

Group action

In a 'fact file' special, we've rounded up progress reports from some of the many active service user groups around the country.

Russell Headley reports from Service User Skills Training (SUST) in Bristol

When and why did you start your group?

We started up in February 2005. The aim was to bridge the gap between early recovery or stabilisation and engaging in meaningful voluntary work. SUST facilitates two out-of-hours open access sessions on a Thursday evening and Saturday afternoon, and does ear acupuncture during the week.

How many members do you have?

Currently about 18. It was never intended for people to stay on long term.

How did you obtain funding?

Some funding comes from the drug strategy team and some from training fees.

Where and how regularly do you hold meetings?

The group has clinical supervision once a month and members can meet with staff on a regular basis.

What do you hope members get from attending?

A sense of responsibility, ongoing support, advice and information around training needs, and support around funding for courses.

How do you keep it going?

We offer support and try to be accommodating to the wishes of the group.

What have been your highlights so far?

We've always been able to open the out-of-hours drop-in.

How do you communicate with your members?

We use email, text, telephone,



messages in pigeonholes and good old-fashioned one-to-one.

Have you any tips for others starting a group?

Allow the group as much freedom as your agency or service can bear. Be accessible at short notice; be involved but do not meddle. Have faith in your group and be aware of any problems that may arise.

Sharron Terzza reports from Sandwell Addicts Views Expressed (SAVE)

When and why did you start your group?

SAVE lifted off in October 2005. In the past a service user group was tried and failed to take off. The drug and alcohol action team then approached local service users to create a newsletter. Since then we have grown from regular newsletters and SAVE meetings to attending conferences, training, speaking on behalf of service users in the Sandwell area and giving input on service delivery.

How many members do you have?

We currently have 11 members, with many others that have come and gone for various reasons.

How did you obtain funding?

From the DAAT.

Where and how regularly do you hold meetings?

At SAVE, c/o 3rd Floor, West House, Lombard Street West, West Bromwich. It's central, to give members easy access and we reimburse their travel expenses. We meet once a month for our newsletter; twice a month for a SAVE meeting; once every three months for our overdose meeting; and once every six months for our overdose workshop.

What do you hope members get from attending?

They gain confidence and meet new people. It's a safe place where they can understand how the system and services work better, gain training, look at job opportunities, enhance their CV, and meet like-minded people at all stages of recovery.

How do you keep it going?

Commitment is the key, and we are lucky to have that in our group. The cash incentive to be paid for meetings other than SAVE's own is another bonus.

What have been your highlights so far?

Being involved in decision-making and policies, such as needle exchange and the changes surrounding it. Being

involved in the pack contents, along with the overdose workshops that we have delivered, gives the group members a real sense of achievement. Overall it feels good to make a difference.

How do you communicate with your members?

Group members communicate via telephone, email letters and meetings, while newsletters and overdose workshops communicate to the service users as a whole.

Have you any tips for others starting a group?

Always be honest and open with each other, and avoid being judgmental of others. Set out a constitution and basic ground rules from the start. We try to keep our group laid back and relaxed. It is a really effective learning curve, so try and use it as such. Respect and accept others' opinions and be able to agree to disagree. Work at a pace that suits everyone. Above all, keep it confidential and safe!

Angela Brinkworth reports from Recovering Addicts Peer Support (RAPS) in Newport, Gwent

When and why did you start your group?

Founding RAPS represented the culmination of a six-year plan formulated in forum theatre workshops with ex-offenders on Drug Treatment and Testing Orders in Newport. The action plan was supported by the then DTO manager Gareth Hopkins and Make A Change was founded in 2002 to raise funds to put the plan into action. RAPS are still being supported by Make A Change.

How many members do you have?

The original membership was 20 volunteers. The first project was a Forum theatre workshop presentation devised by six volunteers based on the combined experience of their journey to heroin addiction. It was called *Jamie's Story* – a short play that was presented in schools, community venues, and to young offenders and other DTTO Units in Wales.

How did you obtain funding?

