

Shelter

Involving users in
supported housing
A good practice guide



Written by Sue Cullen

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Foreword

Shelter is committed to developing and promoting innovative practice with homeless young people, and to sharing this knowledge with other organisations. User involvement is an exciting and challenging area for those working in the supported housing field, particularly with young people, and the advent of Supporting People means it will be more essential than ever to tackle this subject effectively in the future.

The Vodafone UK Foundation is supporting Shelter's work with and for young people, enabling Shelter to provide

young people with the information they need, when they need it. The Vodafone UK Foundation and Shelter are working together to tackle youth homelessness and social exclusion in the long term.

This guide is an example of Shelter's work in supporting local authorities and organisations with policy ideas, examples of good practice, and campaigns to support local initiatives.

It aims to be clear, practical, and easy to use. We hope that you will find it a valuable resource.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Adam Sampson'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Adam' and last name 'Sampson' clearly distinguishable.

Adam Sampson
Director, Shelter

Introduction

Background

In association with Forum Housing, Shelter's Young Persons Team ran a conference called 'Making a difference: resident participation in supported housing' in February 2003. Representatives from 30 organisations across the north west of England attended to discuss issues around resident participation, and several supported-housing providers gave presentations on the subject.

A report on the conference followed a few months later, and included recommendations for continuing and developing the work further. One delegate urged: 'Don't waste the momentum generated by this conference – form a group and take things further.' The Young Persons Team hosted a meeting with invited delegates in order to decide how to harness this momentum.

Eight organisations attended and, after discussion, decided to put together a toolkit or guide to help those who want to encourage user participation in supported housing. All organisations felt that they had had some success in encouraging user participation in their own services. Representatives from six of the organisations volunteered to form a User Involvement Good Practice group to work on the form and content of the guide. The Good Practice group met monthly, sharing ideas and knowledge about good practice and deciding how these could be presented in a practical and meaningful way for workers in hostels and supported housing.

The guide is intended for anyone working in housing or housing-related services, supporting young or vulnerable people. It is compiled by Shelter, but the Good Practice group members who have

collaborated on it are all practising workers in supported housing. They have real knowledge and appreciation of the tasks involved in the day-to-day running of drop-ins, night shelters, hostels, supported housing, and floating support services.

The Good Practice group spent some time defining and focusing on what they agreed to be good practice in this field. They shared examples from their own projects, but also looked to other projects and services for inspiration. The finished guide contains advice, project examples, tips and suggestions, and templates that can be customised for your own services.

A changing culture

Twenty years ago, it was unusual for users to be actively involved in any kind of service they were getting. The prevailing attitude was that people were lucky to be getting a service of any sort, and that the professionals who administered it knew best. In areas such as health care, housing, and education, people (especially those with special or additional needs) were sidelined when it came to deciding what sort of service they needed.

On the surface, the present picture is very different. This is largely thanks to the efforts of users who started or joined organisations such as patient-support groups and tenant forums. These groups, and others like them, both provided support and campaigned for change. Consequently, there has been a radical shift, especially in the area of public-policy legislation. Service-user involvement is now routinely sought, and user participation is an integral part of most government guidance on health and social care. There has been a definite shift away from regarding

people as passive recipients of a service, and towards their active involvement in the service's design and delivery.

However, putting service-user involvement into practice can be a difficult and confusing process. There are issues over building relationships, continuity, and the use of staff time. There are also questions over whether users even want to be involved and, if so, to what degree. In order to provide meaningful user involvement, providers must be innovative and prepared to take risks. They must also be willing to pass over some of the organisation's power to its users. In order to do this effectively, providers need good-quality support, training and guidance.

Supporting People

From April 2003, the Supporting People programme introduced a new framework to fund, promote and improve the quality of housing-related support services in England. It is a system for planning, monitoring, and funding the support needs of vulnerable tenants, including young people, rough sleepers, older people, and ex-offenders.

Prior to the introduction of Supporting People, funding for supported housing was confused and difficult to co-ordinate. In the 1990s, the Audit Commission estimated that there were 20 separate systems funding housing-related support. Supporting People is intended to simplify the funding of services, and ensure that they are more flexible and responsive to people's needs.

One of the ways the Supporting People programme is evaluated and monitored is through the Quality Assessment Framework

(QAF). This is a set of nationally defined standards, along with guidance on how to apply and use these standards. It enables providers to self-assess their services. Within the QAF, there are four core and 13 supplementary service objectives. Although only the four core objectives are currently mandatory, it is important for services to start working towards the supplementary ones too.

The following supplementary objectives fall under the heading of 'Empowerment':

- informing service users
- consulting and involving service users
- empowerment and supporting independence
- participation in the wider community.

While these objectives focus explicitly on service-user involvement, they are intended to be relevant to the entire Supporting People programme. The requirement that service users be meaningfully involved in the planning and delivery of services is integral to nearly every objective.

This has created a new incentive to organisations to implement or improve service-user involvement. It is now very important to produce and keep any evidence of such involvement, as proof of reaching, or striving for, QAF standards. Local Supporting People teams will look for evidence that users are given good-quality information, and that they have opportunities to affect the services they receive. Evidence such as a user welcome pack, newsletters, posters, minutes of meetings, and surveys, will show that the organisation is working within the QAF framework.

What is user involvement?

