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Wales Mental Health  
and Wellbeing Forum

# Improving 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations who support Representatives

**Wales Mental Health and Wellbeing Forum**

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## Introduction

This report is about the service user and carer engagement Service Level Agreements (SLAs) awarded to third sector organisations. The SLAs are in place to support the local involvement of service users and carers in the following activities:- service evaluation; board, committee and group involvement; co-production of service change and development; and service user and carer led research into service user and carer views about statutory and third sector services.

This subject regarding 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations supporting engagement, was raised at the very first NPB in December 2013 that was attended by forum representatives. The Forum authored a paper at that time highlighting similar issues. The differences and problems with third sector support are something we have discussed at every forum since then when reporting back on local progress. We have raised this now so that co-produced solutions can be included in the draft guidance for consultation.

Services across Wales depend on the culture of the organisations delivering them, and on the attitudes, values and approaches of the individuals employed to support the representatives. As a result, there is huge variation between different areas. The SLAs set up by the Health Boards also vary.

We believe that Third sector organisations are there to facilitate and support, rather than manage or direct service user and carer representatives, to ensure they have a genuine, independent voice and influence.

Health Board's role is to work with service users and carers by listening, considering and co-producing work to improve services with service users and carers. They are expected to work in partnership with service users and carers directly without working through proxies. Service users and carers should be at all the meetings. It is not appropriate for third sector SLA staff to attend on behalf of representatives or to speak for them without the consent of service user and carer representatives, even if they are service users or carers themselves.

Lack of transparency and engagement with local service users and carers in the commissioning of these third sector services carries the risk of people losing trust in the process and developing suspicions about the integrity of the organisations involved. It also prevents a realistic understanding of what is and is not a legitimate use of SLA funds. The forum is very keen to see more financial transparency in how funds are allocated and used.

As a result, there are some very negative experiences, and comments regarding 3rd Sector Engagement Holders balanced by some more positive experiences. Some individual personal views are given in the appendix to illustrate the wide range of opinions expressed by members. The paper itself focuses on constructive suggestions to improve the current situation.

## Current Situation

There is a huge range in experiences of third sector support, between organisations and within organisations between individual support staff. This goes from excellent relationships which stimulate fierce loyalty to the organisation and individual staff within it, to passionate anger, with loss of trust and respect for the organisation and its staff.

## Good examples

Third sector support staff are putting considerable resources into developing the ability and confidence of people who can then become representatives.

Third sector organisations are facilitating the successful development of a range of support organisations and services led by service users.

Third sector organisations work with representatives to run consultation events.

Relationships with individual service users and carers are very positive and supportive.

Third sector support representatives in some areas to be involved in the selection of staff who work with service users and carers directly, such as health Board Staff.

In one area the communication between meetings is supported by a WhatsApp group set up by the representatives.

Over the years some organisations have supported representatives by organising local service user and carer groups through which the representatives can get opinions and to whom they can report back the results of their work.

Representatives have been involved with a wide range of engagement opportunities including staff training, facilitating workshops, giving presentations, and conducting service evaluations and audits, and researching service user and carer views.

Over the years representatives have been involved in recruiting new LPB representatives. In the best practice example, the existing reps, wrote the job description and the interview questions, did the shortlisting,

and were involved in the interviewing process. (This took place without a third sector staff member on the panel although there was a health Board member present).

In other areas the decision-making on panels has been entirely the responsibility of service users and carers

In some areas representatives feel heard in meetings

In some areas representatives are free to communicate with any of the other committee, board or group members between meetings.

In some areas representatives can see how their contribution has made a difference to the work of Partnership Boards and other committees, groups and organisations.

## Poor examples

The number of representatives in each area is variable. Who makes the decision as to the number of representatives or their geographical location is not always transparent.

The application process and appointment of representatives is not always transparent.

Service users and carers are not always/in all areas, being involved in the selection of 3<sup>rd</sup> sector staff who support representatives.

The selection of staff who support representatives is not always transparent, and therefore there are doubts about the fairness and legitimacy of the process.

Service user and carer led initiatives are being taken over by third sector staff.

