

LEADING LIGHTS

Lambeth's new peer support service is taking shape through the Aurora Project, a team enterprise with service users at its heart. **DDN** reports from the launch

'We wanted to put peer support at the heart of what we do'

KENNY GREGORY, *substance misuse joint commissioner for Lambeth*

Service user involvement has always been at the heart of what we do – every year we do a service user audit. Six years ago we first mentioned peer mentoring in Lambeth and got an external agency to deliver it on our behalf. Then we set up system change pilots with money from the NTA and tried to set up a peer mentoring service with young offenders.

Towards the end of 2009 we had to re-tailor our drug and alcohol system. We had less money but had to deliver more. We wanted to put peer support at the heart of that and came up with the idea of our service users delivering this themselves, not putting it out to tender.

The service users really stepped up to the task, organising themselves into a management board and working hard to get the product off the ground with business plans and assessment forms. The level of professional work amazed me.

The volunteers, service users and drug and alcohol treatment services showed what we could do when we invest in recovery capital, all using their experience to inform and improve. The system was brought into action by committed individuals who used their own time to get involved.

We're expecting this kind of work to grow over the next few years and for them to grow their own projects and ideas. The Sanctuary Club, Aurora and The Network Club are all service user initiatives. Aurora is one of the key projects at the heart of the recovery transition.



'Today's clients will be tomorrow's volunteers'

DUNCAN CAIRNS, *director, Aurora Project*

Funding was always a barrier. As people on the service user council got stronger and put more time and effort into it we formed a social enterprise – a not for profit company – with a management made up entirely of service users.

Last March we became incorporated as a company and got our building. We had to start recruiting volunteers and thought it would be hard, but we were blown away by how many people wanted to join us.

It's quite phenomenal that you can run a service on the goodwill of others. It's about mutual aid – about people who have been through addiction being able to help others. The amount of time and effort people are willing to put in for others never ceases to amaze me.

We don't pay volunteers, but we offer education and training. People who are our clients today will be our next volunteers. Some go on to be professionals in the field. It shows how people are prepared to put something back into the community.



'It's about bridging the gap for service users'

ANGIE, *peer mentor*

After 23 years of addiction I wanted to help others. When I was out there I didn't know help was available.

When I was using I worked with service users for six years. Now I'm clean it's about knowing how to help them in a more beneficial way. It's about having the communication skills to help them open up, and to work out why they're not engaging. It's also about bridging the gap between them and their key worker.

I needed to learn boundaries. One of the biggest things is learning empathy and compassion. But as peer mentors we can put people in touch with the needle exchange, outreach services, the drop-in centre – whatever they need.



'Our peer mentors go above and beyond'

JENNI ALEXANDER, *peer mentor coordinator*

Peer mentoring gives support to the client, whether it's accompanying them to the doctor or services, linking them to social activities, or accompanying them from detox to rehab. We also offer support through small practical steps, such as filling out forms. Clients can be very vulnerable at these stages and the feedback on the service has been fantastic.

I've come from a background of managing volunteers from all walks of life. But I've never worked with a team as dedicated, passionate and enthusiastic as this one.

Our new team of volunteers starts extensive training at the end of May. They have 13 to 15 training sessions and have to show commitment. They also need to be very patient. Some will study for a diploma in health and social care alongside their peer mentoring.

As they've gained confidence our peer mentors have gone above and beyond what's expected of them.



Contact the Aurora Project at support@auroraprojectlambeth.org.uk