



OFFICE OF THE
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Supporting People

A guide to user involvement for
organisations providing housing related
support services

May 2003

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

The *Supporting People* programme offers vulnerable people the opportunity to improve their quality of life through receiving appropriate housing related support services. One of the key aims of the programme is to enable users of support services to achieve greater independence.

The principles underlying this guidance are that involving users is an important means of both improving services, by enabling users to feed in their ideas and preferences, and of promoting users' independence. User involvement, if sensitively implemented, can enable very diverse groups of vulnerable people to develop their capacity to live independently while being integrated into, and contributing to, local communities.

The guidance envisages the development of user involvement activities as a gradual process, and one that is responsive to the capacities and preferences of the users. It provides examples of the range of ways in which provider organisations have undertaken effective user involvement.

The importance of user involvement in the *Supporting People* programme is also reflected in the approach to quality and monitoring processes that has been developed by the ODPM, for which a package of guidance has now been published.

I hope you find this guide useful when you are developing your approaches to user involvement.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tony McNulty". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'T'.

Tony McNulty

Parliamentary Under Secretary, ODPM

Introduction

Purpose of the guide

This guide is primarily for staff and managers in organisations providing housing related support services. The guide aims to encourage all provider organisations to involve service users effectively in all aspects of housing related support services.

The guide sets out how opportunities for user involvement can be developed for users of housing related support services. It offers ideas for developing a strategy and practice for user involvement, drawing on the experiences of providers and users in the housing related support sector and examples are taken from the sector to illustrate good practice. It also sets out some principles for user involvement that will help to make user involvement strategies and practice effective. Finally, it provides a framework for providers to plan, implement and evaluate an initiative.

The guide focuses on approaches to involving existing service users, but providers will find the approaches presented in the guide useful in developing opportunities for potential and past users to become involved and consulted.

The guide is also intended for local *Supporting People* Commissioning Bodies and teams and it will be useful directly and indirectly. Directly, the guide provides the basis for Commissioning Bodies to evaluate the quality of involvement processes within provider agencies. Local authorities can use the guide in constructing their own local framework for evaluating providers' performance in relation to user involvement.

Indirectly, the use of the guide by provider organisations should improve Local Authorities' own consultative processes. Involving users effectively in the services at provider level, will improve the relationship between organisations and individual service users, providing a firm basis for involvement in broader issues that Local Authorities' will wish to consult on. The guide does not explicitly address how users might be involved in consultative processes relating to *Supporting People* strategy and service development. The *Supporting People* Administrative Guidance¹ focuses on this aspect.

The guide is one of a series of three handy guides produced for the *Supporting People* programme. Whilst this guide is aimed primarily at provider organisations, the other two are primarily for *Supporting People* Commissioning Bodies and teams:

- *Reflecting the Needs and Concerns of Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in Supporting People*;

¹ Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) (2001) *Supporting People* Administrative Guidance, London, DTLR.

- *Addressing domestic violence in the Supporting People Programme.*

This guide also forms part of the package of guidance on *Supporting People* quality and monitoring processes that has been developed for Commissioning Bodies and provider organisations. Specific guidance on involving users in quality and monitoring processes will be published later in 2003 by the ODPM. The rest of the package has now been published by the ODPM and contains the following titles:

- Framework for the monitoring and review of contracted *Supporting People* services.
- Accreditation of providers of *Supporting People* services.
- Proposed performance indicators for the *Supporting People* programme.
- Workbook for interim contract Performance Indicators.
- Guidance on the workbook for interim contract Performance Indicators.
- Workbook for steady state Performance Indicators.
- Quality Assessment Framework: core service objectives.
- Quality Assessment Framework: supplementary service objectives; and
- Monitoring and review of *Supporting People* services: validation visits.

The quality and monitoring guidance can be found on the *Supporting People* website at: <http://www.spkweb.org.uk> under General Documents and Discussion \ General Documents \ Quality and Monitoring.

Readers of this guide may also wish to use the *Supporting People* user involvement training modules 001a (for Local Authorities) and 001b (for provider organisations). These can also be found on the *Supporting People* website under General Documents and Discussions \ General Documents \ National Training Framework – Training Modules ONLY

Readers wishing for more general guidance on consultation may wish to read *Listen Up!* published by the Audit Commission².

Readers may also be interested to know that two user involvement projects have been supported under the *Supporting People* Provider Development Fund. ROCC, an organisation working with four Local Authorities in the South, is being funded to develop an approach to involving hard to reach groups in the development of the Local *Supporting People* Strategy. Secondly, Manchester City Council's Core User Group is taking forward the "Participation in Action" project which will result in the production of a range of videos of user involvement in action, based on the key themes of this guide.

² Audit Commission (1999) *Listen Up!* effective community consultation, London: Audit Commission.

Supporting People and user involvement

Supporting People aims to promote a needs-led and integrated approach to housing with support. Services designed to develop or sustain basic life skills essential to maintaining one's home or to expand tenure choice will be provided:

- On the basis of need, and irrespective of tenure.
- Using a common framework for assessing need and measuring service quality so as to promote equity of provision across the country.
- Through the implementation of a co-ordinated strategy led by local authorities with partner agencies in health and probation. This will identify need and map supply, address unmet need and monitor and review service quality.

