

Signing on for treatment

With new welfare reforms being pushed out to job centres, DDN visited Wandsworth to talk to those directly involved in introducing culture change to benefit seeking drug users – including new employment minister Jim Knight, who started his job just last week

When the government announced welfare reform proposals last year, alarm bells rang at the suggestion that drug users could lose their benefits if they did not seek treatment – and with the Welfare Reform Bill now before Parliament, we could be a step closer to a mandatory regime for problem drug users.

Drugs charities and lobbying groups have warned that threatening chaotic drug users with sanctions could push them further away from treatment and risk alienating them further from society – particularly if they gained a criminal record for fraud. But while the tough talking from government hasn't gone down well with many agencies, proposals for better support into treatment – on a voluntary basis – and more opportunities at the job centre have been warmly welcomed.

Last Wednesday, with the hustle and bustle of Wandsworth job centre in full flow, a meeting took place of people directly involved in this proposed culture change of welfare reform. It involved drug coordinators – newly appointed since April to build a better relationship between Jobcentre Plus, drug treatment providers and other stakeholders like the prison service, the PCT and the NHS. It also included – as its star guest – the new employment minister, Jim Knight, who spent the morning being briefed by his audience on their progress and concerns at this pilot stage.

So what were these concerns? Is the initiative taking root as hoped and making a difference to the employment prospects of the drug users of Wandsworth? And how does the minister see the way forward?





The minister: 'We want to change the whole mindset'

'We're creating a better net through linking together,' Jim Knight told the large group of stakeholders. Later he told DDN (in his first media interview since taking up his post): 'It's been helpful to me to be here and be properly briefed up. But one of the most impressive things is to see what we often talk about in government, but is more difficult to achieve – joined-up working.

'To have drugs coordinators here that are funded by the Department of Health, to have the voluntary sector here, to have the local authority here as well as the Jobcentre Plus staff developing together gives a much better understanding so it's less likely that these very vulnerable individuals fall through the cracks. And to have a service user here as well, and to see the clients are involved in this and are feeding back their experiences and informing the delivery, is very helpful,' he added.

In the ideal world, a client's drug problem 'becomes apparent and is disclosed to personal advisors at Jobcentre Plus', according to the minister. They are reassured that they will receive help, referred on to a treatment agency, and the advisor keeps in touch with them throughout that process. While the rewards for voluntary compliance are many helping hands towards treatment, the punishment for not cooperating still looms large.

'It's a combination of making it slightly less comfortable for people to do the wrong thing and easier, with more support, for them to do the best thing for them in the long term,' said Knight. 'Those at the end of that spectrum are always going to be difficult... there'll be some people who are dependent on drugs who don't want to change, won't change, and it's very different to force people to in those circumstances. There are a lot of people who just need a bit more of a push and in the end they know they're going to do the right thing.

'To some extent we do want to threaten people doing the wrong thing – people should feel it will be harder to do the wrong thing,' he adds. 'But in some ways I draw on my experience in my last job [as minister for schools and

learners]. I came under criticism for introducing legislation to raise the age for participation in education and training to 18 – there was the misconception that involved chaining kids to desks. But the reason why we've introduced compulsion and an enforcement system is not because we want to enforce against people, it's because we want to change the whole mindset.

'I feel it's very similar to changes that are taking place in welfare reform in this area, in that it's as much about us upping our game. We've got to make sure that – across the criminal justice system, the National Offender Manager System, within the health service, here at Jobcentre Plus, the housing department – people are alive to their problems and we want to support them and help them to do the right thing.' Naturally he has a politician's grasp of the economics of addiction: 'The relationship between addiction and crime, particularly acquisitive crime, is really strong and costs us £15bn a year, so naturally this is money extremely well spent for the community, and it's a win-win if we make it work because we're helping individuals too,' he said.

But he is keen to point out that he is learning fast from his first few days in the new job: 'Some drug users are chaotic, some aren't. I've been talking to one of the treatment providers here who was telling me about the numbers in employment that are not chaotic at all so I don't think I – or any of us – should characterise all drug users as chaotic and impossible to help.