There is a lack of transparency and accountability in how the contracted hours of 3<sup>rd</sup> sector staff who support service user and carer representatives are used, how the contract is monitored and quality assured, and what the performance criteria, and job description for the posts are.

At times in some areas there have been long term vacancies for the service user and carer representative support post.

Sometimes the post is then delegated to existing staff on top of their other responsibilities, meaning that the full resource is not available as contractually intended.

Concerns have been raised that there is a conflict of interest where 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations who are also service providers apply for the SLA for service user and carer engagement.

Some Forum members feel that the NHS also has a conflict of interests in awarding this SLA, and that other LPB partners should be involved in a more arm's length application and selection process.

Representatives in some areas are 'dismissed' without notice despite being active and effective, without any transparency around how these decisions are made, or without giving any clear justification. Reps need transparency and forward planning, so that they know what to expect, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that those making the decisions are seeking to exclude effective representatives as a way of repressing challenge and avoiding the need to take account of service user and carer views.

In some areas there are not equal opportunities for representatives to take part in things, as opportunities appear to be preferentially allocated to particular individuals. It can feel like people are chosen because they agree with staff members.

Third sector staff in some areas are attending meetings instead of service users and carers, and excluding them from contributing. This has gone so far as agendas and minutes of these meetings not being shared.

In some areas SLA staff are seeking to create a coherent message from service users and carers which then does not represent the range of views that exist, and which could be influenced by the views of the SLA staff themselves.

Poor networking and information sharing results in failure to let service users and carers know of opportunities to participate, share knowledge and influence.

Some service users and carers feel they are better heard at boards, meetings and groups where the third sector engagement SLA staff are not present.

Some engagement SLA staff are using their role to promote their own opinions

Sometimes SLA staff promote the interests of their own organisation

Representatives are not always involved in recruiting new representatives.

In some places the third sector decide at every meeting who attends which meeting, or if anyone attends at all.

In some areas, communication between support organisation staff and the representatives is extremely poor, with representatives not being notified of up-coming meetings. The reps feel excluded when this happens as the service user and carer voice is not heard.

Representatives are threatened with dismissal in some areas should they talk directly with Health Board staff.

One organisation has reduced the criteria for representation compared to all other areas from having used services within the last 5 years, to having used services within 2 years.

One health board area has no LMHPB service user and carer representatives

Third sector in some areas have closed down active service user and carer meetings where local service users and carers can have an influence on the work of the representatives

There is poor balance of time allocated to service user and carer comments compared to other agenda items in some meetings.

Commitments to support groups of representatives to develop independence are not being honoured.

Rewards for representatives vary between organisations. Sometimes it appears that funds dedicated to paying service user and carer expenses are being used for other things.

When reps are paid there is a lack of flexibility regarding the number of hours representatives work in some areas.

In some organisations, representatives must ask 'permission' from the third sector organisation before attending a meeting, event or conference.



SLA's in some areas are being changed mid-term to include or move exclusively towards supporting the engagement of Children and Young People rather than adults. This is in effect a cut in provision for engagement of adults.

Support offered for enabling support SLAs to become service user and carer led has been withdrawn in some areas.

## **Our vision and ambitions for 3rd sector support**

As a result of the collective experience of the forum and research into best practice in supporting engagement across the world we have laid out our vision and ambition for support services below.

It is important to highlight the potential and essential role of supporting organisations to develop and coordinate local engagement with a wider group of service users and carers to inform the work of representatives.

# Provision of support for representatives prior to and during meetings

## 1. Representatives can expect the following support

### 1.1) Resources

- Ensure representatives have access to the following resources
  - Printing equipment/costs
  - IT equipment to access emails and meetings
  - Internet access costs
  - Software
  - Stationery costs
  - Telephone costs where required
  - Funding to pay for training to meet needs identified
  - Funding to attend relevant conferences
  - Travel and subsistence costs
- It has been suggested that these costs be a ring-fenced budget heading within engagement SLAs.
- Representatives need email addresses specifically for this work to avoid difficulties over sharing personal addresses.