By improving the scope, nature and quality of housing related support services, the programme seeks to enable very diverse groups of vulnerable people to develop their capacity to live independently, integrated into, and contributing to, local communities.

The Supporting People programme offers vulnerable people the opportunity to improve their quality of life by providing positive services, which enable them to have greater independence and control in making choices within their lives³.

A key element of *Supporting People* is the commitment to ensuring that people who use housing with support are effectively involved in shaping provision and evaluating its scope and quality.

For local authorities, this means that:

- Strategies should be developed and agreed through consultative processes, which involve those who use or are likely to use these services alongside other key stakeholders.
- The views and experiences of service users should be taken into account in evaluating and commissioning individual services.

Support service providers, on the other hand, should:

- Involve users effectively in all aspects of service planning and delivery to ensure effective, appropriate and responsive provision.
- Deliver services, which enable people to develop skills and capacities to live independently and to take increasing control over their own lives.

So, user involvement, in the context of *Supporting People*, has to achieve appreciable improvements, not only in the availability, quality, adequacy and appropriateness of the services people receive, but in the quality of their lives as well. What the guide seeks to do

³ Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) (2001), *Policy into Practice*, p.7, London: DETR.

is to set out the steps that providers should take to achieve these dual objectives: enable users to have a direct say in services and to develop their capacity to maintain independent living. The emphasis throughout is on processes for involvement that are pro-active i.e. that engage service users in an ongoing way in all aspects of service provision.

The challenge of involving users in *Supporting People* services

The guidance looks closely at how opportunities for user involvement can be developed. It is a tool for thinking through the issues, as well as a means of sharing the experiences of agencies in developing effective strategies and practice for user involvement.

In developing the guidance the number and variety of housing related support services that can be funded through the *Supporting People* programme has been recognised:

- Some services are provided through large and complex organisations, whilst others are small scale and locally based.
- Some organisations work exclusively with a particular user group, whilst others work with a range of groups.
- Some services support people for very short periods of time, whilst others may work with the same individuals over many years.
- Some are provided to groups and some to individuals.

The guide is based on examples and learning from independent sector organisations, but is intended also for Local Authority providers. It includes examples from both accommodation-based services and floating support. Readers will note that the former predominates and whilst the guide sets out approaches that can be used in a range of provider settings, it does not deal with issues that may be specific to the organisational contexts of any one type of provider.

There are particular challenges in involving people who come within the framework of *Supporting People*. Many users receiving housing related support services are likely to be difficult to engage in, or excluded from, formal consultation initiatives. This may arise because of their particular needs, the circumstances that bring them into contact with services, or their experience of social and economic disadvantage. Creativity and effort is required to ensure that appropriate support is offered and forms of involvement developed, to enable their inclusion in decision making and to make involvement effective and meaningful to the user.

Developing the guidance

In developing the guidance a range of agencies that provide for people with different needs and experiences have been consulted through telephone interviews, examination of documents and site visits. Those contacted included some that were providing services targeted at specific ethnic groups and some which included a significant proportion of black

and other minority ethnic users as well as those which provided for predominantly white users.

Key issues that were considered during the development of the guide:

- Provider and user experiences of involvement at different levels (communicating with individuals and assessing users' needs, day to day service delivery, service development and evaluation, policy, strategy and governance).
- The kinds of methods and approaches that are used with different groups of users.
- The benefits of service user involvement to provider organisations and users. This includes the changes that have come about as a result: in improving the quality of life of individuals, in developing positive relationships between staff and users and in the quality and responsiveness of services.
- The obstacles to effective involvement, and how agencies have sought to overcome them.

Structure of the guide

Chapter 1 sets out some of the challenges for providers of housing with support and stand-alone support services in developing user involvement. The difficulties and tensions experienced by providers are not glossed over. For some agencies the problems encountered in developing user involvement were seen as insurmountable barriers to involvement, whilst for others, these issues were perceived as simply part of the raw material with which they had to deal, and to which they sought to find solutions.

Chapters 2 to 5 set out the experiences of providers in developing user involvement at different levels, and the guidance suggests ways to improve the process. A range of approaches and models are proposed, which offer opportunities for people to influence decision-making, whether individually or collectively. Starting with how users can develop the confidence and skills to have a say in relation to their immediate needs and interests, the guide considers how involvement can be 'grown'. It examines how the arenas for involvement can be extended from users' personal concerns (and which are of direct relevance to them), to the broader terrain of service planning, development and evaluation. It considers how users can develop the capacity to set goals, deal with problems and manage change, towards taking/maintaining control over their own lives and sets out what is required of agencies to achieve these changes.

Each of the chapters examines a specific arena for involvement:

Chapter 2 focuses on individual needs and lifestyle.

Chapter 3 considers user participation in service delivery on a day to day basis.

