



National Service User Forum

On the 5th December 2002, Service providers and Service Users from across England and Wales began a collaboration with the aim of producing a general guide for those users and providers who wanted to develop ways of working and consulting together. The NDN National Service Users Forum is open to both users and providers and seeks to improve the quality and scope of user involvement in alcohol services and associated agencies.

Our first paper, titled '**How to Get Service User Involvement on the Agenda**' is an attempt to:

- a) highlight the benefits of getting service users involved
- b) identify some of the key problems
- c) propose, where possible, some ways of tackling the problems

This is not a definitive paper that promises to solve all the difficulties. The wide range of services and the uniqueness of each service user's experience prevent anyone from having all the answers. What the forum does hope to accomplish with this first of many papers is to give a general introduction to the subject and suggest some ways of moving forward based on personal experience and expertise.

The forum welcomes those who would like to contribute either by attending the meetings or by letter, fax or e-mail. We would especially like to hear from members of any ethnic minority community as these are under represented on the forum. For more information, please contact Sean Murphy or Juliette Hough on 020 7928 7377, or email ndn@alcoholconcern.org.uk.

We have used the terms 'service user' and 'client' interchangeably though we accept that many people will have their preferences on this.

Ten reasons for Service Users to get Involved

1. You Get a Sense of Responsibility and Commitment

Allows Service User to assume a level of responsibility and commitment appropriate to needs and ability depending on where you are in your personal recovery. It can be useful as an addition or alternative to voluntary work or part/full-time work and, importantly, is not imposed but chosen by you. Being involved gives you a say in how your services are run and a regular chance to share what you have learned so that others benefit

2. You increase Self-confidence and Self-respect

If you can make a regular contribution in a way that is appropriate to your needs and abilities you can often help build greater self-confidence. Involvement avoids the expert versus the treated relationship and provides safe and structured environments that let you meet providers in partnership. An opportunity to voice your opinions and influence how things are done tends to increase self-respect.

3. You get an opportunity to help

Every client is an individual with a personal experience and a range of resources that can be used to everybody's advantage. Helping is most useful where you have expertise and knowledge. This might mean getting involved with marketing, promotion, fundraising or HR for example. It might also mean being a support or guide to other service users.

4. More Self awareness

As a part of recovery, client involvement is full of opportunities to have your ideas tested and challenged. It is not always an easy ride and you may find out things about yourself that are uncomfortable and difficult to cope with. The plus side is that you will almost certainly find out how far you have come and what you are able to give.

4. Ownership of recovery plan

Service users often complain that there is insufficient consultation with them about their recovery. With a firm service user consultation structure in place, you can give realistic feedback about what works best and what can be improved. This communication is ongoing and what you tell your service provider will have an effect on the service received by you and others in a way that lets you feel you are working together.

5. Self honesty

If you get involved with service user representation you can expect to be challenged. Particularly for the client, it promises many situations in which you are challenged to question and consider your behaviour in a way that can lead to important self-appraisal and evaluation.

6. Knowing your own needs

Clients often have a very good idea of what does not work and what needs improving. There are no guarantees of completely changing what is not popular but there can be a space to influence on a number of levels

7. You increase Self-worth

In this context, self worth comes from the understanding that your opinions and preferences have a right to be heard and considered, that your experience is unique and that your input can influence and improve the provision of services in the area. A feeling of self-worth, which often disappears with an alcohol problem, is a vital part of recovery and often comes from feeling useful and effecting change.

9. The Holistic dimension – The person as well as the addiction

Client Involvement encourages working with the whole person and not just the alcohol problem. It allows for a level of partnership in which two sides can learn and benefit from each other in a way that improves the work of both

10. Advocacy

At its best, client involvement is a great opportunity for representation. Many clients may not be in a stage of recovery that permits them to do speak for themselves but others can put their views to providers and get some important changes. It is an opportunity for every service user to be heard and for everybody's needs and preferences to be identified and considered.

Seven reasons for service providers to develop user involvement

1. 'Using the best resource'

There are at least three ways Service users can be useful:

- a) By giving detailed feedback as to the quality and effectiveness of services
- b) By identifying gaps in services
- c) By supporting and promoting the work of the provider

2. Help with funding

More and more commissioners are requesting evidence of SU involvement programmes before committing funds. This has to be embraced. Also, many services count on clients to help generate funds. Some clients have independently (and successfully) lobbied commissioners to reinstate services that were due for termination because of budgetary constraints. Others have been involved in funding bids on behalf of the service while others have funded initiatives like football teams and cricket clubs through independent fundraising.

3. Service User range of skills

Clients may be useful in improving the range and quality of services by bringing life experience and particular skills to a service. Some alcohol services include service users to help write and present bids for new areas. Others will have skills as fundraisers, lobbyists, artists, decorators, and administrators for example or have abilities in subjects as diverse as gardening to website design. Even if clients do voluntary work or are in paid employment, many are still eager to 'give something back', to make a one-off or ongoing contribution. This can be an important part of the recovery process as well as being a major enhancement of a service's competence.