'Today I've been able to explore what works, and we want to build on what works, but also we want to find areas where we might be able to do more. There are lots of things to think about' – including, he says, taking back comments to his colleagues in the Ministry of Justice as well as his own department, 'to see if there's more we can do to support that part of the population'.

'In a week where we're trying to raise the profile of what we're doing in terms of tackling drugs, it's been very helpful in making sure it's on my radar,' he added, before returning to his new desk. ■



Drug co-ordinators: 'We're raising awareness, building partnerships'

'We've been brought in specifically to link treatment providers services with Jobcentre Plus and to work with the frontline providers,' said Nilam Jadhav (right), drugs co-ordinator for Wandsworth borough, speaking of her own role and that of customer services colleague Muncher Deboo.

'We're raising awareness, knowing about the referral process and the partners, building a relationship between Jobcentre Plus and the drug treatment providers as well as other stakeholders. Primarily my role is to identify those stakeholders and then introduce them to Jobcentre Plus services, to see whether we've already got paths in existence or whether we can provide that in some way to help the service users move on into employment or into training opportunities.

'The role is challenging but our objectives are very clear. We know exactly what's expected of us. At the moment it's very much at the early stages. Jobcentre Plus advisors are used to dealing with different issues, and up to now we've done very well in identifying those issues and supporting customers to address them. I have confidence in our advisers that they've got the skill to get that information from the customer and to make the referral on.

'When I've been going round to providers and

introducing the pathway and Jobcentre Plus services, the response has been very positive. There are lots of services that job centres offer that they weren't aware of – and they feel the service users probably aren't aware of – and there is that stigma attached to Jobcentre Plus as the dole office.

'Our job is also to go into service user groups and say "job centres have changed and this is what we can offer you. We can actually help you and we're not there just to stop your benefits. We're there to support you into employment and show you the services we have available".

One of my roles is to inform advisors, and I did actually have an advisor say to me "I wish I'd known that information because I had someone tell me they had a drug problem the other day". But largely we will have to work very hard to get that information from clients. It's about breaking that myth by saying to them "we're not here just to stop your money".

Muncher Deboo (left) added a note of caution: 'At the moment it's on a voluntary basis for the customers, it hasn't become mandatory. I think what we have to do is find out how the voluntary process is going first of all. And then we can say if it is working.' ■



The treatment providers: 'It could be an excellent scheme... if it stays voluntary'

'We're going to be the single point of contact for the Jobcentre Plus scheme,' explained James Parker (right), manager for Wandsworth Drug Project. Clients that volunteer that they have got substance misuse problems and want to access treatment would be referred to us – we're part of the pathway.

'This has broadened my awareness and knowledge of what Jobcentre Plus does. I've found the advisers and coordinators to be excellent, and really we have to wait and see about the volume of clients that come through. At the moment it's in its infancy, but hopefully if we make it a success and it remains voluntary, I think it could be an excellent scheme.'

'When I first heard about it a lot of the press around it and the thinking around it was that it was mandatory. Everybody latched on that and was very sceptical. When they said it was voluntary, I thought "I can see that working". We see it as just another way of clients accessing the service.'

'I think it's indicative of how all services are having to open their doors. Be it a job centre, be it a housing department, be it probation, be it drug services – we're all having to think about how we can get more customers in and how can we offer a better service. Everybody has to do it – I just hope it sustains and is a long-term initiative rather than something that's gone in a few months' time because we didn't get the numbers. It's going to take time for clients to see it not as a threat but as an actual opportunity.'

'Today the experience has been good, but the main thing I'm concerned about is how this initiative is going

to progress,' said Yves Marie, service manager, Blenheim CDP Resource (left).

'If there's not a quick take-up and if large numbers of people are not being referred into treatment, how long will this system remain as it is – and how will it develop into the future? Will it cease to exist or will it change its shape into coercive treatment? And if it does, how will it be managed?'