Chapter 4 looks at involvement in service evaluation and development, staff recruitment and training, and in the development of policies; and

Chapter 5 addresses user involvement in governance and in the management of the organisation.

The examples of initiatives that are incorporated in the guidance provide practical illustrations of ways that organisations have approached and achieved user participation. They should not be seen as exemplary practice to be slavishly copied; rather they are offered in the spirit of sharing, and reflecting on, others' experiences. They have been selected to illustrate principles and approaches that can be applied across the range of housing related support provision.

Chapter 6 provides a summary of the underpinning principles that can make user involvement in *Supporting People* services, successful. The issues posed for agencies in translating policy on user involvement into strategic choices and working practices are then considered. Finally, a framework for planning an initiative and evaluating its success is proposed.

The annexes reference other resources that providers may draw upon in developing their strategy and practice.

CHAPTER ONE

Involving Users in Housing Related Support Services

Scope and diversity of individuals, groups and settings

The *Supporting People* programme encompasses a diverse range of services, delivered in many different types of settings, and to a wide variety of individuals and groups, who require support and assistance to either maintain a tenancy or expand their choice of tenure. Services embrace: hostels and night-shelters, sheltered housing, shared homes for groups of people, women's refuges, floating or outreach support to people in their own homes and home improvement agencies.

The people using housing related support services also vary enormously. They include: vulnerable young people who have been through the care system, mothers and children fleeing domestic violence, offenders and ex-offenders, those with drug and alcohol problems, older, frail people, single homeless people and those with a mental illness or with learning difficulties. Moreover, many of these groups are likely to include people from black and minority ethnic groups, whose particular needs will require a culturally appropriate response.

The very diversity of people requiring housing with support – in terms of needs, capacities, circumstances and relationship with the wider communities in which they live – poses a challenge for providers in developing effective user involvement. How can providers manage different and competing interests, balance risk, involvement and independence and ensure that the voices of those most difficult to reach are heard? How can they develop an anti-discriminatory practice that enables the participation of users from multi-racial groups, thereby ensuring equality of opportunity and the valuing of difference?

Why involve people in housing related support services?

While there already exists considerable experience of good practice in developing user involvement within housing related support services, there is much variability in the level of commitment to user involvement, and in the nature of participatory initiatives of agencies and services. There is significant scope for the development of practice through mutual sharing and learning across services and providers.

There are many reasons for providers of housing with support to involve service users:

- Involvement furthers the goal of independence, through facilitating inclusion, encouraging the development of life skills, and enhancing self-esteem.
- Involvement is a way of bringing people together to achieve mutually desirable outcomes and is potentially an empowering and cohesive force.
- Involvement ensures that services reflect the needs and wishes of the people who use them and creates a sense of ownership if involvement initiatives are sustained by action.
- Involvement can help to guarantee a better quality of service.
- Involvement adds value to service planning, development and delivery.
- Involvement enables the organisation to draw upon, and make effective use of, peoples' skills and capacities (e.g. of users, in training staff).
- Involvement is a requirement of national policy.

All of these are valid reasons for involving service users. However, services which only involve people because they are required to, will tend to see involvement as a separate activity and not as an integral part of the process of empowering people and of delivering services. By contrast, services that see involvement as a means of facilitating independence and inclusion, can point to a range of ways that people have been provided with the skills and opportunities, not only to have a say in services, but to have increased control in how they live their lives.

Developing appropriate user involvement

Whilst methods of consultation are easy to describe (see for example, the resources listed in Annex 1) the process of user involvement is neither simple nor straightforward. There is no one model that can be offered to guarantee success. Making involvement meaningful to users is a process that has to start with an understanding of the needs, capacities, interests and concerns of individual users⁴. Moreover, methods and forms of involvement should be continually developing and improving, reflecting:

- The increased confidence and skills on the part of users.
- Changing relationships with between users and staff, and
- More participatory decision-making arrangements.

In developing an effective user involvement strategy and practice, providers should ensure that they understand what capacities, skills and experiences service users bring with them. They should also know whether those supported have the confidence and knowledge both

⁴ See for example Cormie, J. (1999), *The Fife User Panels Project: empowering older people*. In M. Barnes and L. Warren (eds), *Paths to empowerment*, Bristol: The Policy Press. Also see O'Keefe, E. and Hogg, C. (1999), *Publication participation and marginalised groups: the community development model*, *Health Expectations* 2: 245-254.

to make decisions about the services they receive and to secure life choices, and to provide support for them to do so, where needed.

If people have had very little prior experience of being involved in decision-making, they will need support in order to participate effectively. They may be unaware of the options available to them, they may lack the confidence to articulate their needs, and they may not be used to being listened to and valued. They may also expect to be passive recipients of services, rather than to play an active part in shaping and defining the scope and quality of what is provided.

The starting point in developing effective user involvement and participation has to emerge from day-to-day practice. Agencies – through managers and staff at all levels – can:

- Open up opportunities to people about the choices available to them;
- Provide the space for users to communicate their concerns and experiences;
- Offer support and assistance to develop the skills, knowledge and networks for users to make decisions around the things that are of value and importance to them.

