resources, skills, abilities and passion. They will be open to everyone who wants to recover, who wants to transform the way that they live and wants to support others in their transformation. The networks will explore new ways of using their ‘assets’, new ways of communicating and new ways of organising, working and living.

I haven’t been specific about what these networks will do. This is important.

It’s not for me or others to say what function the networks will have. They will do what they want to do, what they are able to do – based on the strengths, experience, abilities, passions of their members and the new relationships they form in their communities.

They will have builders, carpenters, writers, gardeners, administrators, philosophers, managers, artists, musicians, performers, accountants and story-tellers.

They will have many skills and will be built on the strengths of community members. They will have abundance.

Recovery networks require mobilisation, organisation and resources. There are many people in recovery with the skills to support the networks but they also need support. The UKRF has identified over 50 people from all over the UK who have indicated an interest in training to become recovery community organisers (RCOs). We will begin to explore how we can support them at our national conference in Cardiff on 9 September and will be holding UKRF recovery seminars in every region of the UK, beginning in Lanarkshire in Scotland on 28 September. It’s a long path – and we make it by walking it.

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