

# **A Better Working Relationship**

## **Service user involvement and co-production**

### **Background**

The Vice-Chair of Citizens Panel, during her post as a Working Neighbourhood Fund placement within the SP team, was asked to undertake a detailed research project to determine the future role for user engagement within the Birmingham Supporting People team and provide an accompanying document which would sit alongside the Supporting People “A Strategy for Housing Related Support”

### **Aim**

*“We set out to develop a strategy that would, reflect the current relationships that service users have with the Supporting People programme, with the purpose of identifying what service users felt they wanted from Supporting People user engagement activity and co production, and also establishing what service users felt the SP team in Birmingham did well” .*

*Donna Daley*

Citizens Panel members have researched local authority obligations under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the code of practice and its duty to consult. There are also Duties under the Equality Act, needs assessment requirements, to consult appropriately with affected communities. These obligations must inform and underpin user engagement best practice and will ensure that SP funded services across the City move forward in the right way.

### **Findings and recommendations**

It was important for Citizens Panel to establish what service users felt about the communication and engagement undertaken by the SP team directly with service users. It became apparent from discussions with service users that they wanted future co production and consultation to focus upon and improve in the following areas:

- Communication
- Access
- Skills, Training and Volunteering Opportunities
- Independence

## Communication

As part of a recent consultation process, 90% of service users said that they preferred face to face consultation when supporting people wanted their opinion. With a service user population in excess of 40,000 people geographically distributed throughout the City of Birmingham, such a consideration would be impossible to achieve for every service user in a meaningful way.

It is important therefore that over a longer period of time the SP team take on a more enabling and capacity building role across the sector so that opportunities for those face to face consultations start to increase. The SP team has historically invested significant resources in order to develop accredited training courses for the service user community. Given the current economic climate the team have also utilised these resources to income generate and share best practice locally and regionally and by making these training places available to a broader range of service users.

New ways are under consideration of twinning Lay Assessors who use different services and may be able to link up and share service experiences and compare aspects of their experience that can be harvested to improve the span, depth and reach of consultation.

The ways in which the service user engagement team will where possible and resources permitting continue to;

- 1) Continually train support and empower a pool of service users and ex service users to act as advocates and volunteers to the service user community including assisting with face to face consultations.
- 2) Ensure that the opportunity for face to face feedback working with Lay Assessors continues through validation and quality assurance activity.
- 3) Ask service providers, particularly front line support workers to assist the SP team to undertake face to face consultations on our behalf. We believe that SP funded organisational staff has significant skill and expertise which can be utilised particularly in obtaining feedback using the most appropriate formats and language.
- 4) Develop the training programme in conjunction with Fircroft College and CIH to give wider training opportunities

## Access

Citizens Panel and our Lay Assessors have indicated that they wanted to be able to visit the SP team where appropriate.

The SP team have;

- 1) Moved to a new office that is fully “Disabled Access” compliant that has good transport links and significant meeting room resources.

- 2) The Strategic Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods has provided to the Citizens Panel, open access to the Tenants room, for their monthly meetings.
- 3) As part of Supporting People's ongoing commitment to improving customer and provider access to the Service User Involvement Team are introducing "The Service User Involvement Roadshow". The Involvement Team are proposing a perpetual cycle of visiting provider organisations for a series of informal drop-in sessions for both service users and providers. This will give all parties concerned an opportunity to share best practice in service user involvement and co-production. They will be able to explore and devise innovative approaches, establish what is working and what is not, and encourage collaborative working between organisations and service user groups.

### Information – Service User Newsletter “Peoples’ Choice”

The editorial panel is a group of housing related support funded service users that volunteer their time in the production of the supporting people newsletter called Peoples’ Choice. This is tailored to the needs of the service user community. Previously the panel would put together the various articles and production of the news letters was outsourced to a publishing company. As part of our cost-cutting exercises, in line with addressing the national deficit, the editorial panel is now committed to undertake the entire production process of the newsletter. Copies of the newsletter will be distributed electronically, in the first instance via provider organisations. Upon request/subscription an in-house desktop publishing protocol is proposed, hard copies of the newsletter can be produced in standard or accessibility specific formats.

This exclusively produced in-house publication is due to be re-launched in January 2012.

### Information - Service User - web pages

The Supporting People team have dedicated service user area; we aim to ensure that information is kept up-to-date and relevant to the service user community.

### Social Networking

Citizens Panel are currently exploring possibilities in utilising social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter as a mechanism to encourage more meaningful two-way communication between the service user involvement team and the service user community.

### Skills, Training, and Volunteering Opportunities

Many of our service user volunteers have developed a vast array of enhanced skills through their work as lay assessors, mystery shoppers, advocates and

citizens panel membership and it is appropriate that these skills receive accreditation.