### 1.2) Arranging Meetings (including Health Boards)

- Consider availability of representatives for smaller/local groups e.g. under 10 people
- Ensure sufficient notice of meetings (at least 2 weeks) through a variety of methods.
- Ideally meetings will be scheduled for the coming 12 months.
- Consider the timing of meetings to allow for premeeting and to avoid traffic.
- Ensure papers are received in good time (at least one week in advance) in the format required
- Papers are sent direct to representatives and not via third sector organisations
- Where a support organisation also organises service user and carer groups, ensure that they have an opportunity to discuss papers prior to main meeting

- One contact person arranging each meeting so that messages are complete and consistent
- Do not use outlook for communications with representatives, unless you also provide them with the software to read it

### 1.3) Preparation for all Meetings – This can be done through a pre-meeting:

- Ensure understanding of papers
- Discuss issues raised
- Reps practice putting views across
- Reps prepare for challenges to their views
- Provide necessary technical equipment and support/training (when required)
- Ensure representatives have everything they need for meetings including reminders of time and date

### 1.4) Personal Support

- Wellbeing checks
- Help with self-management when needed
- Skills and ability check e.g. consider training needs such as self-organisation, travel support and remuneration
- Expenses paid at meetings
- Dealing with personality clashes
- Building relationships with partner representatives
- Dealing with power imbalance
- Dealing with complaints between representatives
- Raising concerns
- Team building and development of ground rules
- More experienced representatives are needed to support new representatives. This requires terms of office long enough to cover if there is low availability of new representatives.

### 1.5) Expectations During Meetings

- Where possible meet and greet reps prior to meeting

- Individual additional needs are accommodated
- Refreshments e.g. at least tea, coffee and water
- Support service users and carers to present the views of absent representatives
- Ensure equal value given to representative voice
- Treat everyone with dignity and respect
- Ground rules are displayed at the beginning of each meeting and followed by all group members

## 2. Post Meeting Expectations

### 2.1) Provision of support for representatives after meetings

- Support representatives to report back on meeting outcomes
- Support representatives in any actions they are involved in
- Timely distribution of meeting minutes
- Debrief and wellbeing check ideally through a group meeting
- One to one support if needed

## 3. Communication between meetings

- Support organisation does not act as an intermediary between representatives and other committee members and stakeholders
- Representatives have a right to speak to organisations and committee members and stakeholders directly
- Support organisations provide support but do not influence the messages from representatives
- Representatives do not necessarily need to agree with each other
- Where requested provide support to representatives to communicate with committee members and stakeholders
- Any meetings about representation must include representatives
- Representatives should be able to have meetings without third sector support if they choose to.

## 4. Recruitment of Representatives

- Terms of office;
  - reflect the complexity of the role,
  - the need to get to know the business,

- to develop effectiveness,
- time to practice at peak performance,
- and time to pass on knowledge and experience to new representatives.
- A notice period of 6 months or at least 2 LPB meetings is given if a representative's term of office is to end.
- A team of representatives is never replaced in one go, to ensure the passing on of knowledge and expertise to incoming reps, and to ensure that there are always experienced and effective reps on the LPBs
- Some reps feel there should be representation from every local authority area. Given the differences in population and accessibility of meeting venues this is difficult in some areas, where there may be a dearth of activists.
- Decisions about minimum terms of office are made nationally by the Forum and can be exceeded locally but not reduced.
- At least 2 service users and 2 carers are appointed as representatives to each LPB.
- To increase transparency and reduce the risk of conflict of interest by third sector organisations, decisions about terms of office and replacement of Reps are made by the whole Partnership Board, including service users and carer reps, preferably as a part of a local engagement strategy agreed by the board.
- There is a fair and dignified exit strategy, when a rep's term of office comes to an end, which may include keeping them on to mentor newly appointed representatives.

