Teenagers in the Welsh Valleys take action to stop drug from savaging their generation

Friday 8 March, 2013

She says she has seen children as young as 11 snorting drugs from park benches in her hometown.

In fact, Charlotte O'Connell, 16, says mephedrone – also known as 'meow' or 'M-cat' – is used so widely amongst her generation in the Welsh Valleys that it is changing many young people beyond recognition.

Mephedrone is now twice as prevalent in Wales as it was a year ago and is available in the Valleys for as little as 50 pence, according to drug workers at Drugaid Wales.

Now working as 'Fixers', Charlotte and a group of her teenage friends are determined to raise awareness of the dangers of mephedrone – before it is too late.

Their Fixers campaign will be the subject of a broadcast on ITV News Cymru Wales on Tuesday, March 12 from 6pm.

Fixers is a movement of thousands of 16 to 25-year-olds across the UK who are supported to take action and change things for the better, addressing any issue they feel strongly about. How each Fixer tackles an issue is up to them – as long as they benefit someone else.

"I see mephedrone being taken every single day when I go out," says Charlotte, who lives in Tredegar.

"I have seen children as young as 11 actually taking mephedrone off park benches. I have seen people take it on the streets. I have seen people take it in local parks with children playing nearby. Anywhere they can take it, they will take it."

Fellow Fixer, Kayleigh Edwards, 18, of Merthyr Tydfil, said mephedrone is "everywhere you go".

She has seen the devastating consequences of the drug first-hand.

"People on mephedrone don't care how they look, they don't wash, they don't eat properly, they don't think about anything else, they're in their own little bubble," she said.

And Fixer Connor Jones, 16, of Tredegar, added: "Most people round here are taking it for the buzz, there's nothing else to do. It's just something to do to get away from this place.

"I have seen a lot of people go from where they could get somewhere in life and get a good job to dropping out of school from it."

With help from Fixers, the teenagers are making a powerful film about the devastating effects of the Class B drug.

Gemma Jones, of Drugaid Wales, said: "Mephedrone is becoming increasingly popular with young people aged between 14 and 18, primarily because it's very cheap.

"You can purchase mephedrone within the Merthyr area for £10 a gram. Short-term effects include dramatic weight loss, sores around the nasal passages and almost flu-like symptoms."

The award-winning Fixers project has already supported almost 7,000 young people across the UK to have an authentic voice in their community.

Now, thanks to a £7.2 million grant from the Big Lottery Fund, Fixers aims to recruit more than 2,500 Fixers in Wales by the end of 2016.

The movement is already working with 152 young people in Wales on 21 projects.

Each Fixer is supported to create the resources they need to make their chosen project a success, with creative help from media professionals to make their own promotional material, such as films, websites or print work.

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Fixers is a project of the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), a charity that brings together mainstream broadcasters, public and voluntary sector services, and viewers.

“Fixers started in 2008 as just an idea… an idea given a voice by some 7,000 young people over the past five years,” says Margo Horsley, Chief Executive of PSBT.

“They have reached thousands of people with their work, on a national stage as well as in and around where they live. They choose the full array of social and health issues facing society today and set about making their mark. Fixers are always courageous and their ideas can be challenging and life-changing, not just for themselves but across communities.”

Peter Ainsworth, Big Lottery Fund UK Chair, said: “The Big Lottery Fund is extremely happy to be supporting Fixers to engage with more young people to change things for the better. Thousands of public-spirited young people across the UK are campaigning to make improvements in their own communities. By providing a platform to highlight their voluntary work and many achievements, Fixers demonstrates the positive contribution thousands of committed young people are making at a local level and challenges negative stereotypes.”

One photo attached. Caption: Charlotte O’Connell.

For images, interviews or more information, please contact Sarah Jones in the Fixers Communications Team by email sarahj@fixers.org.uk or phone 01962 810970.

There are lots more stories about young people doing great things on the Fixers website, Twitter and Facebook pages:
www.fixers.org.uk
www.twitter.com/FixersUK
www.facebook.com/FixersUK

Notes to editors:

• Since 2008 some 7,000 young people in England have become Fixers and created 800 projects. Now with a £7.2 million grant from the Big Lottery Fund, Fixers is extending into Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.
• The Public Service Broadcasting Trust is a charity that brings together mainstream broadcasters, public and voluntary sector services, and viewers.
• The Big Lottery Fund (BIG), the largest distributor of National Lottery good cause funding, is responsible for giving out 40% of the money raised for good causes by the National Lottery.
• BIG is committed to bringing real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need and has been rolling out grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK since June 2004. The Fund was formally established by Parliament on 1 December 2006.
• Since the National Lottery began in 1994, 28p from every pound spent by the public has gone to good causes. As a result, over £29 billion has now been raised and more than 383,000 grants awarded across arts, sport, heritage, charities, health, education and the environment.

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