Definitions

Broadly, 'user involvement' means that people who use a particular service are actively involved in how it is delivered. Involvement can range from simply being kept informed, and discussing relevant issues, to actually making decisions about the service.

It is important to be clear about the different types of user involvement so that staff and users have a shared understanding about what it is they are aiming for. There will always be debate about exact meanings, but these are the definitions that the Good Practice group found helpful.

Users

This is generally accepted as meaning people currently using the services of a project or scheme. However, some organisations may wish to involve potential service-users or the general public. Involving ex-users can be a way of getting feedback on the quality of the service, but can also encourage continuity within the group you are working with, and provide peer-group support for current users.

For the purpose of this guide, 'user' refers to a tenant, resident, or service user.

Information giving

Users are told what is going to happen once a decision is made. This is a basic level of involvement, and does not give users a chance to influence decisions.

Consultation

Users are asked to give their opinion, either face-to-face or in writing, or by some other means. The information gathered should be used to inform the way the service is run.

Participation

Users are meaningfully involved, encouraged to take part in the various stages of an activity or process, and have a say in final decisions.

User involvement

In the context of this guide, we use the term 'user involvement' to describe what happens when the people using a project have opportunities to influence such things as:

- the day-to-day running of the project
- how the project is managed
- the staffing of the project
- the range of services offered
- the way services are offered.

Sometimes the phrase 'user participation' is also used to describe this process. 'User consultation' is another term mentioned, but this normally refers to service users being asked their opinions, which may or may not then influence how a service works.

Benefits of user involvement

There are many benefits, to both organisation and service user.

These include:

- Improved scheme management, eg a manager receives ideas and feedback from users, and is therefore able to target the service more effectively.
- A more cost-effective service, eg residents are involved in decorating a hostel, giving them a sense of ownership and reducing likelihood of damage.
- Improved provider/user relationship, eg users have a better understanding of how the scheme operates and are more aware of constraints, such as finances.
- Better provider/user communication and understanding, eg regular meetings, newsletters, etc, create an ongoing relationship between staff and users.
- Increased user satisfaction, eg better information and understanding leads to residents having more of a say in what

affects them, and therefore an increased sense of ownership.

- Better community spirit, eg if both staff and users contribute to the idea and ethos of a scheme, and can see their ideas become reality, there will be greater sense of solidarity.
- Increased staff satisfaction, eg staff feel more confident that they are delivering what users want and, therefore, feel their own role is more worthwhile and fulfilling.
- Development of new skills, eg staff and users will be learning more participation skills, while users will also have the opportunity to find out more about how a scheme is run and what is involved.
- Contributing to the resettlement process, eg users are more confident and have developed more skills by the time they move on from the scheme. These are the most important and life-changing elements of a successful resettlement programme, but frequently the hardest to achieve.

Participation ladder

The model of a user-participation ladder, below, shows the different levels at which participation can operate.

Top rung

- Users have the authority to make all decisions
- Users have the authority to make some decisions
- Users have genuine opportunities to influence decisions
- Housing provider seeks users' views, then makes decision
- Housing provider explains decisions to users before acting
- Housing provider tells users what decisions have to be made

Bottom rung

Adapted from Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (Arnstein, 1969).

Challenges for user involvement

Working with homeless or temporarily housed service-users throws up a range of specific problems and challenges. The culture of user involvement in this area is still an emerging one, and staff may struggle for good-practice examples or for the support they need to persevere with what is often a difficult task. Clients may be hard to engage, and some will be dealing with personal issues that mean they do not have the time or energy to become actively involved. There is also the issue of user turnover, meaning that even the most active and engaged people move on sooner or later.

Some of the lower levels are not participation, as such, but simply consultation or information giving.

Different organisations will feel differently about where they want to be on this ladder. Overwhelmingly, the organisations that made up the Good Practice group wanted to be on the fourth rung, giving their users genuine opportunities to influence decisions. This is also the level that Supporting People encourages providers to aim for. Once organisations are working confidently at this level, there may also be scope for projects to move up to the next level.

Making user involvement work

Devising a strategy

A strategy for user involvement is the long-term plan that will help your organisation achieve its goals. It should encompass everything that will be done to involve users in the project and what your plans are for the lifetime of the strategy. It could include:

- lack of time
- lack of resources
- lack of information
- information that is difficult to access
- lack of interest
- lack of self confidence.

All these may apply to workers as well as residents.

Definition of service users

Who is the involvement strategy about? Current service-users only, potential service-users, the wider public?

Once particular barriers have been identified for your project, both organisation and staff team will need to be prepared to be creative and flexible in overcoming them. The aim is not only to improve your service but, also, to help your users develop those attributes that will be of most help to them in the resettlement process: self-confidence and self-esteem.

Definition of involvement

Define what you mean by 'involvement', from information giving to full participation. You could include the user-participation ladder to show what level of involvement is sought.

Diversity

Diversity and equal-opportunity issues need to be carefully considered when planning any work around user involvement. As a term, diversity has come to mean an equal respect for a wide range of peoples, values and ways of life. Among other attributes, it can refer to people's racial and ethnic background, their religious beliefs, their abilities and disabilities, and their sexuality. Promoting diversity is also about including groups that are socially excluded, such as rough sleepers and users of mental health services.

