

Shadow of opportunity

Getting the involvement and feedback of service users is central to providing a first rate service and can offer valuable work experience to a client. But just how easy is it to do that in practice? **David Gilliver** finds out.

Kate Langan is client participation co-ordinator at Islington DAAT, and for the whole of this month a client rep for a local service – Martel – is shadowing her role as she co-ordinates, mentors and deals with complaints.

‘He’s shadowing the strategic workings of the DAT to see how treatment works from commissioning, right down to front line working,’ she says. ‘It’s about looking at how treatment works, and getting a first-hand understanding of the problems.’

The DAT however has had to go through a lengthy process to facilitate this, particularly regarding Martel’s benefits, and are still waiting to hear if everything’s OK. ‘You have to send off various letters and he can only work so many hours – there’s a lot of hoops to jump through,’ she says.

One problem is that benefits agencies tend not to regard addiction problems as health issues in the same way as something like mental health. ‘We’re finding that it’s very difficult for service users to get out of the benefit trap,’ she says. ‘There’s a stigma – a feeling that this is something he’s brought on himself.’

Part of this, it seems, is the age-old issue of lack of joined-up government. ‘The Department of Health’s best practice guidance on reward and recognition sets out how service users should be rewarded for getting involved in commenting on treatment and yet there doesn’t seem to be any link up with the DWP [Department for Work and Pensions],’ she says. ‘Even though the NTA say they’re working on it there’s still no resolution so it’s frustrating how you do that in practice. We had no worries at all about Martel coming in but I’m quite shocked by how difficult and complex it’s been.’

So what advice would she offer to other DATs considering similar initiatives? ‘Get professional welfare benefits advice to make the service user aware of the rules, but still to encourage them to get involved,’ she says. ‘We want clients to go on to committees and sit on drug and alcohol reference groups but we don’t really give them any real background to how the system works – we just sort of throw them in at the deep end.’

‘We should be putting our money where our mouth is if we really want clients to be having an input into our systems,’ she continues. ‘It’s a tremendous opportunity to work with someone like Martel – he brings a whole new perspective, things I’d never have thought of.’

‘It’s about educating myself in how the system works because I only had it from the one perspective before,’ says Martel. ‘I’m seeing it from the other side, what the dynamics are and seeing the challenges these guys face.’

Previously Martel had found it hard to get into volunteer work. ‘There’s definitely a lack of opportunity,’ he says. ‘I feel I’m being judged on my past and not given a fair chance. It’s not easy to get into voluntary services, but I knew I had to do something like that to get me up in the morning, give me a routine and stay focused. The rules are that once you’re two years clean, which I am, then things should open up for you but I feel like doors have been closed in my face and it’s demoralising.’

Worrying about losing his benefits makes it even

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harder to just get on with his life, he says. ‘But I have to be optimistic and take responsibility for myself. The reason I got into drugs in the first place was because I was running away from all the responsibility I was forced to take on as a child.’

Kate Langan, client participation co-ordinator at Islington DAAT on how to make sure you, and your client, get the best from the placement

- Prepare the client for a placement in a local council – for some clients it will be the first time they have worked in an office environment. Explain fully the importance of confidentiality, explain the purpose of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks and make sure that client understands the nature of volunteering in a local DAAT.
- Make sure the client is not out of pocket – they are entitled to the same expenses as a student placement or any kind of volunteer would get. Make sure clients have travel and lunch allowance.
- Give the client regular supervision and ‘check in’ time.
- Encourage the client to write a log of their experiences so they can refer back to learning points. Get them to write a short report on this learning and the value for the future of client involvement.
- Always value the client’s opinion, encourage questions and suggestions!
- Have a written policy on what you aim to achieve by the placement.
- Make sure that clients get good quality welfare benefits advice. Encourage the client to inform the benefits agency of their intention to volunteer and be above board, as this puts the client in a better position to appeal against any negative decisions the DWP could make.

For more information contact Kate.Langan@islington.gov.uk