

Raising the Profile of Engagement Opportunities to Influence Service Improvement

Many service users and carers are unaware of the variety of ways they can have their voices heard regarding their experiences of services, or how they would like to see them improved. They are also unaware of the organisations and groups that exist in the community either providing services or those which campaign for change and awareness.

Visibility of engagement opportunities is critical. There needs to be a route to information which is easy to find and accessible. Collaboration between sectors is key to ensuring that the information about who to contact is available at every point of service delivery.

An on-going and regularly renewed communications plan which uses a variety of media and outlets is likely to make a real difference.

In most health board areas third sector organisations are the focus for creating visibility and provision of a contact point for getting involved. They are well placed to help different third sector organisations to network together and to ensure that service users are aware of the range of third sector groups available to them. Their arm's length status gives them a greater independence and distance from the person's main service providers, which give people more confidence to speak out and a greater sense of safety particularly from the risk of their own services being compromised. Whilst this system is not perfect, no-alternative model has been identified as yet. Where it is absent there are no mechanisms to increase visibility of opportunities or to match interested people with the opportunities available.

Much work has been done to assess the benefits of being part of the 'survivor movement', of co-productive exercises and with involvement in activities to influence service improvement. Whilst general volunteering and getting back to work are promoted as part of recovery, co-production activities have yet to be offered as core activities for Care and Treatment Plans or recovery action plans. Discussions in the consultation indicated that people felt that conversations with clinicians would be a powerful way to reach people who might be interested in these opportunities.

It is necessary to not only sign post people more effectively to opportunities for engagement, but also to raise awareness relating to its benefits. We know that engagement provides relief from isolation, being with like-minded people, meaningful occupation, a sense of purpose, and a way to build confidence and self-respect. These are such fundamental contributors to recovery that it is time to make

this a mainstream activity accessible to all at some level, and to make it an option for standard care and treatment plans. For this to work clinical staff need to be kept up to date with the opportunities available.

We also need to look at how people can access these opportunities through primary care services. Much less work has been done at this level of service.

The third sector has typically been the 'go to place' for seeking service user and carer engagement, even though not all third sector organisations are necessarily any better at this than public or private sector organisations. Interested service users and carers may be attracted to them because they are one step away from health and social care services, hence discussing services may feel safer with them. There remains a concern that raising issues about their care may adversely impact on individual's services.

However, accessing people is far harder from outside of the health and social care services. In addition, far more people with mental health issues use public sector services than any other sector. So not going to public sector services to recruit service user and carer voices is a missed opportunity.

It may be that some third sector organisations who have developed this kind of signposting to opportunities, can provide a template for how this can be done in the public sector too. The obvious solution is for health and social care to work in partnership with the third sector in this endeavour.

Many ideas were offered on the various media through which engagement opportunities can be promoted. Whilst all methods have pros and cons, the likelihood is that the wider the range of media used, the more people will be reached. It is very important to have a variety of communication methods for instance not everyone is digitally included.

Options included:-

- Social media, including Facebook and websites
- Posters/notices in service waiting areas
- Leaflets
- Business cards
- Word of mouth – as already described – through
 - Clinicians

- Third sector staff
- Formal and informal advocates
- Other service users and carers
- Go out to communities, where people are.
- Flyers in materials for self-management and psychoeducational courses

In some areas organisations may have a data base of email contact details for people who want to be involved so information can be emailed out to people who have given their permission for this to be done.

A common theme across a number of questions in the consultation was the need to publicise and promote the positive examples of how service users and carers have already successfully influenced service development.

Other media such as newsletters, local newspapers, local radio/television could be used to promote good work in a way which widens the numbers aware of this work even more.

Another suggestion was to go out into communities to meet with people. In Wrexham some people stood in supermarket doorways to speak to people. (Permission clearly required from the supermarket concerned). In Birmingham a stand was taken into large stores and shopping centres for general information about mental health and volunteering opportunities. They had a good response. This may be more difficult in smaller more rural communities where there is still a lot of stigma around talking about mental health. There has been mixed success with taking information and support to Farmers' markets.

Pharmacies would present a great opportunity for reaching people but tend to have little space for information to be distributed. GP practices would be more practical. Other suggestions of places to promote opportunities included community centres, leisure centres, libraries.

Examples also come from other services who are reaching out to the public, such as the police scheme 'coffee with a copper'. If there are opportunities like this it may be possible to work with them to get more interaction with the public.

Another example from CAMHS is going out to where young people are, such as schools and colleges, and youth clubs.

Part of the process of raising the profile of engagement opportunities is in the

messages that are promoted. In other words, it's not just about what's out there, but also about why it matters to the public.

In addition to the benefits of engagement to individuals and organisations, and information about successful projects, it is helpful to promote a culture of valuing service user and carer contributions. Commitment to embedding engagement as a way of working, and any principles or quality standards the organisation has adopted which are relevant to engagement are also important. When engagement is embedded within the organisation's policies, strategies and plans, (e.g. any quality improvement strategy), it sends a strong message about the organisation's commitment and culture. This is a message that the public need to hear.