Purpose of user involvement

Existing Supporting People guidance (see Further reading, page 33) will provide you with a range of good reasons for involving users. However, it is essential that you agree why *your* staff team wants to involve users. Many of your reasons will probably match those in the guidance, but there may be particular issues for your project, such as specific needs of users. See Benefits of user involvement, page 7, for some suggestions.

Awareness of diversity should run through everything an organisation does, a bit like the lettering through a stick of rock. It should be reflected in the user welcome pack, in the way meetings are run, in posters and newsletters that are produced, as a crucial ingredient in ensuring user participation. It's important to consider not

Barriers to user involvement

Recognising the barriers to user involvement is a vital first step to overcoming them. Your staff team should undertake this exercise for themselves, but will be likely to identify some of the same factors as the Good Practice group:

- culture of the organisation

only present users, but also possible future service-users. You should review this area of the strategy frequently, incorporating users' feedback and experiences.

Below are some considerations raised in Good Practice group discussions about diversity:

- Materials should be made available on CD, video or audio tape, as well as in a written format.
- Posters, newsletters and other printed materials, should be illustrated with images that represent a wide range of people.
- Notice-boards should be at heights that are suitable for all potential users.
- Users' additional needs should be gauged before a meeting (eg lip readers will need people to look at them when talking).
- Suitable refreshments should be available for a range of diets (eg vegetarian and halal).
- There should be a quiet area for people to pray.
- Meetings should be held in buildings that are accessible to everyone.

Present situation

Identify current levels of user participation in your service, and outline any examples of good practice already in place that you can build upon.

Goals

Identify the main aims and specific plans for achieving your goals. It's also good practice to place them within a timescale. For example:

Aim

To develop staff training and support so that all staff across all services are able to help make participation happen.

Objectives/how

- Make sure that all staff have read and understood the strategy for user participation by September 2005.
- Conduct an audit of staff training needs around participation by October 2005.
- Commission a training programme, which will meet the needs revealed by the audit, by December 2005.
- Support staff so that they are meaningfully involved in staff training from December 2005 onwards.

Responsibilities

Everyone involved in the strategy, at any level, has a responsibility to ensure its successful implementation. This will certainly include:

- service users
- staff
- management.

Depending on how individual projects are structured, it may also include:

- training team (either external or internal)
- development team.

It is useful to detail exactly how these groups are going to help carry the strategy forward.

Evaluation and monitoring

Specify how, and by whom, the strategy will be evaluated and monitored. It is good practice to involve users in this process. For example:

- A group of staff (sourced from all levels of the organisation) and users could be recruited to check progress on the strategy at three-monthly intervals. The group would have the power to amend the strategy and make sure that it is kept fully up to date.
- The group will either produce a newsletter, or incorporate their findings into an existing newsletter. This will inform users, staff, and other interested groups and individuals, about the progress of the strategy.

Implementing the strategy

Strategies for user involvement will vary, depending on your service, its users, and their objectives, and user-involvement projects should be tailored accordingly. Some ideas for good practice are listed below.

User welcome pack

This is a term used for the introductory information given to a service user when they first have contact with a project. There are many different ways of presenting this information, and your staff team should decide which would be most appropriate for your service. Options could include:

- a Filofax-style wallet with inserts, which makes it easier to add new information and delete anything that is no longer relevant
- a booklet

- a newsletter format
- a poster, or series of posters put up on the wall
- a video, audio tape, or CD.

The contents of the pack will vary from project to project, but most will need to include:

- a welcome message to new users
- a service statement about the project (ie who you are, what your aims are, what sort of a service the user can expect from you)
- project information, including facilities available on site and nearby, and how to contact staff
- information on accommodation, focusing on what individual accommodation units are like
- licence and/or tenancy information. Staff should make users aware of the need to read and understand the terms of the agreement, and make sure they know that they are available to help them with this
- support contracts and plans, explaining the process, including the users' and provider's responsibilities
- Supporting People statement that clearly states that, under Supporting People guidelines, your project is obliged to offer a good level of service. Supporting People contact details and complaints procedure should be outlined clearly for users
- information about rent and direct charges, making it clear that users should inform staff of any changes in circumstance that might affect Housing Benefit

- service users' rights. Service users should be made aware of their conditional rights, eg the right to stay in the accommodation provided by the service unless they break the conditions in their licence or tenancy agreement
- a statement about equal opportunities or anti-oppressive practice, explaining what this means for your service in particular
- information on making a complaint. Detail the complaints procedure and make it clear that the user also has the right to complain to the Housing Ombudsman and the local Supporting People team
- exclusion or eviction procedure, explaining what the procedure is and how it may affect them.

Project example – Forum Housing

Forum Housing's welcome pack (titled 'All the basics about the place YOU live in one easy pack!') is presented on sheets of thin card, fastened together with a key ring. It is very colourful, illustrated with photographs and graphics throughout. An information symbol (an 'i' in a blue circle) can be found next to the headings on several pages. At the beginning of the pack, it is explained that this symbol 'means that there is further information available to you on the subject if you wish to know more. The leaflets will be available in all reception areas or from any member of staff.'

Forum Housing's Breakdown and Exclusion Policy is illustrated with photographs that represent subjects, such as 'vandalism' and 'threatening behaviour'. The photographs were

produced as part of a project that involved current residents contributing to the welcome pack.

