

The truth is out there

RELECTING back to 1998 and the start of the government's current drug strategy, Paul Goggins is in no doubt of the progress made. "We have virtually doubled the number of people in treatment which I think is a fantastic achievement in terms of the extra capacity we've had to build, increasing the workforce from 6,000 to 10,000. Add to that people are waiting on average two and a half weeks to get into treatment – down from about nine weeks only three years ago. By those measures, we have come a long way."

But as he admits, there is still much to do just on the government's volume targets. "For example, if you look at the drug intervention programme, we committed ourselves to 1,000 drug-using offenders going into treatment a week by 2008. At the moment it is just over 2,000 a month."

NOT JUST NUMBERS

The Minister is equally aware that just getting people through the door doesn't finish the job. "We also have to make sure that the treatment is increasingly effective and that means tailor-made treatment for particular individuals at particular times to meet their individual needs. The big target is to keep more people in treatment because all the evidence is that if we can retain people in for at least 12 weeks, then they have a much better chance of changing their lives."

But it is an important point to emphasise that while we are making progress, we do so against a continuing background of problems and difficulties with drugs. I come across individuals where we have clearly not been

EXCLUSIVE Home Office drugs minister Paul Goggins has a simple message for drug treatment services: "Don't make treatment success our best-kept secret." Interview by **Harry Shapiro**

able to bring the services together in a way that's been able to make an impact. And I regret that for every individual. All that does is strengthen my determination that we can do better."

HOUSING PRIORITY

Those caring for drug users know full well that without decent aftercare even those who successfully complete treatment can easily slip back. Nowhere is this a bigger problem than in housing, as Paul Goggins acknowledges. "That for me, and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, is a key area. But it's not just for government ministers to work out all the answers. People at the local level need to work out for themselves what can be done practically. Increasingly that's what we need to do because the answer on housing support could be the local authority, it could be social landlords, could be private or a whole combination. We are trying to develop a rental bond scheme so that people can get help with the initial costs of a private tenancy. So it's finding practical solutions at a local level. Training, education and jobs are all important, but housing is the one we really have to crack."

Another high priority for government remains vulnerable young people. "Some good things are happening, but what is required is people who run children's services and DATs to really work together to integrate

them with drug services. We are putting money into this, but again it is about local partnerships working together."

THE PRICE OF PROGRESS

Nobody can deny that the government has invested hugely to prove that treatment works and drive down drug-related crime. Those parts of the country designated as High Crime Areas have been substantially funded to deliver results. But can this level of investment be sustained both financially and politically? "We are very aware that this is taxpayers' money going to fund these services. People will want to know that their money is making a difference. What's the taxpayer looking for? One, people genuinely want to turn the lives of these people around. Many people these days have somebody in their family or they know somebody who has a drugs problem. But secondly, and this applies to everyone, people are sick of the crime that arises from the use of drugs and we owe them the obligation to try and reduce that crime still further. If we can deliver that, then the taxpayer will feel that it is a good investment. But that requires us to get more people into treatment, increase effectiveness and make sure we get people off drugs."

"Having said that, nobody should expect the money to increase at the current rate year on year because if we are right that



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treatment works and crime does continue to fall then there should be a tipping point where we begin to see fewer people harmed by drugs, so that we don’t have to keep increasing the amount of money we spend on treatment.”

TOP DOWN OR BOTTOM UP?

But that presupposes that the government can make inroads into the supply side, otherwise there will be new generations of young people at risk. The enforcement agencies will point to record amounts of drugs seized and gangs taken out. But it is clear from the leaked Cabinet Office report on supply side activities, the Tackling Supply seminar at November’s Home Office drugs conference and the decision to send in researchers to interview drug dealers in prison, that the agencies involved are playing catch-up with drug markets and are actually making little sustained inroads at the top of the chain. Now a proposal has been announced to reduce the threshold for asset seizures from £5000 down to £1000. Even allowing for the creation of the Serious and Organised Crime Agency, it seems

there has been a shift in emphasis to targeting small-time dealers in the hope of reducing demand at the street level. And of course, many at this level will be users dealing simply to support a habit.

“There was a time when we thought that asset and cash seizure was only about dealing with the Mr Bigs and indeed it still is. But what we are signalling with this new announcement is that actually we are after anybody who is making money out of criminal activity. So we are consulting on bringing the threshold down and of course that would draw in a lot more people. The message to people in neighbourhoods beset by problems like this is that we are not going to tolerate drug dealing. But if the dealer is also a user coming into the criminal justice system, then they will be offered the help and support of the DIP. So there is a tough message here, but also a helping hand.”

LOOKING AHEAD

We are hearing a lot about mainstreaming of drug treatment services which suggests that these services will have to take their chance up against all the other health and social priorities. Because there are no votes in being kind to drug users, this could throw services back to the bad old days.

“In the end what we are looking for is more devolution, priority setting at a local level. However, national government will still expect outcomes from the money being invested. And with that devolution of decision making comes more accountability to the local communities who will want to know if money is being spent effectively on treatment services and keeping crime down. If they can see that this is already working then the pressure will be on locally to keep the investment up.

“But part and parcel of this is that those on the frontline of drug services have got to get out there and explain to local people what it is they are doing and how they are changing peoples lives. They can’t keep this the best-kept secret in the local community. Be proud of what you do – it’s an important job. And when people know more about it they’ll respect you for it. So when it comes to a more devolved set of decisions, the local community will more fully appreciate the difference that drug treatment can make. It is true that there is always the problem of NIMBY-ism – and it is the same in areas of mental health, sex offender treatment or drug treatment. But it’s the job of politicians to argue the case for providing effective drug treatment – and it’s justified because in the end, it will help protect and enhance local communities.” ■