

A pilot project in Yorkshire is using outdoor activities like climbing, canoeing and kayaking to help rebuild service users' confidence – with impressive results. **DDN** reports



# High hopes

**FOR PEOPLE WITH LONG-TERM DRUG PROBLEMS**, rebuilding self confidence can be one of the biggest obstacles they face. A project for service users in Selby, Yorkshire, however, is taking an energetic approach to addressing the problem.

Natural Highs is a pilot project that began last summer and involves canoeing, kayaking, climbing and archery, among other activities. The brainchild of drugs worker Anthony Nevens from York-based charity Compass, the project was set up with the help of service users themselves. 'Somebody who's been on drugs for such a long time – they're in services, they're getting treatment, they're getting pushed towards work but their confidence isn't up,' he says. 'These sort of activities help to build confidence.'

Twelve service users were involved in the first two-day pilot session, and there have been four more sessions since. 'We've more or less tailored it for substance misuse clients, to give them an end goal or a little bit of a trophy – a reason to move on from the past,' he says. 'We were really surprised at how well it went.'

At the moment Natural Highs is paid for entirely by fundraising through Compass, with the course taking place whenever the money is available. 'It was going to be a one-off because I had a little bit of money I'd applied for, but after that two-day event the guys wanted to carry it on,' he says. 'It was such a success that I got the go ahead to do that with the proviso that I would need to raise the money for each of the events – that's the problem at the moment. It's been recognised by the DAAT so we're hoping more funds will come our way – it's an extra little thing on top of what we provide, but hopefully we'll get some future funding.'

Feedback from service users has been exceptional, however, with several going on to join outdoors activities clubs. 'One of the guys, Simon, is training to be a climbing instructor,' says Nevens. 'He'd never climbed before in his life but he just had a natural ability and loved it. He was 12 years crack/heroin and he's completely drug free and out of treatment now. People don't realise that you can do these sporty, adrenaline things quite cheaply and close to where you live – we've got a climbing wall ten miles away, world class mountain biking routes, great kayaking clubs. Even if people do know about them, they're a bit intimidated about going down there on their own, but if we go as a group, or our

service users go down in pairs, it gives them more confidence about doing it.'

'It is fair to say that we were all a little nervous on the first day,' says Andy, who's now a service user rep. As well as learning about teamwork and trusting others, it helped people discover their inner strengths, he says, as well as providing a sense of achievement through doing something that felt 'out of reach for people in our situation'.

People who have completed the course go on to facilitate the group the next time, and Compass is now looking at building the courses into its treatment structure. 'We've got plans to do another two-day event but staying over at a centre and incorporating cooking activities,' says Nevens. 'People getting together in an evening and cooking a meal together, team building – some people on the course hadn't even left Selby in ten years.'

Service users need to be able to show that they are making some progress with their treatment in order to be eligible. 'There are conditions,' he says. 'You can't take drugs, obviously, and you can't drink either. Obviously there are health and safety regulations to adhere to, but we would tailor it to meet individual needs.'

One thing that does concern him is the lack of women who've signed up for Natural Highs, which has led to a broadening of the range of activities on offer. 'I started thinking about what we could do for people who weren't necessarily into the action man and adventure stuff but would give the same sort of results. We started thinking about acting, and we're now in the process of setting that up with St John's University in York. Again it's about building confidence, but people want to tell their story as well.'

Andy, meanwhile, has found the course has helped him put his 15 years of heroin use behind him. 'He was coming to the end of his treatment and it really inspired him to move on from it,' says Anthony Nevens. 'He now helps run the activities and he's training to be a kayak instructor himself so that he can pass on what he's learned to other people as a mentor.'

'It has helped us to readjust to life and to give something back by supporting each other,' says Andy. The project is the 'next step in moving out of services', he says, putting people in charge of their future. 'The group members' mutual support helps maintain our new substance-free lives and belief that anything is possible, no matter how crap your life was.'

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