To create this, lay assessor training has been established in conjunction with Fircroft College, The Open College Network, and the Learning Skills Council. This was the first accredited course of its kind in the country. Negotiations are currently under way with the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) in modifying the course content in line with a set of standards laid down and endorsed by the CIH. Considerations to further enhance the personal development of the lay assessors with a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) has been explored and is currently considered to be non-viable due to excessive development costs.

The Service User Involvement Team currently works with volunteers from the service user community who engage on work placements with the team. This process has been mutually beneficial, allowing both personal development for the volunteers and increased capacity for the involvement team.

Supporting People is proposing to standardise the work placement initiatives for up to six months. This consideration will allow an appropriate time period before the work placement candidates to enhance their existing skills, learn new skills, develop their CVs and obtain appropriate references for any future employment opportunities. Placing time restrictions on the work placements will optimise opportunities for a greater number of volunteers to benefit from this personal development initiative.

A number of trained lay assessors from Supporting People have previously and are currently working with the Adults and Communities Directorate in reviewing a number of commissioned third sector services for people living with mental health problems and learning disabilities. We are delighted with these developments and will continue to develop partnership working initiatives within the directorate in instances where the deployment of the Supporting People's resources will improve service standards and prospects for vulnerable citizens of Birmingham.

As a further development, a number of service user volunteers are engaging in accredited training through Fircroft College as trainers. The service user involvement team are developing a series of in-house training initiatives that will enable the lay assessors, work placement candidates and citizen panel members to impart their knowledge to members of the wider service user community of the supporting people programme using their trainer skills. As well as developing a broader resource bank, this process will generate good practice widely and generate income for the service that will help secure staff resources.

### Resources

Given the difficult economic climate the SP team will continue to explore the most innovative ways of engaging with our service user communities. Equally the call for the prudent use of resources in undertaking meaningful and fully

accessible consultation does come at a price. There will always be higher engagement costs associated with enabling volunteers with physical or sensory impairments to attend meetings or service reviews. However the SP team are committed to ensuring that all services users are provided with the appropriate opportunities.

### Strategic Role of Citizens Panel

The Citizens' Panel plays a vital role within the governance arrangements of the SP programme and continues to inform the decision making aspects of the SP programme locally. The SP team prides itself in the fact that panel members come from incredibly diverse backgrounds and vulnerabilities. The SP team will continue to support the panel to deliver its work plan and areas of developmental work.

This role has been recognised by the wider support community both regionally and nationally, with requests being received for the Citizens' Panel to talk about their work at national conferences in both England and Wales. The Panel with SP support will continue, where possible, to attend conferences with SP Providers, users, stakeholders and Government representatives to promote its work and its journey to engagement in the shaping of service delivery.

### As a direct result of this initiative the service user involvement team's strategy is committed to ensuring that:

- The service user involvement team is more accessible to the service user community by implementing "The Service User Involvement Roadshow" the involvement team will develop and deploy a perpetual cycle of visiting provider organisations for a series of informal drop-in sessions for both service users and providers.
- The Service User Involvement Team actively encourages collaborative working between provider organisations and service user groups.
- The service user led editorial panel is given the required level of support in undertaking the entire production process of the People's Choice newsletter.
- The Supporting People website continues to have a regularly updated dedicated service user area.

- Possibilities in utilising social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter as a mechanism to encourage more meaningful two-way communication between the service user involvement team and the service user community are fully explored and implemented if appropriate.
- The lay assessor training in conjunction with Fircroft College, The Open College Network, and the Learning Skills Council is further developed, including endorsement and accreditation with the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) in modifying the course content in line with a set of standards laid down by the CIH.
- A standardised work placement initiative is implemented for members of the service user community to gain work experience with the service user involvement team.
- The Service User Involvement Team continues to support and promote membership of the Citizen's Panel and ensure that the diversity of the service user community is reflected within the panel's membership.
- Volunteers from the service user community receive appropriate levels of support to engage with the program and perform their duties irrespective any barriers that traditionally could be considered as barriers to participation.
- The Service User Involvement Team continues to support volunteers from the service user community to act as mystery shoppers.
- The Service User Involvement Team continues to ensure that service users are at the heart of reviewing service standards.
- The Service User Involvement Team continues to work collaboratively with stakeholders and the wider directorate of Birmingham City Council in sharing best practice, resources and knowledge for the purpose of capacity building.
- The Service User Involvement Team continues to ensure that representatives from the service user community play a meaningful part in the governance structure of housing related support services within Birmingham City Council.
- Lay Assessor Teams will continue to undertake review commissions for partner organisations to enable them to have service user feedback on the services they are delivering. This process of consultation work generates income for the Supporting People Programme that helps sustain services and resources.