

## Developing a vision of the process of recovery

It cannot have escaped the notice of anyone working in the drug and alcohol field that there has been a fierce debate underway over drug treatment effectiveness in which abstinence-focused and harm-minimisation approaches to treatment tend to be represented as mutually exclusive. While debate within the field can be healthy, in this case it appeared to be becoming increasingly political and divisive, with little reference to the extensive, publicly available evidence on treatment effectiveness. There seems to be a danger that public and political support for drug treatment might be undermined and the gains made as a result of recent investment might be lost. At the same time, some of the criticisms levelled at the treatment field are not without foundation and staff morale in many places is low. As an independent, charitably funded body established to stimulate informed evidence-based debate about drug policy, the UKDPC felt it should seek to make a positive contribution to the debate.

Inspired by work on recovery both here and in the US, we invited a group of experienced individuals involved in the UK drug treatment field to take part in a two day consensus meeting held in March 2008. The group explored and reached agreement on an overarching definition of recovery that could be applied to all individuals experiencing problems with substance use. The 16 people who took part represented a wide range of perspectives: user, families, service providers, and researchers, with expertise in a wide variety of disciplines. The group included individuals from services providing the full range of care and support, including maintenance prescribing, general practice, residential rehabilitation and peer and family support groups. Participants also came from different parts of the UK and different ages and cultural backgrounds. The meeting was facilitated by Professor A. Thomas McLellan who had been a prime mover in a similar consensus panel in the US conducted under the auspices of the Betty Ford Institute.

### Overarching definition

An overarching definition of recovery was drafted that, in the opinion of the group, could be applied to all individuals striving to tackle their drug problem, those who are abstinent from all drugs, such as those in NA, as well as those whose abstinence is supported with drugs such as methadone or naltrexone (or acamprosate or nicotine replacement as alcohol and smoking examples). It also applies to individuals who make their recovery efforts unaided or without professional help, as well as both alcohol and drug users and people with differing levels of problems, not just those that meet the formal criteria of dependence. As such it recognises the diversity of experiences of recovery and also that developing a fulfilling life is central.

Whatever type of treatment is being provided, we wish to foster attention to the process of recovery. And it is with this in mind that we have striven to develop a deliberately broad definition to be applicable to a wide range of treatments.



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Following the initial meeting, there has been a period when the statement has been presented at conferences and discussed with a wide range of other groups and individuals, which has identified issues that required clarification. We have presented the statement for discussion at the Drug and Alcohol Today events in London and Glasgow, the UKESAD conference in London, the NTA conference and the London Drug Policy forum. Members of the group have also discussed it with colleagues in a number of meetings, formal and informal around the country. However, although the need for clearer or fuller accompanying notes and explanation is evident, the core points originally identified have withstood this scrutiny and remained largely unchanged, suggesting that the statement does encapsulate the key issues around recovery well.

The definition when finalised is proposed as a starting point and should not be conceived as "set in stone". Nor is it seen as the final answer but as a contribution to the work currently underway on many fronts to try and improve outcomes for people with drug problems. Any definition of recovery developed by a small group needs validation among a wider constituency and will also need to evolve to take account of cultural and societal developments.

However, we hope it can provide an overarching vision that could be used to underpin a range of developments, while talking about recovery in this new way allows us to begin to describe the scale of the cultural change necessary for professionals and organisations.

### Building block

The definition is not an end in itself and will be of little value unless it is used. We believe that the proposed definition is one that can be aspired to for all types of problem drug users and by all types of services, both specialist and generic, working with problem drug users at the present time. **It can also provide a framework for commissioners of services** to consider the range of provision required. It also parallels the developments in thinking in the related field of mental health. Our hope is that it might be adopted and used as an initial definition to provide a basis for the development of recovery oriented services.

Further work is needed to consider the implications for services and how this vision might be made a reality within UK drug services and also **how it relates to current developments, such as the introduction of the Treatment Outcomes Profile in England and the recovery networks being developed throughout the UK. This will require the endorsement and adoption of the definition by the wide range of bodies and agencies involved in the delivery of drug treatment, who will need to take the work further. Dissemination and discussion of the definition is therefore important** and we welcome thoughts and comments on our work. The consultation process will continue a little longer but we intend to publish a paper on the definition and our vision of the key features of recovery in the summer. Keep an eye out on our website for more information as we progress.

See [www.ukdpc.org.uk](http://www.ukdpc.org.uk)