## 5. Other Considerations

- There should be transparency about budget allocations for mental health involvement both in the third sector and in other organisations.
- Budgets for activities should be transparent and decisions about how money is used should be made with local service users and carers.
- Robust policy for dealing with Bullying and Harassment including investigation and action (see WMHWF example)

- A clear and accessible policy to deal with Grievances and Complaints including about third sector support organisations, through an independent process
- Support organisations will support representatives to engage with other local service users and carers in the community
- Service user and carer representatives are encouraged to take the initiative to arrange their own work, for example by way of action plans.
- Support organisations will support representatives to undertake opinion research on mental health services in the area e.g. development and analysis of surveys
- Support individuals to participate in recruitment processes
- Ensuring proper representation by service users and carers in any meeting about engagement
- Service users and carers should be involved in choosing which representatives attend which meetings through expressions of interest
- There need to be back up representatives should a representative not be able to attend a meeting
- Some meetings, such as sub-groups, are attended by people who are not LPB representatives. The LPB representatives need to know who these people are and have the opportunity to check in with them, to be informed about what is happening in their area.
- Service users and carers are acknowledged for work undertaken
- Service users and carers are invited to any evaluation of their own work
- Service users and carers are involved in the awarding and determination of performance targets as well as the annual evaluation of SLAs for third sector support organisations and individual performance of the third sector staff who work directly with them.
- Service users and carers are involved in the selection of staff who will be supporting representatives, including when this is an internal reallocation of roles or a promotion from voluntary work. This is required to ensure the process is open, fair and transparent and to ensure the appointment meets the needs of the representatives.

## Summary

Service users and carers want a much more co-productive role in the determination of the SLAs for service user and carer engagement and in the selection of the staff who work with them through those SLAs. They want equitable resources compared to other partner organisations/staff, appropriate support for their role, and to be able to provide a voice which is entirely independent of any external influence (including from the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector), which is genuinely originating from service users and carers without going through any proxy individual or organisation.

They also want fair conditions of work, which reward their commitment and experience and provide a dignified and positive exit strategy, such as keeping them on to mentor new recruits.



## Possible solutions

LPB's should be offered guidance based on the aspirations described in this document to guide the criteria for selection for engagement SLAs and to guide the performance monitoring of these SLAs. The Forum could design a voluntary pledge for LPBs to sign up to laying out aspirations for delivering best practice in supporting engagement.

The Forum to co-develop a national role description for people who support service user and carer engagement, and representatives.

The Forum to lead on the co-production of a competence framework for people who support service user and carer engagement, and representatives.

The Forum to lead on the co-production and delivery of training to people who support service user and carer engagement and representatives.

There needs to be healthy competition for SLA's to ensure that organisations don't become complacent about keeping their SLA, and hence let the quality of service slip.

To provide greater transparency, 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations with engagement SLAs should be publicly accountable through the need to declare the outcomes of spending through annual reporting.

## Decision

We would like the NPB to discuss how we can work with partners so this can be taken forward to ensure national implementation of the above solutions.

## Glossary

SLA = service level agreement – a contractual agreement with a commissioner to provide a particular service.

## Appendix 1: Forum Member Opinions

*The following are individual and personal opinions.*

### Voice A

In my opinion there are very few examples of good practice. Apart from [REDACTED] maybe some in [REDACTED]

I wish to express my concerns more strongly than in the paper.

I think a revisiting of the overall strategy and funding of the engagement SLA's across Wales is needed.

This paper only looks at engagement SLAs, but I think that all non-direct services provision SLA's i.e. Information and Development are all relevant to the engagement process.

That they sit together and that they are interdependent, and inseparable is confirmed by the situation across almost all Boards. Most of CVS's have rest of them bundled together.

I am aware of a few exceptions to this.

I agree that in the immediate term there is a need for one focus to be on what limited representation we have i.e. Reps and mostly single isolated LPB Reps at that. But in the longer-term perspective we need to also focus on how to seed fund and develop local groups, activists and future Reps. I feel something should be done on extending and developing engagement to local groups and the wider public. This illustrates the need for the Development and Information SLA's to be included in any review.

Engagement should be far more than tokenistic individual Reps, there need to be teams of Reps at all meetings. Also needed are local engagement groups and conferences, newsletters, Social media.

