


# A glass half full



**With problem drinking taking its toll on the North East, Kevan Martin decided to turn his experience into action by forming the service users' forum NERAF. DDN talks to him about his mission to haul alcohol treatment up the agenda**

➤ Following intensive treatment for alcoholism, Kevan Martin was sent back home to fend for himself. That was when the safety net was cut away and he realised he was back on his own with a problem that continued to overwhelm him.

'I was going home to the same place, nothing had changed,' he explains. 'And I'd lost the skill to change things because I'd been drinking dangerously for some 20 years.'

Spurred on by the need for support, Martin got involved with the regional drug user forum. He realised that he was not the only person in his region that felt swamped by alcohol problems, and became vice chair of the forum, so he could bring alcohol issues to the table.

But his agenda was soon thwarted. 'We were told by the NTA that effectively there was no room for alcohol in that forum. I was incensed, to tell the truth; I thought if it's good enough for drugs, it's good enough for alcohol. So I set about starting a self-help group in Whitley Bay where I live.'

From these initial frustrations sprouted NERAF – the North East Regional Alcohol Forum. Realising from an early stage that he needed help to get the group up and running, Martin approached VODA, a community service agency, which gave him help with setting it up and forming a constitution. He found an invaluable ally in Peter Carlin-Page, alcohol co-ordinator for Sunderland Teaching Primary Care Trust, who 'asked what I wanted to do and has been 100 per cent behind me ever since'.

Carlin-Page shared Martin's concern for the state of alcohol services in the North East. 'We've got the fewest treatment services and the longest waiting times. Alcohol is a serious problem up here,' explains Martin. 'There were 430 people who died from liver disease last year in the region, and we're on the increase.'

There were two strands to the newly formed NERAF's strategy: getting things moving locally, and working out how to get more influence nationally to extend support to other service users around the country.

Setting up drop-in centres was an obvious point of local contact. The more difficult part of the local equation was finding people before they slipped through the net – just as Martin had. He set up links with services and the four local rehabs, intent on

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partnership working: 'We haven't set up an opposition agency or militant group, we've set up to complement other services,' he explains. 'Where they finish, we take over. We go on to the long-term aftercare.'

Visiting the rehabs each month gave NERAF the opportunity to see people before they came out, 'with the hope they'll tap into us'. Not only did many of the service users accept ongoing support – many of them wanted to become involved with the group, 'to help others go through what we've gone through, to show them there's a way out'. Martin took the opportunity to reinforce the group's message with the help of new supporters. The message is: 'you can be turned around, and you can go on to lead a meaningful and profitable life. Just because you've had a drink problem, that doesn't mean that's life ended,' he says.

Alongside the immediate comfort of reassurance, Martin emphasises that NERAF has an important role to play in the long-term game for people with alcohol problems. His own experiences have given him a lasting memory of being treated only for addiction – 'they didn't treat anything else', explains. He now makes it his mission to help people address all areas of their life, to get back control. NERAF's long-term goal, he says, is to set up seven-day-a-week centres, 'one-stop facilities, where we look at housing, debt, therapies, arts and crafts, IT training'. They will help people re-establish contact with children, encourage them to get relationships going again and rebuild the fabric of their lives.

Local service providers are now linking into the Forum's network of contacts, referring people for ongoing counselling and care. Martin was coming into contact with people who had been five or six years into recovery but who were unable to get back into work, and he saw the opportunity to develop a peer support network. He knew he needed help with NERAF's growing workload – and that there was a demand for their skills that were borne of experience: 'Service users were saying to their counsellors, "look, I want to talk to somebody who has experienced what I'm going through now"'. He set up a network of volunteers to bring the 'vitaly important' peer support model to life, and is training former users in advocacy and mentoring, to become involved in a newly commissioned mentoring service in Sunderland.

He is now seeking funding to pay a salary to his four full-time volunteers. In the meantime he is encouraged: 'we have people actually coming to us with contracts now, which is very very good.'

Tapping into a national framework has been an ambitious project. Undaunted – and grateful for Carlin-Page's help in opening doors – Martin has gained support and inspiration from Alcohol Concern and a seat at meetings of the North East government office's alcohol forum. Not content with being a self-help group for Whitley Bay, Martin wants NERAF to galvanise the alcohol support network throughout the country.

'We've got the blueprint now, which anyone else can follow,' he says. And making things happen is not about waiting for the money: 'A lot of people are waiting till funding is actually available. But if you dig deep there's some funding available,' is his message. 'OK, it might not be through health services or DATs – but there is funding to get this going now.' He urges colleagues in other parts of the country to get organised with whatever resources they can find – 'so when the mainstream funding comes in, you know what to do with it.'

Political uncertainty (will there ever be more money to turn DATs into DAATs?) should not choke the potential for local initiatives, according to Martin. Visiting liver units in hospitals, going into A&E departments, finding opportunities to intervene with problematic drinkers can make a lot of difference, he says – particularly if you can then involve service users in influencing commissioning.

'Commissioners are in their own world,' he says. 'But we're breaking through now by showing the success we're having.' To get the message across, NERAF is sending questionnaires to areas throughout the North East – 'and 99 per cent of the 202 questionnaires we got back want a peer-led support service.'

Martin has respect for different methods of tackling alcoholism, but a key goal is promoting choice. While AA is 'a fantastic organisation', it didn't work for him. 'We don't care how a person achieves or maintains sobriety,' he says. 'What matters is they get there.' NERAF aims to be holistic – and encouraging, particularly when the going gets tough.

'If somebody lapses, they give themselves such a hard time – and we say don't,' Martin explains. 'A

baby when it's born doesn't get up and walk straightaway, it keeps falling down. And that's what happens with alcohol. You've got to stand up, brush yourself down, and carry on. You learn from it.'

He used to give himself a hard time whenever he lapsed – 'I remember going 18 months without a drink and then went back. I felt so disappointed.' But now he knows that's the nature of the condition and wants to help others persist.

Six years on from his last drink, Martin has a fist full of plans and a determination that alcoholics should no longer languish at the bottom of the priority list. But he knows he has a fight on his hands.

He's afraid that the extra £15 million to be spent on alcohol treatment in the next year is not only a drop in the ocean, compared to the scale of the country's alcohol problem, but that government targets are all heading for the criminal justice agenda to tackle binge drinking.

'The people needing treatment very rarely break the law,' he points out. 'They're solitary people, they go to the off-licence and back home. They don't commit crime.' To issue funding on these grounds is to miss the main issue, he says, and missing the main people that want treatment.

His purpose and his passion through NERAF then is to galvanise movement throughout the country, to unite with other groups and give a strong voice to alcohol service users, whatever kind of treatment they are involved in.

Martin has already had vague promises of involvement, but is determined that NERAF is in it for the long haul. From wanting to get better alcohol treatment for one of the worst served areas in the country, he is now driven by conviction that this is the time for alcohol services to be heard: 'Service users have got to get united behind each other, it doesn't matter if they're AA or what. People with drink problems have got to be saying look, this isn't on.'

'I would like other groups in the country to get in touch with us,' he says. Let's get something going nationally. Now's the time.' **DDN**

NERAF's newly launched website is at [www.neraf.org.uk](http://www.neraf.org.uk). You can get in touch with the forum by emailing [neraf@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:neraf@hotmail.co.uk).