The needs and circumstances that bring people into contact with housing related support providers are many and varied. For some, housing with support may be a positive move from more institutional living arrangements toward greater independence. For others, it may be a response to increasing isolation, frailty, illness or disability or the need to live in close community with (one's) peers. For yet others, such as refugees and women escaping domestic violence, the need for housing with support arises out of a crisis. Some people will have experienced homelessness or imprisonment; and some will have serious drug or alcohol problems.

Understanding what people bring with them in terms of experience and vulnerability is crucial to knowing how best to support them in being involved.

Many people, who come within the *Supporting People* programme, will have been socially excluded, that is, they will have been and/or may see themselves as being, separate and apart from, the wider communities within which they live. For some, this will include physical separation– in hospitals or prisons. Others will be marginalised and feel isolated as a result of homelessness, lack of skills/education, unemployment, and poverty⁵. The stigma attached to certain conditions, the fact that people may be seen as 'different' in some way, may also contribute to their being shut out of communities, either by neglect or design⁶. For some users as well, the experience of disadvantage will be exacerbated by ethnicity, culture or gender, adding to their vulnerability and exclusion. These experiences are likely

5 Craig, T. and Timms, P. (2000), Facing up to social exclusion: services for homeless, mentally ill people, *International Review of Psychiatry*, 12 (3): 206-212.

6 O'Connell, M. (1990), *Community building in Logan Square*, Ivanston, 11: Institute for Policy Research.

to engender poor self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as low expectations of themselves and of the people with whom they come into contact.

Support aimed at helping people to take responsibility and control of their own lives, should be sensitive to, and take into account, their diverse experiences of exclusion. User involvement has to encompass approaches and methods that enable people gain greater access to, and integration within, the wider community.

Overcoming the obstacles

In setting the scene for developing user involvement within housing related support services, it is useful to consider providers' views of the difficulties and obstacles they encounter and to present some suggestions for managing them.

Effective user involvement may present a challenge to providers on account of the needs and circumstances of the people for whom they offer support. Not all users perceive themselves to be members of a group with whom they share a common interest. Some (e.g. people with HIV/AIDS, women fleeing violence, and people with drug and alcohol problems) are anxious that they are not labelled and may be reluctant to take part in activities that identify them as having specific problems. Others, who may have particularly chaotic lifestyles (homeless people, young people, and people with drug and alcohol problems), may be excluded by approaches to involvement that rely on a regular, sustained commitment through formal meetings. Yet others, who have experienced discrimination on account of their age, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, have often been marginalised in participation initiatives and may have little confidence that their views matter, or that they can bring about change.

Flexibility and creativity – in the context of a dialogue with people about the kinds of methods they would prefer – is essential in developing approaches to involvement that are inclusive.

Many people receiving support services (e.g. refugees and those seeking asylum, and people with complex needs) are understandably focussed on dealing with immediate and pressing problems. The same is often the case with people who are homeless and rootless, within direct access and emergency accommodation. Even so, if providers can facilitate an open culture that welcomes people expressing their views, and offers them the opportunity to have a voice in the most immediate and directly relevant aspects of the service for them, is likely to be crucial to them gaining some control over their lives.

Involvement should start from an understanding of, and a willingness to respond to, the immediate needs and concerns of users i.e. what is important to them as opposed to what might be the interests and concerns of providers.

The size and complexity of agencies can also present challenges for user involvement. Where services are small and local, they may rely on informal approaches and direct one-to-one-contact with staff members. Large regional or nationally based agencies will likely require additionally, the development of formal, representational structures and mechanisms. Similarly, where services have changed, for example, by expanding beyond shared housing to independent accommodation or dispersed activities (e.g. drop-in groups), models of involvement that were effective at one point in one context are likely to be inappropriate in other contexts.

Some support providers are dealing with users with similar kinds of needs, for example, troubled young people. Others deal with a diversity of need (mental health problems, learning disability, homelessness, tenants in general needs housing), within the same agency. Tensions between different and competing interests pose a challenge for agencies both in respect of the forms of involvement and in securing representation at the level of governance.

Forms of involvement should be flexible to reflect the size and complexity of organisations, the type of services offered and the needs of users supported. They should also be subject to regular review, to incorporate the lessons drawn from experience and to reflect shifts in the nature and form of service delivery.

User involvement is both about control and responsibility, which are effectively two elements of the same process. For users, assuming control of one's life is also about being aware of the implications of one's actions on others. Similarly, to take responsibility for decision-making, whether in relation to services or life choices, is about learning to work with people to achieve change. From the service perspective, some agencies are dealing with individuals who are very vulnerable; others are providing support to people whose behaviour potentially poses a threat to others or themselves.

Balancing a duty of care and the management of risk is an ongoing issue in respect of user involvement with vulnerable people. What is possible in terms of managing an acceptable level of risk is related to the amount of support available to users and front line staff.