4. Quality in Drug and Alcohol Services (QUADS)

Among many other obligations for the sector, these national standards stipulate that :

- a) 'there are procedures for consulting with service users to inform service planning and delivery'
- b) 'service users are provided with information on types of service...and the standards they can expect'
- c) 'service users are represented in management structures'
- d) 'the service has a charter of service users' rights and responsibilities'

5. Less them and us

With consultation mechanisms in place at many levels there is ground for a collaborative partnership which, hopefully in most cases, will have common aims, namely the improvement of the service on offer. You will probably have anxieties about this process but it is definitely the future and if you want ownership you need to put in the effort and resources to make it work for you

6. Role model for future users

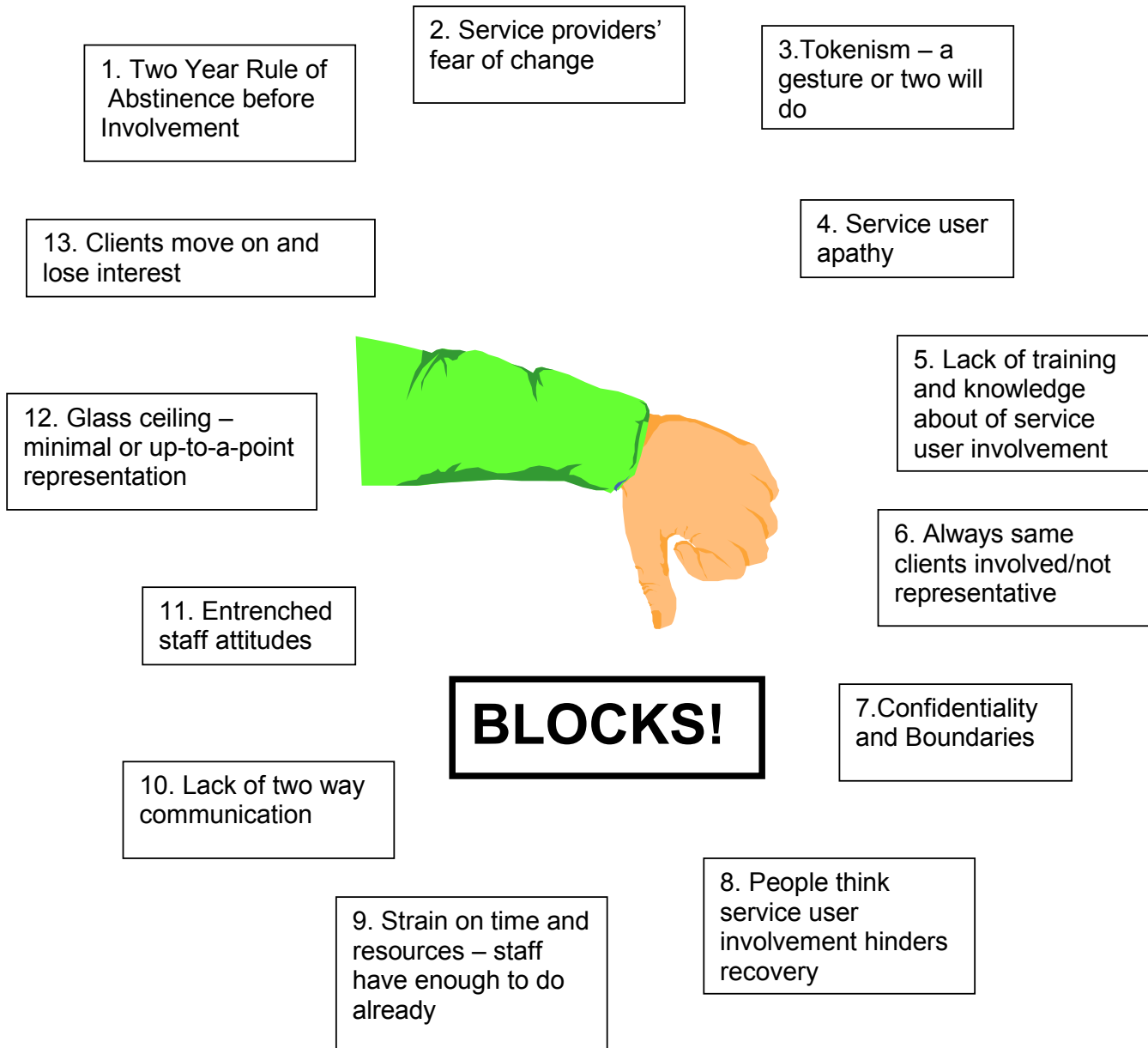
In the early stages of recovery and at various times throughout it, the support and guidance or peers is vital. But many clients do not know who is the best person to approach. With an organisation of experienced clients already in place and with a meetings schedule, people will know who to ask for support and where to go.