As regards to development - sadly recently existing groups have closed or been closed. Over time many others have disappeared for some

reason despite funding for development. No new groups have been developed in some areas, despite funding being available for this. This development funding is used for supporting existing 3rd Sector service providers instead of its assumed intention of development of Service User and Carer groups.

Not only are there not any new groups in some areas, the 3rd sector has allowed the collapse of previous groups and on occasions have actually closed them down deliberately!

As regards to Information SLA's there is little evidence of any spending in some areas.

We need to have teams of Reps at meetings, not just one or maybe two, nor one with a deputy for when Rep can't attend.

Reps need a local support/focus group/constituency to access wider views, for support, and to be accountable to.

Ring Fences for development seed funding, Reps costs, Newsletters, local conferences and Social Media.

There is a conflict of interest where Providers dictate via SLAs and fund the organisations and functions of those supporting the engagement and representation of their Service Users and Carers.

Not only do health boards control the SLA selection process, there is also the scenario of any SLA Holder not wanting to bite the hand that feeds it.

This is comparable to a Company funding and controlling Union Representatives. Contents of SLA's and funding of them need to be at arm's length.

SLAs need to be consistent across Wales, so logically criteria for SLAs should be co-produced between WG and WMHWF centrally.

Since the Welsh Office Days of John Redwood, over twenty-five years ago there have been many millions of pounds spent on engagement across Wales.

All we have to show for it is less than we had those decades ago.

I feel there are very few positive outcomes to be shown for current spending and it is a struggle to find them.

I strongly feel there are many negatives. I feel there is not an equal balance between the positives and negatives of service user and carer engagement.

Not only is Public money being unproductive, it is being used to prevent what it is intended to achieve.

There is widespread suspicion that funds are being overly used to cover 3rd Sector core costs and to divert funding to other provision. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

An independent review is needed of the effectiveness of third sector engagement, development and information support services which would also include how efficiently funds are being used. This would promote improvement.

“how public money is being used and how it meets people's needs, inspires and empowers the **Welsh** public sector to improve.”

## Voice B

What I would like to say is that many of the third sector organisations are not acting independently but as partners with other organisations, like [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] are partners and under them is [REDACTED], and SU and Carers are weak actors in their hands. I am very sorry to say that but it's true. Nobody controls their finances or how the money is spent. Every time I attend a meeting of a 3rd sector organisation, I am feeling that I waste my time. Recently, I happily noticed that [REDACTED] trying harder to improve things around Mental Health Services. Anyway, I think that we should add in our document that our representatives should get a sort of Financial statements with actions of the organisation prior meeting. This is a must to ensure that things are moving and the meetings are not iconically.

## Voice C

We need to create creative and meaningful ways that promote wellbeing and encourage communities to utilize their development organisations and create their own projects that meet the needs of the local population. (and showcase good examples of this as there are many doing amazing things).

Examples of creativity include, storytelling workshops, opportunities to tell your story to different audiences, vision boards, and creative ways of exploring how to make sense of things.

This built confidence, ability to express my story, and listening to other people's stories. Story telling in our culture helps to have meaning and learning from each other's stories. This can also help to develop empathy for other people's worlds.

My personal experience of third sector and development organisation has been nothing short of life changing for the better and I wouldn't be where I am (physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually) had it not been for the support of ██████ in more recent years. I have been fortunate in that my mental health has not ever required hospitalization or an assessment but nevertheless, the impact it has had at points in my life has not been great and my confidence and ability to function had suffered ...Without the third sector I would not be where I am today, employed and given the opportunity to help others find their voice, creating social opportunities that promote inclusive healthy communities, and support members without fear of judgment or discrimination.

I am a firm believer that having had the opportunity to receive support through meaningful activity with creative non-judgmental people (in nature is always best) but away from stuffy offices is a close second lol who promote independence and value diversity. I have also been rewarded with expenses that cover the cost of my travel and replacement care without judgement or being made to feel like I am taking advantage! I also have had the use of good IT tech such as a laptop and tablet. I have received time credits (Tempo) for my time volunteering and pre covid was able to spend them swimming with my children at the local pool and play area. My children have also benefited being in nursery spending time with peers learning through playing as they are very sociable confident happy children.