Activities

The process of becoming actively involved in a project or service is usually a gradual one. Often, the first experience that users will have of participation is attending activities that are arranged by the project. Organising activities is a good first step to engage your users, because it builds relationships and users can see quickly what some of the benefits of working with the staff are. Activities may mean such events as:

- outings
- quiz nights
- sports-related activities
- musical events
- residentials
- training courses.

As users become more confident, they can begin to have a say in the kind of activities they are offered. This will involve becoming familiar with issues such as budgets, targets, and project management. In turn, this may lead them to take on a wider role.

Project example – SHAP

The Tenant Participation Worker (TPW) organised a mini-bus trip to the local fairground. The idea was to charge users half the cost (£7), but, since only three people could afford to pay, the charge was waived for everyone. Fourteen tenants came on the day, which cost the project £300.

On the way back, users filled in evaluation sheets about the activity. It

was clear they had enjoyed the day and would like to have more outings. The TPW then told them they would have to arrange a meeting in order to discuss how these would be organised and funded. It was made clear that, although project workers would help the service users and support the process, they would need to organise the trips themselves in future.

A group met to organise future activities, and gradually widened their area of involvement. They dealt with everything from youth disorder to delays in repairs, but had difficulty recruiting new members at first. The group decided to stage more events, such as a barbecue, in order to attract new people to the meetings. This strategy worked, as did the idea of sending out personal invitations to tenants.

Meetings

Meetings are a usual way of encouraging participation and involvement in a project. However, they are sometimes poorly attended, and service users complain frequently of not knowing how to contribute effectively. If you are having problems getting people along to meetings, consider the following points in your planning:

- Who called the meeting, you or the users? If you've called the meeting, are users completely clear what it's about?
- Were users made aware of the agenda in advance so that they could consider any contributions they would like to make?
- Could users call a meeting if they wanted to and, if so, would they know how?
- Are the aims of the meeting clear?
- Have you publicised the meeting effectively, particularly to users with special or additional needs?
- Have you checked that both the time and venue are suitable for users?
- Have you provided transport, refreshments, childcare, and other services that would make attending the meeting hassle-free?
- Have meetings in the past been called by the staff when they want to complain about something? Or have agendas been hijacked by staff, or users, as an opportunity to moan?

Control of the process

It is important that users have equal control of the meeting process. Being committed to involvement means understanding, and being willing to respond to, the immediate needs and concerns of users. Be aware that interests and concerns may differ for providers and service users. Make sure that users know that they have an equal right to instigate meetings, and that the service as a whole, not just individual members of staff, will take their concerns seriously.

Aims and objectives

Aims and objectives provide clarity and focus, and are essential in order to:

- define what the purpose of a meeting is
- help shape an outcome that is relevant to all participants
- make feedback easier for everyone to understand
- enable monitoring and evaluation.

They should be agreed to by both staff and service users.

Outcomes

It's important that some action is taken as a result of any meeting, and that what is going to happen is clear to everyone. Staff and users alike hate 'talking shops' that take up a lot of time and energy, yet don't have any tangible outcomes.

Make sure that the minutes of any meeting are distributed within a week. Attach an action list to them, stating:

- what action is to be taken
- what date it is to be taken by
- who is going to do it.

Publicising a meeting

People can't participate in something they either don't know about, or don't realise is relevant to them. If meetings are a regular way for staff of the project to communicate with users, then they should be referred to in the welcome pack and their importance made clear. If your project has either paid user-representatives or volunteers who are users, an essential part of their role will be to inform other users about the meeting process and support them through it. If you don't have representatives, your staff members need to fulfil this function.

Notice-boards should publicise upcoming meetings in plenty of time, so that everyone has an opportunity to contribute to the agenda. Users may be more likely to attend if an individual invitation is delivered to their door.

User-friendly meetings

Users shouldn't have to struggle to get to a meeting. Getting the venue and timing of meetings right is vital in order to get as many people as possible to attend, and to make sure that no-one

is excluded. It is crucial to consult your service users, and, if attendance is low, keep consulting. Some things to bear in mind, when organising a meeting, are:

- **Length of meetings** – Long meetings wear people out, and it's often possible to get just as much done in a shorter time if you are focused. Allow a maximum of 10 minutes for each agenda item and, if it takes any longer, consider scheduling another meeting to deal with that particular issue. Whoever chairs the meeting needs to be firm in moving the meeting along.
- **Venue** – If it's not possible to hold the meeting at the project, it should be held nearby or transport provided. Make sure that the venue is fully accessible for disabled people, looking at facilities such as induction loops, as well as wheelchair access. Make sure seating is comfortable and the room is neither too hot nor too cold. Meetings held in dingy, dirty surroundings are unlikely to make people feel valued.
- **Refreshments** – It's courteous, as well as good practice, to make sure that participants have something to eat and drink. Water should be on hand throughout, but it's best to serve the main refreshments either halfway through, or at the end of the meeting. If you serve it before the meeting, you may lose people before the meeting starts. Bear in mind that people might have particular dietary requirements.
- **Childcare/care for dependents** – Remember that this may be a problem for some participants. It might mean providing a crèche at the same premises as the meeting, or paying for a sitter or carer for the duration of the meeting.

Project example –

Leeds Simon Community

The Simon Community in Leeds works with some of the hardest-to-reach groups in society, including street homeless people and those who use hostels intermittently. In order to get users' feedback on their services, they have developed meetings where venue, timing, and refreshments are tailored to their users' needs.