This project was funded by a £5,000 Awards for All Wales grant. Make A Change volunteers were the first group of ex-offenders to go back inside a Welsh prison where they performed and facilitated a forum with inmates and staff on 'drugs in prison'. A £10,000 grant from the European Social Risk funded *The Journey Home* – devised, written and filmed by volunteers, to highlight the need for better aftercare provision for offenders with addiction issues post release and to support pre-release training. Subsequent funding supported by research in three Welsh prisons led to a 40-hour peer support training programme for volunteers over 26 weeks, supported by the Welsh Charitable Stadium Trust.

Where and how regularly do you hold meetings?

Five RAPS peer supporters meet once weekly. Participants to their group self-refer and are referred by Gwent probation and Bridgend Park Prison. Peer supporters receive ongoing supervision and training from Make A Change.

What do you hope members get from attending?

Members get the opportunity to actively participate in discussion and dialogue between themselves and



the communities they come from, demonstrating that with support they can engage in finding and implementing solutions to the problems they face in their everyday lives.

How do you keep it going?

A grant from the Communities Trust Fund and the South Wales Workers Education Association has resulted in *OFFIT* – a newsletter for addicts – and money to employ a project manager to lead the group toward independence from Make A Change and to fundraise for the groups long-term sustainability.

What have been your highlights so far?

The positive reaction of young people to *Jamie's Story*. The realisation that members have something of great value to offer service providers. Meeting the police and drug prevention professionals on an equal footing. *OFFIT* being recommended to the Welsh Assembly as an example of good practice.

Have you any tips for others starting a group?

We were very lucky to have a DTTO manager with the imagination to try something different. It has not been easy being a small voluntary organisation offering an alternative 'TO' (Theatre of The Oppressed) approach to engage with people

recovering from drug addiction, but it works. Imagination is our greatest resource... and finding a place 'to be' which is safe and respectful, accepting people for who they are, and what they can be.

Herman Prestcote reports from Southend User Forum (SUF)

When and why did you start your group?

We started up in March 2006.

How many members do you have?

We currently have 14 SUF members.

How did you obtain funding?

We are supported by the Southend DAAT.

Where and how regularly do you hold meetings?

Meetings are once or twice a month, at a local night shelter – in the daytime.

What do you hope members get from attending?

They experience engagement – and hopefully a sense of purpose, friendship, and personal development.

How do you keep it going?

By involving members, keeping in regular contact with them, listening to feedback – and through a democratic approach (hard work!).

What have been your highlights so far?

Being invited onto the strategic partnership group.

How do you communicate with your members?

We keep in touch by phone and in person.

Have you any tips for others starting a group?

Only start if you are well enough, and can offer commitments of time and energy.

Russell Headley reports from Service User Group Action Reaction (SUGAR) in Bristol

When and why did you start your group?

SUGAR was started in May 2006. As providers we placed a poster in our open access space asking for service users to attend and form a service user group. We felt it was time for services users to have more of a voice in how we deliver our services.

How many members do you have?

It varies from week to week. There are about six core members and others who attend or participate in events as and when they can.

How did you obtain funding?

SUGAR is not funded by the Community Action Around Alcohol and Drugs project (CAAAD). But we provide tea, coffee and meeting space and have offered to pay travel expenses and childcare costs.

Where and how regularly do you hold meetings?

We originally planned the meetings to be once a month. After the first meeting, members decided to meet on a weekly basis. They use the open access lounge on a Wednesday morning.

What do you hope members get from attending?

They can affect how services are delivered within the project, and gain a sense of ownership and the opportunity to engage in some meaningful activities.

How do you keep it going?

We offer support, encouragement and try to be accommodating to the wishes of the group. The group seems to be self-maintaining as they have autonomy around what they do.



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What have been your highlights so far?

The newsletters they produce, the fortnightly Saturday night social events and the money they have raised themselves. The energy that is produced brings a tear to my eye sometimes.

How do you communicate with your members?

