

This transcript is a part of the Peer NSP Project from Coact for more details please visit: <http://co-act.info/peernsp>

Secondary Exchange

Helen Fletcher was a woman who injected drugs who lived in a marginalised area of Manchester called Moss Side. Moss Side struggled with both high levels of crime and poverty. Moss Side in the 1980s had a reputation for gun crime and the police only went into the area in pairs and in body armour. It was a difficult location for services to operate in and drug services were provided in the centre of Manchester. Local residents in Moss Side had to overcome poor transport links and a bus service that stopped at night disconnecting the area from the centre of Manchester. The area had high incidence of drug use including a significant number of injecting drug users.

The weak transport links and distant services were a high risk combination and Helen worried about the needs of her peers in Moss Side. Helen was using the needle exchange in the centre of Manchester and she started taking larger stocks of equipment to distribute from her home to her peers. Helen had a car and this allowed her to access the needle exchange and also to return used equipment. Helen, and her partner Charlie, made their home a space where peers could come for injecting equipment. However, Helen also offered support with filling in forms for welfare or housing. Helen was a strong advocate and this added to her credibility within her peer network.

Helen called her project Manchester Mainline and she saw herself as a drug user and community activist. The police were aware of her activities but they saw that she was well motivated and responsible. Helen and her volunteers would pick up discarded syringes from the streets of Moss Side and ensure their safe disposal. This public commitment to the wider community earned Helen respect from the police and local residents.

Helen also sat on the management committees of local harm reduction services and policy making forums. She represented her peers into these forums using her skills as an advocate to lobby for the rights and needs of her community. Her peer NSP provided the foundation for her wider advocacy work on behalf of people who inject drugs in Moss Side and Manchester more broadly.