

# Protecting independence of voice

Independence of voice means people can speak openly and honestly, in their own words, without anyone changing or censoring what they say, and without fear of judgement, punishment or repercussions.

Much of the power of the service user and carer voice comes from lived and living experience. It is the responsibility of partners and stakeholders to respond compassionately to differing points of views and to take them seriously. Engagement and co-production will inevitably give rise to difficult conversations and even conflict at times. Part of the skill set therefore, for successful working, is to be able to work through these difficulties with respect to de-escalate any conflicts and to find an acceptable and realistic solution.

During the consultation, representatives expressed that they felt unable to speak freely in meetings and believed their views would only be influential if moderated.”

This fails to trust the instincts of people with mental health issues and carers and lacks faith in the authority’s ability to hear and act on views which are expressed genuinely.

## How to facilitate independence of voice

To enable people to speak openly a positive culture, which values service user and carer contribution is needed to enable people to share their lived and living experience. The common purpose is to ‘improve services together’. It is not enough to just have a statement of commitment.

It is important that all people:

- Have an attitude of non-judgemental acceptance.
- Represent not just their own views but also those of others.
- Are open to a culture of transparency and honesty, to be able to acknowledge mistakes and failings, and be clear about any limitations in determining what is and not necessary to promote more positive outcomes.
- Have a curiosity and desire about what people think and up to date knowledge of what happens within all areas of mental health.

A genuinely co-productive culture is one where everyone can learn from conflicts, complaints, problems and challenges. Skilful chairing is essential for inclusive decision making and to de-escalate and create opportunities for the development of creative solutions and learning (see Guide to Chairing Co-Productive Meetings document). Where there is disagreement in the group, it is important to ensure people are assisted and receive timely support as needed.

To support culture change and become more inclusive it is important to recruit people who have a positive attitude towards service user and carer engagement. Delivering training to all stakeholders in the values, skills and behaviours necessary to make engagement and co-production work is essential. Having a champion for engagement and co-production within the organisation or team provides focus and leadership for culture change as demonstrated by those areas who have appointed an engagement lead with lived experience in their health board.

The group needs to hold values which are supportive, such as trusting individuals to be responsible, respecting them and their views, and treating them as equals. Feedback from the consultation highlighted that there should be measures in place to address people who undermine service user and carer voices.

The conditions need to be there to support individuals to develop the skills, confidence and courage they need to contribute effectively. This is not just a matter of training, although training and advice, on how to deal with sensitive issues can help. Most importantly it is a matter of giving people the experience they need to speak out.

Models of engagement across Wales that are most successful have forums of service users and carers where people can interact with each other about their views and learn to put them across in a group situation. These groups also expose people to the views and experiences of their peers, frequently providing reassurance that their views and experiences are valid. This kind of group is essential for service users and carers to find their voice, understand divergence of experiences and support and to be truly representative.

### **Conflicts of interest need to be identified and managed**

To work at a co-productive level everyone needs to be aware of their influence and privilege (in their position) and be able to empower those who are less powerful. This includes stronger and more assertive personalities within the representative team, consciously being aware of their impact on others and the necessity to be inclusive. Encouraging people to ask questions and contribute can assist in supporting quieter member to speak.

Another approach to power sharing would be to give everyone the opportunity to chair the meetings, where this is possible. This would help to remove power imbalance. In some boards service users chair meetings.

Mutually respectful and trusting relationships help develop equality of power within a group. These take time to develop. It helps if the chair encourages informal interaction, perhaps through development exercises and workshops. Opportunities to chat before and after meetings, or in coffee breaks are also helpful.

Having clarity of expectations is helpful, especially where there can be a challenge raised if expectations are not met or if problems with independence of voice arise. Expectations can be laid out in role descriptions, such as ensuring the representatives know that they are representing local service users or carers and not the health board or the third sector organisation which hosts their support. The development of a code of practice for all people participating in co-production will also help, as will any locally adopted 'co-production principles or group agreements (previously known as ground rules). This guidance should also support clear expectations.

Finally, independence of voice needs to be monitored, and the representatives themselves asked at regular intervals whether they feel that they have that independence of voice. Evaluations of the engagement practice of the organisation or partnership may help to identify good practice as well as risks to independence of voice that can then be overtly managed

### **Ensuring Independence of Voice**

Through co-production it is important that a service user representative has the opportunity to have their voices heard without fear of judgment or repercussions. It is important that service user and carers can share their views, however challenging they may be. Although there may be different views between a service user representative and a support worker their views should be listened to in order to influence and improve services.

Consideration must be given to conflicts of interest in acknowledging your independence of voice may come as a detriment to another party.