Getting started

Having explored some of the opportunities and barriers to user involvement, how should agencies target their energies to make effective user involvement a reality? There are two aspects to this: challenging the overall direction of the service and exploring the mechanics for involvement.

User involvement is integral to the achievement of *Supporting People* aims, and this should be reflected in the way the objectives of the service are articulated. In developing their strategy and practice for user involvement then, agencies should start by asking some fundamental questions about the overall direction of the service as it is now and how they would like it to be in the future.

CHALLENGING THE OVERALL DIRECTION OF THE SERVICE

What do you see as the primary aims/objectives of the service?

- Are these objectives compatible with, and geared toward empowering service users?
- Are they reflected in the kind of support people are offered and the quality of the relationships between staff and users?

Flowing from reflections on the aims and objectives of the service, are a number of questions about the mechanics of involvement, now and in the future.

EXPLORING THE MECHANICS OF INVOLVEMENT

- What are the positive experiences of involvement and what can be learned from them; conversely what are the perceived obstacles and how might they be overcome?
- How far can users shape the agenda and terrain for involvement? Have providers identified the kinds of areas users want to be involved in and how they might want to be engaged?
- What is agency policy on the appropriate balance between managing risk and encouraging autonomy and independence? How are the tensions dealt with in practice?
- What changes might need to occur in relationships between users and staff and managers and staff, to make involvement effective?
- What kind of support should be offered, for people to participate in decisions that affect their lives and the services they receive?
- What forums, mechanisms and approaches to involvement can be developed if the most difficult to reach people are to be included?
- In what ways might decision-making mechanisms and structures need to change to take the perspective of the user into account?
- How can user involvement activities enhance community participation and integration?

In the chapters that follow, the guide sets out and illustrates the ways in which agencies have attempted to grapple with the challenges of user involvement. Using examples from a diversity of housing related support providers, the guide sets out approaches to involving service users in decisions ranging from their individual support arrangements through to strategic planning and governance.

CHAPTER TWO

Establishing a Dialogue with Service Users

The starting point in any involvement strategy is establishing a two way dialogue with individual users – providing information, enabling people to express their needs, preferences and concerns and to share their experiences on a day to day basis. Here, providers may wish to consider:

- The provision of accessible information, and
- Developing a culture of active listening.

Providing information

Giving relevant information in forms that are interesting, understandable and accessible to people for whom the service is offered, is a crucial step toward establishing an effective dialogue. This means providing information to users about:

- The scope and content of the service.
- What they have a right to expect.
- With whom they should raise problems and concerns, and
- New policy and service changes.

Information sharing and communication has to be a two way process. On the one hand, access to information enables people to ask informed questions, a pre-requisite for any kind of partnership between providers and users. On the other hand, services can seek out from users, what kind of information they require, in what forms and for what purposes. A key task for providers therefore, is to develop an infrastructure that will facilitate a two-way flow of communication between staff and users and among users themselves.

Residents' handbooks, information packs and newsletters are commonly used among housing related support providers. Resident's handbooks should provide an ongoing resource in accessible formats about the service: the terms of the tenancy, the type and standards of support services that people should expect to receive, the process for dealing with any problems or difficulties, and how their views will be taken into account. Newsletters facilitate the sharing of news and information between providers and users. In some agencies, the commitment to developing a dialogue has extended to include users/residents on editorial boards of newsletters or to provide them with the resources and support (including skills development) to enable them to produce their own material.

In the example below, the agency involved service users in the design and production of accessible information about healthy living. Here, the emphasis was not simply on the content and presentation of the message. Involving users in its production was viewed as an opportunity for them to develop confidence and self-esteem as well as to acquire skills that could be applied in other areas of their lives, both important outcomes to be achieved through *Supporting People*.

1 HEALTH EDUCATION PROJECT: ELFRIDA SOCIETY

The agency provides housing with support in different settings: a home link supported living scheme, care packages for people living in their own homes, advocacy, education and a community living programme. It caters for some 200 people with mild and moderate learning difficulties across a number of London boroughs. The service makes use of different media, for example, art, drawing and audio-visual tools, to facilitate communication.

Process of involvement: Users have been directly involved in developing material to promote healthy living and to manage common illnesses. Specific features of the process of involvement include: identifying individual talents and interests in respect of different aspects of the project (eg. drawing), providing training for people to develop required skills (word-processing) and testing out with other users whether the message was understood.

Benefits of involvement:

- Getting users to work together in partnership with each other and with staff.
- Developing confidence through enabling people to work at a pace with which they have felt comfortable.
- Giving users the opportunity not only to shape and influence what was produced but to develop skills in its production.
- Facilitating a culture of engagement, by enabling those directly involved, to test out their ideas and products with a wider group of peers.

Factors in securing success: It requires openness by the agency at senior level to partnership working, willingness to provide support and resources to staff and a commitment on the part of staff to try out different ways of working with users.

Another example of an innovative approach to involving users in the development of information is the website 'Tenants Online', set up by Carr-Gomm⁷. This is an interactive site created by service users with the support of specialist web designers, volunteers and staff and includes: web-based email, discussion groups, chat, online polls, information on policies and procedures, regional newsletters and views, information on user activities and events, a gallery showcasing service users' talents, links to other useful community websites on topics such as health, housing, benefits and disability.

