



A commissioner's guide to service user involvement in the re-commissioning of day and vocational services for people with mental health conditions

This is a concise guide for health and social care commissioners on how to involve people with direct experience of using mental health services in the re-commissioning of day and vocational services. It is based on the experiences of commissioners and service users who collaborated on re-designing and modernising local services. The information presented here can be applied to all kinds of mental health commissioning.

This experience has shown that a well planned and managed re-commissioning process can make an enormous difference to people's lives and that the involvement of service users from the start of the process is crucial to success.

We have identified the following basic principles of good practice drawn from an evaluation of service users' experiences and illustrated by real life examples. It is intended as a guide rather than a blueprint.

1. First steps and first principles

Equal involvement of service users at all stages of the process is crucial: Involve service users at the start of the process to agree the principles that will underpin the re-commissioning.

Project management: Appoint a dedicated project manager to manage the re-commissioning process. It is essential that momentum is maintained and there is support for all parties as and when they need it.

Resource allocation: Allocate sufficient budgets to cover project management, training and support for service users, and reimbursement costs. Allow sufficient time to enable service users to participate fully in the process. It is important that key activities, such as interviewing potential new service providers and visiting services to assess quality standards, are not rushed.

Commitment: Demonstrate your commitment to service user involvement by ensuring that there is regular attendance at all meetings by a senior member of staff who can make decisions and keep the process on track. Ideally a 'lead officer' should be identified to attend meetings, with a deputy to whom attendance can be delegated when necessary. Ensure that all staff understand the importance of service user involvement and appreciate the skills, knowledge and experience that service users bring to the process.

More about re-commissioning

For more information about re-commissioning and what it can achieve, see *About Time: Commissioning to transform day and vocational services* (Lockett, Pozner & Seymour, 2008) and resources for commissioners at: www.scmh.org.uk/employment/commissioning.aspx.

2. Engaging with service users

Clarity of purpose: Explain what the purpose of the re-commissioning process is and what the boundaries are, for example: which elements are negotiable and which are not; where formal responsibility ultimately lies; and how decisions are made and the reasons for those decisions. It is important that the rationale for any review of services is clear and transparent.

Information: Ensure that any background information given to service users is in plain English and clearly outlines why the re-commissioning is taking place and what the process will be.

Level of participation: Explain what opportunities there are to participate and the time commitment required for each activity.

Recruitment: Involve as wide a group of service users as possible. A variety of communication

Setting up a reference group

A service user reference group was convened to provide general oversight of the development project, which included involvement in the design and implementation of a stakeholder consultation process.

Three members of the reference group joined the project steering group, taking on a key role in project management and influencing critical decisions on service redesign.

The stakeholder consultation process involved gathering the views of service users, managers and staff of provider agencies, carers and local residents with mental health conditions who had chosen not to use services.

It was undertaken through discussion groups, face to face interviews, self-completion postal questionnaires, and through a large consultation event held in a major town in the locality.

Imagining the new services

Some participants found it difficult to visualise what a new service landscape might look like as they did not have sufficient knowledge about the full range of alternative day and vocational service models. Consequently they were anxious about what might be lost.

This knowledge deficit was managed through written briefings and presentations on alternatives to traditional day services (e.g. social firms, community interest companies, user-led art and creative groups).

Briefings were provided for both the service user reference group and the wider service user population at a county-wide information and consultation event.

However, in retrospect, service user commissioners felt that visits to services in other localities would have helped to give them a broader understanding of the alternative models.

channels, such as newsletters, service user groups, local third sector agencies and targeted discussion groups, can be used to ensure that those who would like to participate are given the opportunity to do so.

There is often a wealth of mental health service user expertise among the members and governors of mental health foundation trusts, patient advice and liaison services (PALS), local involvement networks (LINKs) and mental health third sector agencies. These networks should be utilised at the outset of the process to develop a strategy for service user involvement in the commissioning process.

3. Support during the process

Working agreements: Ensure that service users who are participating in the re-commissioning process understand what their role will be, what skills they will need, and what support, supervision and training they will be given. A Working Agreement

that sets out roles, remits, responsibilities and support structures should be determined and signed off by both parties. For example, such an agreement might include core principles and basic ground rules on conduct of meetings, anticipated time commitment, accountability, equal opportunities, complaints processes and reimbursement. Research on service user involvement has shown that such arrangements are valued by all group members, both paid and unpaid.

Payment and expenses: Make sure that service users not only receive payment for their time and expertise but also that their expenses are reimbursed promptly. Ensure that all service users have access to expert advice on welfare benefits and understand how any payment might affect their benefits.

Training: Assure service users that they will receive the training necessary to play an informed part in commissioning, such as interviewing potential providers, undertaking options appraisals and quality assessing existing services. Training should be provided in a timely fashion so that the skills acquired can be used in real life situations as soon as possible.

Mentoring and supervision: Consider recruiting an experienced service user consultant who can provide external support and supervision for service users who are participating in the commissioning process. Service user commissioners have often found it helpful to have additional meetings, as

Communicating with stakeholders

Uncertainty about the future of existing services inevitably generated anxiety among their users and staff.

A good strategy for communication with stakeholders was crucial and included the distribution of regular progress bulletins, the staging of an information event to outline the new vision, and one-to-one meetings with providers to explain decisions about future contracting arrangements.

Supporting service users during the process

There were periods during the re-commissioning process when service user members of the steering group were aware of decisions made regarding the future of the service they were using, but were unable to communicate these to fellow users or staff.

Some experienced considerable pressure as a result. They also felt responsibility for staff anxiety and were worried about possible job losses.

Good support for service users involved in the re-commissioning process was considered crucial to enable them to manage these pressures.

a separate group, where they can confidentially discuss any issues that have arisen for them during the commissioning process. And they may benefit from the input of a mentor, either the service user consultant or the commissioner's project manager.

All papers and information provided for meetings should be easy to understand with minimal or no use of jargon.

4. Communication, confidentiality and management of conflict

Communication: Provide ample, timely and clear information to staff and the wider group of service users about possible changes to the service. Be open with staff about the potential implications of change and their future roles. Ensure that all members of management groups, including service users and staff representatives, have input into crafting messages for the wider groups of interested parties. When project delays occur, ensure that all parties are kept fully informed.

Confidentiality: Provide training and support in how to manage confidential information for service users participating in management meetings.

Commissioners should produce a briefing at the end of each meeting that clearly sets out what should be kept confidential and at what point information can be shared in the public domain. Once information can be shared more widely, it is the commissioners' and not the service users' responsibility to oversee and manage that process.

Conflict management and resolution: Be aware that conflict may arise and ensure that there is a management plan in place to support service users involved in the commissioning process. They may face pressure from staff and other service users who are anxious about the proposed changes.

At the start of the process, commissioners and service users on the steering group should discuss whether service user members should be involved in the evaluation of the service they are currently using and what the implications of this decision might be. The role of the service user commissioners in the decision-making process should be explained to all service users and staff.

Published: November 2009

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Helen Lockett, Linda Seymour & Adam Pozner

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About Time is based on the real experiences of commissioners in Southern England who have recently re-designed their services. It is essential reading for commissioners in the NHS and local authorities.

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