A Client involvement group will also be a key organ in terms of feedback to, and consultation with, clients and will ensure effective communication.

7. National Care Standards Commission

The NCSC are responsible for maintaining standards in the residential sector. They also carry out inspections. Included in their exhaustive assessments are a 'Service User Plan' and 'A Service User Assessment'. This means that some of their methods of assessment will be focussed not only on client satisfaction but also on the ways in which the service providers ensure appropriate involvement and consultation over time.

Client Involvement: Overcoming the Blocks

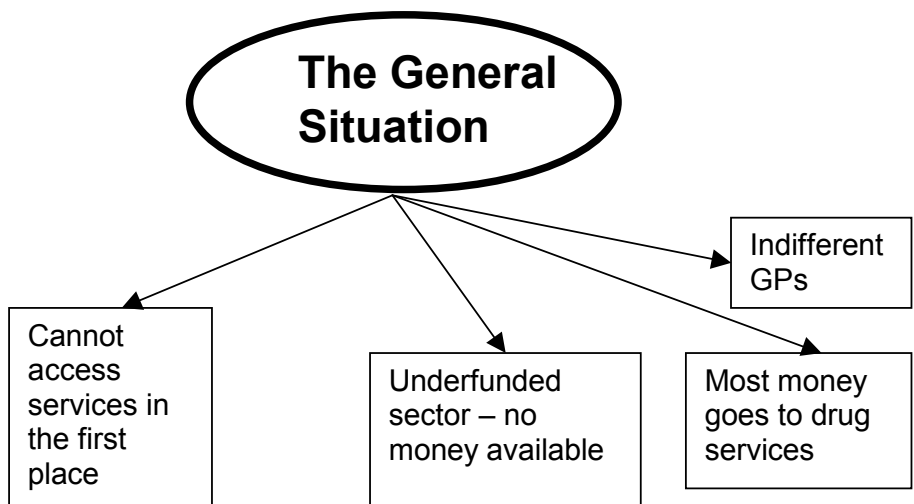


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1. - Challenge guidelines and blanket rules
- Challenge arbitrary discrimination
- Client to be assessed according to personal history and present ability

2. - lots of consultation between staff driven by board and management
- fear of what and when? promote discussion and reality checks
- start small and work up, change the culture by degrees
- persuade and convince 'non-believers' of benefits and advantages
- establish ground rules so people feel safe
- initiate discussions that include feelings as well as thoughts

3. - write Service user involvement into contracts between commissioners and providers and ensure audit trail
- remind service providers of statutory obligations
- establish procedures and timetables
- challenge apathy but be patient!

13. - get clients to contribute when they can
- promote regular meetings to help focus on recovery
- encourage intake of new people to ensure interest

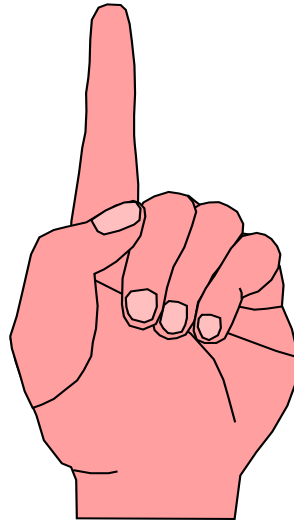
4. - make sure communication and promotion reach everybody
- persuade clients of benefits to recovery
- clients more likely to stay involved if they think they are being heard

SUGGESTIONS!

12. - Convince and persuade others of benefits
- highlight your potential contributions
- be consistent and patient : change takes time
- challenge tokenism

11. - agree ground rules and set boundaries for meetings
- accept differences and work towards respect, openness and realism
- challenge prejudice and out-of-date judgements
- listen to staff and hear their concerns
- keep chipping away

10. - set up newsletters so that both sides are regularly informed
- establish regular consultations and focussed meetings
- choose client representatives to feedback information
- put up client bulletin boards in all agencies



5. - service providers must follow regulations (NTA, QuADS and NCSC) and get up to speed
- encourage ownership of change and staff will want to find out more
- lobby and involve Board as ally in change

6. - make a changing rota of clients
- access available to everyone eg outreach, translate literature etc
- promote and advertise meetings, events and information
- give people opportunity to contribute on many levels

7. - write a clear code of conduct that providers and users agree to and are familiar with (Charter of Rights)
- instruct users and volunteers on confidentiality and boundary issues as part of training

8. - negotiate between staff and client about advantages of involvement balanced with pitfalls
- be flexible and get involved in a way that helps you and others (levels of involvement)

General

Difficult to generalise but
- raise agenda of alcohol
- lobby government
- promote local agencies