

As the financial climate changes for services, the problems don't diminish and the work must still go on. **Ian O'Sullivan** describes how Mainliners have had to streamline ambitious plans for an international hepatitis C conference to make sure the event can still happen

Under darker skies

A KEY THEME of all party conferences in the last few weeks has been that dreaded word 'cuts'. Nobody could fool themselves into thinking that the generous increases in public spending that have benefited the third sector in the last decade can continue in light of the need to drag the economy back from one of the worst economic downturns in the post war period.

Organisations that work in the substance misuse field have become used to making a little go a long way. With full-cost recovery something to aspire to rather than a daily reality, most projects run through public funding or grant-making bodies are used to making the most out of limited funds. The reality of the next few years will mean that organisations will have to continue to prove their flexibility and innovation in delivering vital services to those who need them most.

But what about organisations that have been caught in the crossfire of this unprecedented downturn? What happens to events and projects that have been planned under one set of economic conditions, but which have to be delivered under much darker and more uncertain skies? The current climate in many ways gives organisations a chance to prove to funders their ability to roll with the times, to change quickly and deliver a comprehensive service at a fraction of the cost.

Mainliners is a national charity based in London. Dedicated to reducing the harm caused by substance misuse and bloodborne viruses, it has had a key role in fighting the battle against hepatitis C throughout the UK by organising the International Hepatitis C Conference. After a highly successful two-day event in Derby in 2008, the organisation decided to create a larger and more ambitious conference in 2009, to reflect the larger role that hepatitis C is beginning to play in public health planning. With the Scottish and Welsh governments moving forward with comprehensive, cross-sector plans, and the Greater Manchester hepatitis C strategy showing that large regional drives within England can also successfully address the issue, the time seemed right to expand the conference.

With the vision of a three-day programme, Mainliners planned the 11th International Hepatitis C Conference in partnership with the University of Manchester and the Greater Manchester hepatitis C strategy. A national steering committee consisting of some of the most prestigious voices in research, public health and the voluntary sector was involved in putting together a programme that featured 60 speakers from 15 countries, and acted as a showcase for some of the most innovative and practical research into the treatment and prevention of hepatitis C.

Unfortunately, the economic situation began to bite ever deeper into the plans for the conference and it soon became clear that, despite the hard work and enthusiasm from all concerned, the event would have to be refashioned.

'The economic realities of the last two months made it increasingly difficult for Mainliners to create a financially viable conference,' said David Badcock, chief executive of Mainliners.

'Between a failure to secure corporate sponsorship for the event, and cutbacks in the NHS affecting our key delegate market, it became increasingly necessary to look once more at the conference set-up. Our first priority must always be to our service users, and it was clear that the risk we assumed in setting up such an ambitious conference could affect frontline service provision. This is unacceptable, despite the value that the conference could bring.'

Instead of cancelling the conference, Mainliners worked with its major partners to refashion the international conference into a one-day event. The new conference condenses the themes and presentations of the original three-day programme into one structured session and distils some of the key initiatives and directions that those engaged with the battle against hepatitis C have fought at a local, national and international level.

For those who work in the substance misuse field, the programme contains many exciting presentations on topics such as decreasing the amount of hepatitis C among young injecting drug users and guidance for injecting equipment services, as well as presentations on reaching isolated communities and HIV/hep C co-infection. As well as an international perspective offered by speakers from Australia, China and America, the evening session will offer an exciting UK specific perspective from some of the key players in the Scottish, Welsh and Greater Manchester plans.

'We feel that the conference is vital to maintaining the momentum behind the various public health initiatives to combat hepatitis C and to encourage other regions into action,' said David Badcock. 'The credit crunch has forced all organisations to offer more value for money, to all their stakeholders. But through rethinking our format, we've been able to keep to our objectives while adapting to survive these difficult times.'

Ian O'Sullivan is office manager at Mainliners. For more information please contact Mainliners on 020 7022 1890 or visit www.hepc09.org.uk.

The 11th International Hepatitis C Conference takes place on 16 November at the Lowry Hotel in Manchester.