In practice, this has meant holding them in fast-food restaurants in the evenings. No formal written invitations are issued, but word is passed on through the hostels and on the street. Staff provide some of the agenda items, but users are encouraged to add their own concerns. A meal and a drink are provided for those attending the meeting. The aim of each meeting is to come up with an action list, detailing practical ways that services will be improved.

On average, 20 users attend, and staff have found that they need to be flexible in allowing the meetings to be long enough for everyone to feel that they have had a fair say.

Project example – SHAP

One of the tasks of a SHAP Tenancy Support Worker (TSW) is to organise meetings with tenants of their supported housing. Most of these are young people aged 18 to 25. Rather than compiling a list of headings, the TSW worked with one of the young people to devise an agenda that would be more meaningful to participants. This was distributed in advance of the meeting and helped to explain what would be discussed. This is how it was written:

'Funding – Bill will talk about how much we have in our budget, what the money can be spent on and what it cannot be spent on. He will talk about how the budget came about. He will also talk about what funds we can access and how long they will take to clear.

Barbecue – For this part of the meeting we will discuss what we will be cooking and who will be cooking it. We will talk about what other activities we can take part in while we are there, eg games or a video.

Gardening and painting suggestions – This is the chance for us to make suggestions about how to refurbish our gardens, and vamp up dull blocks and hard-to-reach places in our homes. We will have to take into account what funds we can access.'

The young people who attended the meeting found that they got more out of it by having this information in advance. They were able to think through any contribution they wanted to make, and felt more comfortable knowing what issues would be raised.

Project example –

The Whitechapel Centre

The Whitechapel Centre decided to consult with rough sleepers, to find out what the barriers were to individuals coming indoors and being included. From 10pm, they opened the centre overnight for a series of consultation exercises. They provided hot food and a warm place to rest. To enhance the consultation process, simultaneous outreach work was undertaken on the street to bring rough sleepers indoors.

The consultation process involved a series of agreed interview questions determining individual need and how best to address this. In order to respond directly to the reported and assessed need, help was available at the meetings. This included the provision of temporary accommodation, initial registration, and assessment for longer-term accommodation.

Later nights were themed around different issues, including the awareness of mental, physical and sexual health. These nights were facilitated by mental health agencies, medical staff, and professional drama groups.

The events were well-attended, with between 25 and 43 rough sleepers attending each of the nights. A total of 31 rough sleepers came indoors, moving into temporary accommodation. All of the individuals were immediately guaranteed intensive daily support from a named worker, to help them move into and maintain their tenancies.

An overwhelming majority of participants took the opportunity to engage with the mental and physical health services that were provided during these nights.

Residents' representatives

Having resident or user representatives can encourage user involvement in different ways, reaching people who do not like participating in meetings and providing a focus for all service-user issues and activities.

Project example – FORUM

Paid residents' representatives

Forum Housing decided to employ residents' representatives within its projects because they recognised that the balance of power was overwhelmingly weighted towards staff. The idea behind this was to give young people a fair voice. Comic Relief funded two representatives for a period of three years, each for 25 hours per week. Recruitment was designed to be inclusive and young-person-friendly, and both the successful candidates came from Forum's own projects. This representatives project began in January 2003, and Forum feels it has been so successful in encouraging user participation that they want to make the posts permanent.

After consultation with users, residents' representatives have initiated projects, including:

Speak Ezy – a refurbished shop that now provides a meeting-and-activities space for all of Forum's residents. Residents are welcome to book the space or lead groups there, and it is fitted out with computers, kitchen facilities, and a TV and video. The shop was decorated and furnished by users.

The Speak Out strategy – a comprehensive tenants' participation and consultation strategy.

Residents' panel – a new way of organising the residents' committee, making it more structured, interesting, and rewarding for those who attend. Incentives include training, activity days, youth exchanges, and a chance to get involved in drama and music projects.

Project example – Novas-Ouvertures

Volunteer residents' representatives

Novas has actively encouraged the recruitment of residents' representatives at a number of their projects. These representatives act as advocates for individuals, and liaise with staff locally and at an organisational level. Their roles vary from project to project, but, they may articulate complaints or represent other service-users as advocates at appeal. Anecdotal evidence has shown that residents are quick to take their problems and queries to the representative, enabling issues to be raised immediately rather than having to wait until the next residents' meeting.

A survey conducted for Novas concluded that most service users knew who their representatives were and agreed that they represented their interests. However, the survey also highlighted some confusion over their role, with some service users seeing them as a friend rather than a spokesperson. As their report 'Have we got views for you' states: 'This can lead to conflicts of interest and unreasonable demands on individual reps.' Appropriate training and strong support is therefore essential for representatives in order to help them deal with the complex demands of the role.

Resettlement

Involving users in the delivery of resettlement services can improve their effectiveness and help with tenancy sustainment. It can also help to develop the scope of such services, encouraging users to form self-help groups and, perhaps, befriending services for new

project users. Ex-residents of hostels or supported housing have an important role to play in highlighting areas of the service that could be improved, and suggesting ways that this can be accomplished.

User involvement in resettlement helps participants develop into strong, confident people who are not afraid to make decisions or express opinions. Actively involving them in the project will take them a long way towards developing the skills they need.

