

How members like Neil Walters are helping colleagues with drugs or alcohol problems through a joint Community-Corus initiative.

# Drink, drugs and safety at work

The first three drugs and alcohol counsellors have been appointed as part of a pilot programme on drugs and alcohol agreed between steel company Corus, Community and other unions. They are David Chugg, who will be working in Llanwern, and Neil Walters (once an ISTC Executive Council member) and Nia Davies, who will both work in Port Talbot. Neil worked with Community's Head of Health and Safety Rob Sneddon to create a training programme for those who will champion the project in Corus steel plants.

Neil (pictured left), a team leader on the re-heat furnaces at Llanwern, was seconded to neighbouring Port Talbot works to be a counsellor there. 'In South Wales we're ready to start the programme and so far the workforce in both plants are receptive and supportive of it,' says Neil.

It was a few years ago that some ISTC local union officials in Port Talbot expressed concern about an increasing drugs and alcohol problem in the town. They approached Corus' management and that was the start of the story. 'It's inevitable that what goes on in the wider community is reflected within the works,' says Neil, 'That concern led to Corus and the unions agreeing what should be done.'

No Corus worker should come onto a plant under the influence of drugs or alcohol and if they do they will be subject to a disciplinary. 'What we've agreed, says Rob Sneddon, 'is that any worker who feels they have a problem can approach one of the champions of this project or an appointed counsellor. They won't lose their jobs by coming forward, their situation will be kept confidential (only their line manager will be told), but they will sign a contract in which they undertake to receive the help and treatment they need. If they're working in a safety critical area they may be redeployed elsewhere until treatment is concluded.'

'Most workers act very responsibly but there are some who might have a problem and it is those we're trying to reach,' says Neil. 'A great deal of help is available and we are supported in this by Dr Sally Williams and the Corus medical teams. Stuart McIntyre, Human Resources Director for Port Talbot and Llanwern, has been a real driving force behind this since day one.' Neil, like his colleagues David and Nia, is concerned about drugs and alcohol abuse in South Wales. 'That's why I and Nia are working with the West Glamorgan Council for Alcohol Addiction and David works with the Gwent Alcohol Project.'

'We have massive issues regarding drugs and alcohol in the wider community,' Neil declares. Alcohol is the greater challenge – it's a cultural thing and alcohol is a legal toxin. Cannabis is our second biggest problem because its use is so widespread – from 10 to 50-year olds. It's easy to get hold of, yet it's illegal both to have and use the drug. Heroin is an increasing problem and then there's a whole range of other drugs from amphetamines to steroids.



Pictured working in partnership: Corus human resources and Community trade union

'A very worrying features of today's society is how very young children are abusing alcohol. Even children as young as 10 are managing to get hold of drink – often by way of their parents – and are ending up in accident and emergency centres. If we're not careful we're going to have a new generation suffering a range of alcohol-related diseases. We'd be naïve if we believed that the ills of society aren't reflected some way at work,' adds Neil.

There is no random drug and alcohol testing on Corus plants but there is testing if there is cause to believe that someone is under the influence. There will be testing, too, when there is an accident which can't be attributed to mechanical failure. The only other time someone might be tested is when they are entering a hot area and could become dehydrated. It would be irresponsible to let someone go into that situation if they had substances in their blood.

Neil admits that in the new year as the drugs and alcohol programme becomes better known there might be some suspicion on the part of some employees but they have no reason to be anxious. 'There's no desire to catch people out,' says Neil. 'We just want to ensure that when someone comes to work they are fit and they go home fit – we don't want to lose anybody. All Corus, Community and the other unions are working together on this want to do is to help anyone who might have a problem or wants to talk to one of the counsellors. As time goes by we want to take our message to the communities around us,' he adds.

Rob Sneddon believes that the partnership between Corus and the unions on this drugs and alcohol programme will be highly successful. 'We've been working on the project for some time and it is great to see it launched. It is a real collaborative effort and it is done for one reason – to make our workplaces and Corus employees safer.'