

Fumbling towards democracy

Research into the attitude of treatment managers reveals that many still put stumbling blocks in the way of effective user involvement. Derek Bunce reveals the findings.



The NHS and Social Care Act (2001) established user involvement as part of the policy framework within substance misuse services. Despite this, the National Treatment Agency has yet to propose a formal model of how treatment providers and agencies should engage with service users.

From the 'consumer' perspective an increasingly vocal 'user movement' has emerged in the last five years and consistently called for increased representation at all levels of substance misuse service delivery.

However, the development of service user involvement may be hampered by a number of factors, including the type of relationship between drugs services and service users. Indeed one of the

central concerns evident within 'user' magazines such as *Black Poppy*, *Monkey* and *Users Voice* is the nature of the relationship between user activists requiring ongoing methadone maintenance therapy (MMT) and treatment providers.

The question raised by these groups is how can users effectively challenge the 'system', when at the same time they are dependent upon it for their survival. Indeed, if managers and those in a position of authority are reluctant to share power there may be a number of hurdles to jump before a fully representative consultation process might emerge.

In order to investigate some of these issues a three-year project was

established to identify factors that facilitate or hinder the development of user involvement. This study represents the first phase of the research and aims to access the views of treatment managers and those with a strategic responsibility within one UK region. This was achieved by interviewing 41 senior managers as well as accessing key policy documents such as treatment planning grids.

The treatment grid is a self-assessment exercise to gauge the quality of service provided within a DAT area. The results are then monitored and ultimately approved by the NTA regional office. The process utilises a 'traffic light' system according to the criteria in the box.

One of the assessment exercises encourages agencies to focus on the involvement of users and carers in the design of the local treatment system and their involvement throughout the implementation, monitoring, review and evaluation processes and the development of advocacy services.

In the submission for 2005/ 2006 only two DAT areas within the region managed to achieve an assessment level of green while four were assessed as red.

Interviews with key professionals established that 40 per cent remained dubious of any consultation process. Opinion about user involvement among professionals tended to be divided with only one professional speaking positively about engaging with active drug users.

One of the reasons offered was the fear that another task was going to be imposed upon already overstretched services. Other comments tended to assume that most service users actively engaged in user involvement are those who are either at the latter part of treatment or stable through a maintenance programme. Few felt there was any merit engaging with users prior to, or at the early stages of, treatment.

Many professionals were open to the idea of service users becoming involved in strategic planning and recruitment. However there was a significant decline in support for the idea of service users being engaged in both financial and budgetary issues or disciplinary matters relating to drug workers.

Only one respondent gave their reason for not including service users in disciplinary issues as being connected with staff/ trade union relations.

Many agencies indicated that they had experienced some difficulty establishing user groups and that once formed membership tended to fluctuate considerably. Engagement with service users in these areas had tended to be limited to a small number of focus groups during a 12-month period

It was also apparent that DAT areas employing someone with a responsibility for developing user involvement appear to have established small user groups. However, in order to engage with larger numbers of users, all were developing extensive outreach programmes.

There was also evidence that some respondents would have welcomed more support from the NTA in helping to develop user involvement in their area. Indeed, evidence obtained suggested that strategic organisations felt that the NTA commitment toward increased user involvement had lacked a cohesive plan.

Specifically, the absence of clear guidance and detailed key performance indicators, placed DATs in a position of having little control if providers refused or did little to engage with service users.

While this study helps to explain some of the underlying problems present in the current consultation process, what remains unclear is whether service users feel a need to engage in the policy process. Further research is required to explore the views of service users engaged in user groups as well as those who choose to not affiliate to this emerging 'user movement'. In addition, it is also important to seek the views of drug users who have yet to access treatment services. The next phase of the research will aim to address many of these issues.

Derek Bunce was lead researcher on the project. He has been involved in the substance misuse field since 1984 as a therapist and treatment manager and now works as a research fellow at the Policy Research Institute, University of Wolverhampton.

In the next issue of DDN, we'll be looking at how to set up user groups – and keep them going. If you're involved with a group, or have experiences relating to setting one up, please email the editor, claire@cjwellings.com, so we can build up a picture of national activity.

Grading: what the grade actually means

- **Red** No significant impact on the development of user involvement
- **Amber** Slight improvements to the consultation process
- **Green** Significant impact on processes to engage with service users