Project example – St Basil's

St Basil's runs its resettlement project from a base in Birmingham city centre. The project works with new tenants and those struggling with a tenancy. When it was refurbished in 2001, users were consulted on the new design. Importantly, they wanted to have open space for training and meetings but also smaller, more intimate areas in which people could feel their privacy was respected. The facility also has chill-out spaces and a breakfast bar.

The centre provides a range of services for young people aged 16 to 25. These include advice, advocacy and counselling related to housing and independent living, access to a mental health worker, a family mediation service, and access to furniture and household goods. Laundry, shower, and cooking facilities are also provided. A number of training courses are on offer, too, and users have the opportunity to suggest what is covered. The current 'driving theory' course was requested by a number of users.

Regular drop-in meetings, with lunch provided, are a feature of the centre. At these meetings, users are

encouraged to talk about the services provided by St Basil's and discuss ways of improving them. Any action taken is reported back to the meetings and posted on notice-boards.

Part of the function of the centre is to empower young people to support each other. A youth-befriending group has been set up, which aims to help those struggling with homelessness, and those in hostels or other temporary housing. Young people can also receive help and support from the group on the internet or by email.

Consultation

Questionnaires and surveys

These are useful consultation tools. They do not need to be complicated or long-winded, and should be easy for people to complete and return. Exit questionnaires are a way of gauging a user's experience of the project, and are an essential tool for improving services. Satisfaction surveys show you which areas of your project are working well and which need more attention.

People are used to grading things numerically, and you could use scales of five (1-5), seven (1-7) or 10 (1-10), the lowest figure indicating extreme dissatisfaction and the highest perfect satisfaction. As a simpler method, you could use smiley faces: a smile to indicate satisfaction, a straight mouth to mean improvements could be made, and a down-turned mouth to indicate dissatisfaction. Beware of making the faces any more complicated than this, or it could be difficult for users to know what they represent.

The results of a questionnaire or survey are only a first step towards improving services for your users. In order to

make lasting changes, the organisation will have to commit to taking findings seriously. The survey is not an end in itself, but a starting-point for deciding what action needs to be taken.

Project example – St Basil's

St Basil's frequently uses questionnaires to check how its services are perceived by users. These can be returned, either with contact details or anonymously. At the resettlement centre, responses are posted to issues raised in anonymous questionnaires on the 'check back board', to ensure that users know their concerns are being dealt with. If questionnaires are not anonymous, a worker will contact the user to discuss the issues raised.

Suggestion boxes

Suggestion boxes should be placed where they are easily accessible, although users may also want them to be located where confidentiality is assured. Instructions for using the box should be written on it, or close to it. The box should be locked, and only designated members of staff, residents' representatives, or a neutral agency should have access to it. Suggestions should be acted on promptly to reassure users that their suggestions are being taken seriously, and to ensure ongoing participation.

Project example – Phoenix House

Phoenix House is a project catering for people with substance or alcohol abuse problems, and problems related to their abuse. Inner Action, a local service-user advocacy group, empties the suggestion box in their centre on a regular basis. Inner Action also holds meetings with users so that they can make comments or complaints. They then write a report

about the concerns raised both through the comments box and the meetings, and this is passed on to the project's manager. Action taken as a result of the report is fed back by the manager, both to Inner Action staff and to the users.

Project example – Forum Housing

The suggestion boxes in Forum Housing projects can only be opened by the residents' representatives. Once a month, representatives meet with the Deputy Chief Executive to talk about concerns voiced by residents. Seven days are allowed for action, because specific issues may be delegated to other managers. Users are then contacted individually and told what action will be taken. If suggestions were anonymous, outcomes are fed back to all users through meetings and newsletters.

Notice-boards

Notice-boards should be prominent and placed in areas where people gather or pass by regularly. Make notices eye-catching, interesting and easy to read. Moving notices around the board will help to maintain interest. Removing out-of-date notices will stop the notice-board becoming stale or uninteresting.

Another variant is the 'graffiti board', where users can write comments or questions. Staff or other users can reply, developing a dialogue that will help to inform the project's work.

User representation on committees

Being included in committees allows users to feel that they have a real voice in how a service is delivered, and that the organisation trusts and has confidence in them. Users will be helping to make decisions on how thousands or even millions of pounds are spent, and steering the fundamental direction of the project. In order to wield this considerable power meaningfully, appropriate training must be provided for users. This can require users to give up a considerable amount of their time, so it's important that they are supported well and remunerated fairly.

It can be isolating and intimidating to be the only user representative, or one of very few, on a committee or board. It also means that, if one representative leaves, there may be a considerable gap before someone else is recruited. If only very few users are interested in getting involved at this level, you could consider recruiting ex-users as well.

It is important that representation at this level is not merely tokenistic. If your organisation is unable to provide the finance and support needed to ensure that representatives are equipped to contribute, you will need to think of other ways to involve them. There are many ways to do this:

- Representatives could present the opinions or ideas of the user group in writing.
- Representatives could attend meetings, or parts of meetings, as and when there is something they wish to be involved in.

- Committee members could attend user meetings on a regular basis.
- The project could run annual events where users and committee members discuss the future of the service.
- A key staff-member could meet with the users to discuss items on the agenda before each committee or board meeting. That staff member could then attend the committee meeting and feed in the views of the resident group.
- Two panels can be assembled, one consisting of professionals and the other of users. Both groups can prepare their own questions and feel confident that their feedback will be given equal consideration.