'I think the outline is there for it to work from what we've been talking about today – which is being referred voluntarily on admission of drug use, rather than a more probing type of assessment and obligatory referral. As we've seen with the DRR system, not everybody takes it up and even though somebody's freedom's on the line it doesn't always mean they're going to engage with a drug service or want to address their drug use.'

'So quick fix it's not, and one size fits all it's not either. We've got to see how we adapt this to our services and how the job centre works with us as well – how we work together. That's one of the vital components and the initial work that's gone on over the past few months and how we've been introduced to Jobcentre Plus has been very good so far. If this continues, things could work out quite well.'

'The other point that we picked up on is that this will provide us with more options for throughcare. We're all focusing on looking at ETE (education, training and employment) options, aftercare, what happens after treatment, long-term treatment pathways. I think this'll give us more options on what's being provided by Jobcentre Plus and the connection that we've got will help that pathway to move easily in the referral process.' ■



Education, training and service user feedback: 'It's about giving people practical skills, isn't it?'

'I've taken the lead for ETE which is a priority for Wandsworth,' said Wandsworth DAT commissioning officer Kelly Pegrem (left). 'There are lots of strings to that – part of it has been coordinating this pathway between Jobcentre Plus and the drug treatment system.'

'I'm also coordinating various training packages because the success of this pathway is going to be about the quality of training that everyone involved receives. So we've got training for the specialist drugs personal advisers who are taking ownership of the caseload of drug users. They've accessed our DAT training programme – that's basic drug awareness, advanced drug awareness, and drug users in the criminal justice system. I'm working with the drugs coordinator on a training package for all of the personal advisers about asking personal questions, drug awareness, boundaries – that kind of stuff.'

'The other side of that is we've commissioned two courses within our DAT training programme for drug workers on the benefits of ETE for those in drug treatment, and the new developments that are going on locally and nationally. Benefits advisers have also done a training course for drugs workers on the types of benefits available, and the support that Jobcentre Plus can offer.'

'Personally I'm quite sceptical about the punitive measures if they ever come into legislation, but I think at the moment we can build strong pathways between drug treatment and the employment sector. It's about giving people practical skills, isn't it? What we want to do in Wandsworth is build ETE and an assessment of learning and skills into the care planning process. So it's about bringing it into drug treatment and getting drug workers really passionate and positive about the subject because practical skills – learning, training, work experience, work opportunities – are something that continually come up for us in our needs assessments and service user consultations. Service users often say there are loads of barriers to accessing stuff.'

'A new development is that I sit on the employment and skills partnership at a strategic level within the council and I've recently presented to the board about the barriers that this population will encounter – low confidence, low self esteem, criminal records, dealing with disclosure, mental health.'

'There is a lot of scepticism about this, about benefit sanctions – from drug services, from the DATs, from service users. People are quite concerned about this. If you're using £1,000 of drugs a week, money has no meaning for you. Losing £47 a week of benefits, in the grand scheme of things, isn't that big. My concern would be that it would take drug use completely underground. So people – particularly women with childcare issues – would be even more wary of services.'

'Another concern is what particular benefit systems it could potentially apply to, and whether it would have implications for housing benefit – because that could have major, major implications for hostel provision and housing stability for this population.'

'There's an element of trust that has to be dealt with,' said service user group representative Malak (right). 'There has to be more on incentives rather than sanctions – keep away from the punishment side.'

'It's too early to say [if this is working]. Everything will take time. It will be an incentive for a person to challenge themselves in some sort of way with training, instead of sitting there bored. He'll have choices. It's not about all positives – there are pitfalls. Concentrating on the pitfalls is better than concentrating on the positives because there's a lot at stake. It's OK saying this is brilliant and all that – and there's the idea is that the person is active in some way and there's a follow through. But if he gets lost, who's lost him? It does amount to someone's responsibility.'

'There has to be complete follow through, all the way – and if they are dropped, then somebody needs to take responsibility for that drop.' ■