⁷ See www.tenantsonline.org/cg-about.asp

Active listening

Many people who use housing services with support have had few opportunities to make decisions, only limited experience of possible choices and options and low expectations of what might be available to them. Therefore, indirect and informal approaches that allow greater openness on the part of individual users to express their needs are invaluable, and are widely used in the housing related support sector. The process for identifying users' support needs, illustrated in the example below, is expansive and open-ended, providing an opportunity for service users to reflect on and articulate their needs.

2 THYNC PROJECT (TRAINING AND HOUSING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTH CRAVEN): FOUNDATION HOUSING

The agency provides emergency open access accommodation, supported tenancies and floating support to some 300 young single homeless people and ex-offenders across Yorkshire.

The THYNC project offers housing and support for single young people who are in housing need or are homeless in a dispersed, rural area with poor access to services. The aim is to assist young people in making the transition from dependence to independence and to enable them become socially and economically active within their community by supporting them into education, training and employment.

Process of involvement: The assessment process is geared to the development of personal action plans with the young person, using a range of self-assessment tools that include pictures and life maps to produce:

- A life skills action plan (e.g. managing tasks around budgeting, cooking, developing confidence, controlling temper, and dealing with formal agencies such as the doctor or dentist)
- Action plan to build on experiences (e.g. problem solving, dealing with stressful situations, working with others and on ones' own, accepting praise and criticism, learning)
- A self contract – identifying goals, steps toward achieving them, and help required.

Benefits of involvement:

- By focusing on users' strengths and not only on their problems and difficulties, users' self-esteem is enhanced.
- The open nature of the process enables users to express need in their own terms and in a way that enables staff to challenge low expectations.

continued

- Action plans developed are more user-centred, mobilising users' own capacities alongside the knowledge, support and expertise of agency staff.

Factors in securing success: It takes time to build up a relationship with users to understand their needs. The process also demands sensitivity and expertise on the part of staff. It requires a commitment by the agency to a partnership approach and a culture that places high value on building on users' strengths and capacities.

Using different communication media

Central to effective communication and active listening is that information is accessible and sensitive to the needs and abilities of the users concerned. Agencies providing support to people whose first language is not English, for example, should ensure that they have access to interpreting and translation facilities. An audit of language skills among service users can play a significant dual role: examining the need for specialist language support and identifying language skills of those who are able and willing to provide help with translation, where confidentiality is not an issue.

For people with particular needs, for example those with a cognitive disability, forms of communication other than language, are essential. The use of pictures, word cards and familiar objects as a means of stimulating communication has been found useful with people suffering from dementia⁸. Similarly, the use of audio-tapes or Braille is essential for communicating directly with people who are visually impaired. Whatever medium is used, the information provided should be easily understood, in plain language and attractively presented.

For users generally, eliciting preferences and choices does not have to involve talking or writing. Other forms of communication may be used, for example, actions, drawing, art and the use of audio-visual tools. The project below uses different media (art, drama, and collage) to involve young people in thinking about what they want from the service as well as in envisaging the shape of new developments.

3 THE GROVE HOUSING TEAM: FOUNDATION HOUSING

This service, which also comes within the remit of Foundation Housing, provides support to young people 16 to 25 years. Most of them are at the younger end of the age range and many of them are women with young children. It aims to build confidence, help youngsters secure housing and employment and facilitate their integration into the community.

continued

⁸ Allen, K. (2001), *Communication and consultation: exploring ways for staff to involve people with dementia in developing services*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Process of involvement: In involving young people in identifying need, it uses creative and imaginative approaches that appeal to young people, for example:

- Video diary (modelled on the Big Brother television show) has been used to work out what kind of facilities people want in the resource centre they are designing.
- Art based media have been deployed to enable young people to communicate their needs and wishes. For example, individuals got together to make a collage of how they wanted the resource centre to look.

Benefits of involvement: Using forms of communication that are interesting and enjoyable for the groups of people supported by the service, facilitates engagement by users who might otherwise be unwilling to be involved.

Factors in securing success: Staff should be creative and imaginative in trying out different communication media and the agency has to be prepared to let staff experiment with different approaches.

There are particular challenges in communicating effectively with people who have communication and cognitive difficulties, as the example below illustrates.

4 COSSHAM GARDENS, BRISTOL: LEONARD CHESHIRE

Leonard Cheshire provides residential and housing support services and day, respite and workability schemes to people with physical disabilities, as well as specialist services for people with brain injury. Supported living schemes are growing in number and are often located close to residential homes, to facilitate moving on.

This Bristol based service provides accommodation and support in a 16-bed unit for people with severe physical disabilities, few of whom have intelligible speech.