Staff recruitment and training

User involvement in the recruitment and training of staff is now more common than it used to be, although it is still not widespread in supported housing settings. This may be due in part to high, user turnover. To ensure that the users' contribution is seen to be as valuable as that of staff members and other professionals, it is essential that participants are trained and fully briefed. It is good practice to pay users for their contribution, and, if they are delivering training, they should command a rate comparable to any other external trainer.

Users can get involved in the recruitment of staff in a variety of ways:

- They can help compile the job specification for any role, listing the qualities they feel are important in a worker.
- They can be included on the recruitment panel, devising questions and interviewing candidates. This can be quite stressful and demanding, so it's good practice to include more than one user to provide support for each other.

Glossary

A quick guide to some of the words and phrases that are employed in the context of user involvement.

Levels of involvement

- **Information giving** – This is when users are told what is going to happen once a decision is made. This is a basic level of involvement, and does not permit users to influence decisions.
- **Consultation** – This is when users are asked to give their opinion on something, either face-to-face, in writing, or by some other means. The information gathered should be used to inform the way the service is run.
- **Participation** – This is when users are meaningfully involved, are encouraged to take part in the various stages of an activity or process, and have a say in decisions.

User meeting

A meeting held for the benefit of all service users. Users should be involved in their organisation. The meetings may be formal or informal, and address day-to-day service or project issues. A chairperson and agenda should be decided, and minutes with an action list should be recorded.

User forum

These are more formal than user meetings, and may involve representatives from two or more user meetings. Forums are often established to focus on specific issues. They may be able to make recommendations to the main decision-making body or to a user committee.

User committee

A group of members that carry out work on behalf of other users. The members tend to be elected, and have the authority to make decisions. Committees may arrange forums

or meetings, and are responsible for making sure that decisions are acted upon. They usually have an agreed constitution, terms of reference, and code of conduct, and are accountable to the project or service. Committees influence decisions at a wider level and on a more long-term basis.

Issue-based meetings, forums and committees

These are useful tools for responding to specific concerns of service users. They can be particularly useful when working with transient client groups. They can increase involvement from individuals who may otherwise be excluded, and can make meetings more relevant to users. They should be time-limited, focused and targeted.

Aims

An aim is a broad statement of what you are hoping to achieve. For example: 'We aim to work with our users to produce a user-involvement strategy by the end of the year.'

Objectives

These are specific goals that lead to you achieving your overall aim. For example: 'We will develop and distribute a service-user satisfaction survey.'

Outputs

An output is something that happens or is produced as a result of changing or improving your services. For example, a service-user welcome pack would be an output if developed in response to a service-user satisfaction survey.

Outcomes



An outcome is the result of an intervention you make. An outcome from the above output could be that users, when surveyed, were happier with the service than they were before.

Templates

In this section of the guide, we have reproduced templates that we hope will support you in promoting user involvement. They have already been used successfully by members of the Good Practice group, and can help you with developing a portfolio of evidence for Supporting People.

You can adapt the templates for your own use, and they can be customised to your organisation's identity. They may be used as they are, or you can take the basic idea and be as creative as you like with them.

Activity evaluation form

| |
|---|
| Activity: |
| Project: |
| Date: |
| 1 How good was the activity you have just completed?  1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  (1 = not very good, 10 = very good) |
| 2 Would you like to do this activity again? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 What did you get out of this activity? |
| 4 What kind of activities would you like to do in the future? |

Thanks for your feedback.

Activity outline

| |
|--|
| Provider / Housing Association / RSL name: |
| Name of activity: <i>Example: Gardening Project</i> |
| Aim: <i>Example: To create a relaxing outdoor environment for users of the project</i> |
| Objectives: <i>Example: Team building, learning horticultural skills, learning planning skills, learning budgeting skills</i> |
| Proposed outcomes: <i>Example: Project users will acquire and demonstrate the skills needed to plan and cost a project. They will demonstrate a basic knowledge of gardening, and will create a relaxing outdoor environment</i> |
| Who are involved? (include staff and users' names): |
| Brief description of activity: |

Activity evaluation

| |
|--|
| Provider / Housing Association / RSL name: |
| Name of activity: <i>Example: Gardening Project</i> |
| Evaluation report date: |
| Pages: |
| Signed: |
| Report: <i>Include project details, user numbers, project progression towards planned targets, and any plans for ongoing or follow-up work</i> |
| Next report due: |

Residents' meeting

Speak out at the residents' meeting.

Please write down any issues you would like to raise at the next residents' meeting.

Make sure **you** have **your** say!

Residents' meeting

The next residents' meeting is on



at

in the



Have your say!





User invitation





You are invited to the user involvement meeting
on: _____
at: _____
in: _____
Have your say – hope to see you there!





You are invited to the user involvement meeting
on: _____
at: _____
in: _____
Have your say – hope to see you there!



You are invited to the user involvement meeting
on: _____
at: _____
in: _____
Have your say – hope to see you there!



You are invited to the user involvement meeting
on: _____
at: _____
in: _____
Have your say – hope to see you there!



You are invited to the user involvement meeting
on: _____
at: _____
in: _____
Have your say – hope to see you there!