As peer support and progression routes co-ordinator, I attend the weekly meetings and am accessible during the week, some evenings and Saturday afternoon. We use email, text, telephone, messages in pigeonholes and good old fashioned one-to-one.

Have you any tips for others starting a group?

Have faith in your group and be mindful of the members' limitations.

Christina MacDonald reports from the service user group of West Glamorgan Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse (WGCADA)

When and why did you start your group?

The group first met on 19 October 2007 to foster a better relationship between service users and staff.

How many members do you have?

We have eight regular members, but our group is open to all WGCADA service users.

How did you obtain funding?

WGCADA provides us with the resources we need.

Where and how regularly do you hold meetings?

Monthly, at WGCADA.

What do you hope members get from attending?

We hope members get a feeling of involvement, and a voice.

How do you keep it going?

In a word, enthusiasm.

What have been your highlights so far?

A staff photo-board, service users' noticeboard, and non-facilitated meetings.

How do you communicate with your members?

Through the service users' noticeboard, published minutes, and word of mouth.

Have you any tips for others starting a group?

Get a commitment of support from the management. Keep it practical. Don't take on too much at once. Be prepared to do some work.

Caroline Marshall reports from SU4em in Wakefield

When and why did you start your group?

The Forum was formed in March 2007. Several service users were becoming actively involved within their local services and were interested in developing a group to maintain this involvement the Substance Misuse Commissioning Group (SMCG) allocated a worker from the commissioning team to support and facilitate the Forum.

How many members do you have?

The Forum currently has a core of five service user representatives. It operates on a strategic level. The reps are currently developing peer led service user groups within

services with the aim of developing one unified Service User Group for all service users to be involved.

How did you obtain funding?

The SMCG have allocated a service user budget which is managed in partnership with the Forum.

Where and how regularly do you hold meetings?

The Forum is held at Wakefield Treatment Service on a fortnightly basis.

What do you hope members get from attending?

Members on a professional level have developed a wide range of transferable skills and attended various specialised and generic training courses. They are able to represent and provide the service users with requested information and be the voice and link in the commissioning processes. On a personal level they support one another, have developed friendships and most of all enjoy their involvement!

How do you keep it going?

Forum members are supported and listened to – their involvement is important and decisions are made with their input. Involvement is not seen as tokenistic but a two-way benefit.

What have been your highlights so far?

The progression of the Forum in a short space of time. Service user led research, which has been displayed at the Society of Study for Addiction Conference. One of our members was nominated to be an NTA regional representative in the TOP consultation. Design and roll out of SU Magazine for all service users in the Wakefield Integrated Substance Misuse Services (WISMS). Development of peer-led groups in services. Positive participation in commissioning and provider processes. And finally... the friendships gained!

How do you communicate with your members?

Email and phone – all reps have access to a mobile phone at each Service.

Have you any tips for others starting a group?

Start by contacting local treatment services or your DAT for advice, support and a financial contribution. Try to be patient with any red tape and persevere with your aim and goals. Each person has their own strengths; use these skills to develop the group and always keep smiling... one step at a time will amount to a giant leap!

Mahmood Waraich reports from User Forum Oldham (UFO)

When and why did you start your group?

We started six years ago for the purpose of consultation.

How many members do you have?

There are between 15 and 20 people attending the group.

How did you obtain funding?

Funding was from the DAAT.

Where and how regularly do you hold meetings?

Meetings are held every week. They're on Tuesday for the sub-group and Wednesday for the actual group.

What do you hope members get from attending?

More knowledge, confidence, friendship, education, health information, strength, and structuring time.

How do you keep it going?

By having a sub-group to organise meetings; by reimbursing bus fares; and by holding sports events.

What have been your highlights so far?

Different day-trips; consultation days; an accredited confrontation conference in Manchester; winning a regional football competition; doing the 'Race for Life'.

How do you communicate with your members?

Through our own magazine, and the users' and carers' shop.

Have you any tips for others starting a group?

Organise sub-group, recommend ground rules and keep motivated. Have a structure, keep working together, be organised and plan ahead.