Process of involvement: In order to communicate effectively with people, staff have employed the following methods:

- Close attention to actions and facial expressions, where understanding of meaning has been built up through relationships with people over time.
- Offering people simple choices from a number of options in the first instance and gradually expanding the range of options (e.g. asking people what activities they wanted to engage in when most had no recent experience of getting out and about was fruitless).
- Trying out new experiences in a safe place (e.g. bringing a dance and therapy group into the unit to give people the opportunity to see whether they would like it; then taking some users out of the unit for the activity).

continued

- Building links with the local Coalition for Disabled People to provide advocacy support on an ongoing basis.

Benefits of involvement: Over time users' confidence has been built up and the scope for exercising real choice has been expanded, including among people with considerable communication difficulties.

Factors in securing success: Facilitating effective choice among users with communication difficulties demands enormous effort and skill on the part of staff. The agency should ensure that appropriate training is offered to staff. Moreover, opportunities should be provided for staff to get together to reflect on and share experiences about what is most effective in engaging individual users with different needs and capacities. Partnerships with external advocacy organisations are important in ensuring users can express views and preferences that they may find difficulty in raising with staff directly.

Key learning points

Communication, through provision of relevant and accessible information, and by means of active listening, is the foundation block on which effective user involvement rests. It is underpinned by a commitment to the development of working practices, involving partnership between users and staff, based on mutual trust and respect.

Agencies may wish to:

- Develop an organisational culture that supports staff in trying out new ways of working.
- Provide the resources (including staff time) to develop interesting and creative forms of communication.
- Provide training and ongoing support for staff, to build on their existing skills, qualities and attitudes for communication and active listening.
- Ensure that opportunities are available to staff to get together to reflect upon, and share their experiences as a way of developing their practice.
- Draw on good practice from other agencies.

Agencies and staff may wish to:

- Ensure that the forms of communication used enable users with different needs, abilities and language skills to access information.

continued

- Be creative about the use of communication media that engage peoples' imagination and interest.
- Create opportunities for people to express themselves in their own terms, including involving them in shaping and producing information material.
- Start from an understanding of people's strengths – service users have strengths as well as vulnerabilities; involvement will be more successful where users are treated not as passive recipients but as active in developing their own solutions to problems with appropriate support.
- Work in a person-centred way, seeking to develop relationships of trust and confidence, using external advocates as appropriate.
- Find ways of pulling together information about individual need, so that a clear picture can be built up of the gap between expressed need and existing provision.

CHAPTER THREE

Involving Individuals and Groups in Day to Day Activities

Engaging in a dialogue with individual service users is the starting point and pre-requisite for agencies and services to involve people collectively in decisions about day to day activities. Having reflected upon the extent to which working practices, at the level of the user, are user-centred, providers should consider the following questions in exploring approaches to involving groups of users routinely in service delivery.

Key questions for providers to consider:

- Are there opportunities available for people to be involved in shaping what is provided and how it is provided on a day to day basis, whether formally or informally?
- Are these forums for involvement inclusive, enabling the participation of those who are difficult to engage for whatever reason? Do they enable users from black and minority ethnic groups to participate on an equal basis with other users?
- Do the opportunities for involvement take into account users' different capacities and abilities?
- Is the necessary support provided to enable people to develop the self-confidence and skills, to equip them to have a say in activities?

Providing opportunities for people to get together – to share experiences and views, provide mutual support, negotiate solutions to problems, deal with differences and conflict, take responsibility for individual actions – is an essential part of the process of user involvement and empowerment. Enabling groups of service users to express their views and to have a voice in how services are delivered requires both appropriate opportunities and forums for involvement, and the necessary support and skills to participate. If users are not supported, then they won't be able to make full use of the opportunities that are provided. If they are uncomfortable with the mechanisms and structures for participation, they will opt out of being involved. When this happens, user involvement becomes the preserve of the minority. The only voices that are heard are those of the most determined, the most articulate, and the most confident, and services cannot respond adequately or appropriately to users' needs.

In this chapter of the guide, the different approaches to engaging groups of users in shaping the form and process of service delivery on a day to day basis are set out. The examples range in scope from small-scale local initiatives to broader national forums and from relatively informal to more formal mechanisms for involvement. They encompass users whose relationship with the service is relatively short term, as well as those who have a

long-term involvement with a service. A common feature of all of the examples however is the fact that providers have sought to start from the specific interests, abilities and capacities of the service users for whom they provide support.

Local forums for getting people together

RESIDENT HOUSE MEETINGS FOR PEOPLE LIVING IN SHARED ACCOMMODATION

Regular house meetings are common arrangements for people to get together within shared accommodation. They can serve a dual purpose: being a means by which staff and management issues are brought to residents, as well as a forum for users to raise their concerns and make decisions about day to day activities.

“Living with other people can be difficult. While you can do what you want, you have to be aware of the effect on other people. You can raise any difficulties in house meetings when you can’t deal with them any other way.” (Service user)

5 MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE, SOUTH DURHAM: STONHAM HOUSING ASSOCIATION

The agency provides a varied range of housing and housing related support to some 4000 people across a diversity of client groups: people with mental health problems, learning difficulties, ex-offenders, young people at risk or leaving care, women fleeing domestic violence, single homeless people, and people with drug and alcohol problems. Length of stay varies from a night in a direct access hostel to several years in other forms of accommodation.