Meeting agenda

| |
|--|
| Provider / Housing Association / RSL name: |
| Meeting date: |
| Meeting time: |
| Meeting venue: |
| Chairperson: |
| Items for discussion at today's meeting: 1 Minutes of the last meeting 2 Matters arising from the minutes |
| 3 |
| 4 |
| 5 |

Break

| |
|-----------------------|
| 6 |
| 7 |
| 8 |
| 9 |
| 10 Any other business |

Have your say!

Suggestion box form

The suggestion box is here to give all residents a chance to make suggestions that might help improve the project.

Please do not use this form for your complaints. If you need to make a complaint, please contact any member of staff instead.

If you would like a reply to your suggestion, please leave your name and address, and we'll get back to you.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Please write your suggestion here. Continue overleaf if you need to.

Have your say!

Service improvement questionnaire

1 Are you happy with the service that you receive from this project?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Please tell us why, or why not:

2 Do you feel able to see a worker

■ quickly if you need to? Yes ☐ No ☐

■ as often as you need to? Yes ☐ No ☐

■ for as long as you need to? Yes ☐ No ☐

3 Can you talk to your worker about your circumstances and the issues you're facing?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If not, why do you think this is?

4 Are you happy with the time of day you usually meet your worker?

Yes ☐ No ☐

5 Do you feel that you are being supported well?

Yes ☐ No ☐

6 Do you know how to make a complaint about the project?









Yes ☐ No ☐

7 Do you have any ideas for improving the project's services? If so, please describe here.

Thank you for your help.

Exit questionnaire

We use this questionnaire for important feedback from you when you leave the project. By completing the questionnaire, you will be helping us to improve the project for other young people, as well as for yourself if you return.

| |
|---|
| <p>1 How long have you lived in the project?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> less than a month <input type="checkbox"/> one to three months <input type="checkbox"/> four to six months <input type="checkbox"/> seven months to one year <input type="checkbox"/> one to two years <input type="checkbox"/> two to three years <input type="checkbox"/> more than three years</p> |
| <p>2 Which project have you been living at?</p> |
| <p>3 How satisfied were you with your accommodation? Please circle the relevant number.</p> <p> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  (1 = very unsatisfied, 10 = very satisfied)</p> <p>Any comments?</p> |
| <p>4 How satisfied are you with the services provided by the project?</p> <p> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  (1 = very unsatisfied, 10 = very satisfied)</p> <p>Any comments?</p> |
| <p>5 How satisfied are you with the level of support you have received from project staff?</p> <p> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  (1 = very unsatisfied, 10 = very satisfied)</p> <p>Any comments?</p> |
| <p>6 How satisfied were you with the opportunities you had to air your views? This includes invitations to residents' meetings, involvement with focus groups, meetings with Resident Representatives, etc.</p> <p> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  (1 = very unsatisfied, 10 = very satisfied)</p> <p>Any comments?</p> |
| <p>7 Please tell us any concerns you have had about your stay.</p> |
| <p>8 Please tell us anything you've particularly enjoyed about the project and your stay.</p> |
| <p>9 Have you got any questions that you would like us to answer? If so, please write your question here, along with your contact address and phone number.</p> |

Please continue overleaf if necessary. When completed, please place this form in the suggestion box.

Thank you for your feedback.

Further reading

Godfrey, M, *et al* (May 2003),
*Supporting People: a guide to user
involvement for organisations providing
housing related services*, ODPM.

*Have we got views for you!?: service
user involvement in supported housing*
(2000), Novas-Ouvertures Group.

Project details

Forum Housing

Forum Housing is a registered social landlord (RSL) and a provider of supported housing to young, single people aged 16 to 24. It has properties throughout the Merseyside region. Its aim is to provide accommodation and support to young people in order to help them realise their potential. Young people have a big voice within Forum and a significant effect on the service delivery.

Leeds Simon Community

Leeds Simon Community is a small group of volunteers, providing emotional and practical support to people who are homeless and living on the streets. Its members are committed to working with rough sleepers, especially those who cannot or will not access existing provision.

Novas-Ouvertures

Novas-Ouvertures is a group of social businesses that provides a range of services including housing, community development and social care. The group comprises 15 member organisations whose services include work with rough sleepers, homeless families, asylum seekers, young people, and people with offending histories.

Phoenix House

Phoenix House is a project catering for people with substance or alcohol abuse problems. Based in the Wirral, it does not offer an alcohol detoxification programme, but provides counselling services and assessments for residential rehabilitation.

St Basil's

St Basil's, based in Birmingham, is one of the largest agencies in the UK working with young people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. It provides a range of services that cover accommodation, including housing aid, homelessness prevention, and resettlement for young people moving towards independence.

SHAP

SHAP is a supported housing provider that has been providing services for young and vulnerable people in Merseyside since 1981. It specialises in making high-quality supported accommodation available to people who are homeless, in housing need or experiencing disruption and difficulty in their lives. Its support programme gives young people a period of stability, enabling them to gain the confidence, knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to take control of their lives and live independently.

Whitechapel Centre

The Whitechapel Centre works with homeless people in Liverpool, over the age of 16, who need help in order to live independent lives. It manages various properties and provides a range of support services to tenants, with a view to encouraging independence and helping to break cycles of recurrent homelessness.

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SEPYPT623

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