The South Durham Mental Health Service offers 24-hour support in a number of ordinary houses on a former council estate, in what was a mining community. There are 16 residents in total, with 3-4 sharing each house. From this base, other services, offering less intensive help are also provided e.g. floating support, drop-in facilities. The service started in 1991 as part of re-provision from a long stay psychiatric hospital.

Process of involvement: Individual house meetings (up to four residents) take place weekly, chaired by a resident on a rotating basis. A member of staff attends to facilitate the meeting and take notes. The focus is very practical – for example how domestic chores are organised – although group dynamics issues can also be addressed, for example, if one person is seen as not pulling their weight or a dispute has arisen between two or more people. There are also scheme meetings (next level), which are open to all 16 residents. At these, broader issues relating to the service as a whole are discussed. This can range from reviewing plans for the development of the service to arranging social activities and holidays, and managing the tuck shop. There is a welfare fund, which is managed by a group of residents to organise social activities and make small loans to people in financial difficulties.

continued

Benefits: Users develop self-esteem and derive support from each other. They also learn how to deal with conflict and tackle problems. Positive experiences of involvement in decision-making about the things that immediately affect people facilitate engagement in broader arenas and in respect of decisions at a more general level.

Factors in securing success: The timing and pace of the meeting should be in tune with the needs and experiences of users as opposed to staff. Staff should try to create an informal, welcoming and open culture that facilitates a two-way exchange. Decision-making structures within the agency should support such a process. Thus, it is crucial that there is visible follow-up on ideas and proposals from meetings. This may not only take the form of staff responding to demands for change. It may also involve supporting users to take action to produce the kinds of changes they want to see themselves.

These forums may be led/chaired by a service user (as in the example above), external facilitator from an advocacy organisation or a member of staff. What is important is that there is a welcoming, open atmosphere and a flexible approach to engaging people.

“There is no pressure. Each person can move at her own pace and be involved in the things you want to be involved in. It makes you feel really good. You feel really involved that you are part of something. It helps you to talk to people.” (Service user)

Providing people with the opportunity to come together within shared accommodation is an important way in which service users can share experiences and gain support from each other. Moreover, for new residents, support from existing users may enable them to develop the confidence to take part in other activities; they in turn can reciprocate this help as they become more established.

“I was terrified of coming along [to the drop-in] when I first came. I’m not a very confident person. But I was taken along there by another woman, who was living in the shared house. It’s easy now. It gives me somewhere safe to come.” (Service user)

Encouraging mutual support – either through informal mechanisms or through mentoring or buddying systems can be important in developing self-esteem and confidence.

For agencies working within specialist drug and alcohol projects, group work may be a specific feature of practice with service users. Engaging people in day to day activities within their scheme, allocating responsibility for communal tasks and representing the views of other residents to staff is seen as part of the process of people taking responsibility for their lives.

6 NACRO HOUSING

The agency provides accommodation and support to some 1400 offenders and ex-offenders in England, many of whom also experience mental health problems, or are drug users. Accommodation ranges from 24 hour staffed hostels, shared houses and floating support within self-contained tenancies. Whilst it is intended that people move on to more independent accommodation, if they are unable to cope, there is the possibility of moving back into more supported settings. Schemes vary in the length of time that people stay – from around 3 months to at most, a year.

The service here comprises two 8-bed hostels with 24-hour support for two groups of men with drug problems – young men aged 16 to 25 years and older men – aged 25 years and above.

Process for involvement: At the beginning of each week, residents agree a schedule for the group, including who organises the shopping and cooking and who will be the resident representative at the staff team meeting. The representative consults with each resident about issues that need to be raised at the team meeting.

Benefits: Among individuals and groups who live chaotic and disorganised lives, resident and user meetings provide the arena for people to negotiate ground rules for behaviour that enable them to live together. Funding has been secured to purchase IT equipment and this has enabled users to develop their own leaflets about the service. A significant achievement has been the production by residents of a guide for young people coming into the area on how to access help in respect of drug use.

Factors in securing success: Chairs are offered training and support in managing meetings. Given the relatively short time users stay in these services, their involvement does not tend to extend to service strategy and governance. The focus is on what is of immediate concern to people. Group activities are organised around such leisure pursuits as football, pool, cooking and IT. Each scheme has a budget for tenant participation, which can be used in different ways. For example, in one scheme, users produced a video about their experiences.

GETTING PEOPLE TOGETHER WHEN THEY LIVE INDEPENDENTLY

Support services are not only offered within the framework of hostels or shared housing. In the case of individual tenancies and floating support, creating opportunities for service users to get together is likely to demand ingenuity and creativity on the part of providers.

In the following example, people living independently within their own tenancies are encouraged to come together, informally, at local venues. Support is built on users' own capacities and encourages them to value and draw on each other's skills and resourcefulness.

7 KEY RING

The agency provides a service to people with learning difficulties and some with additional physical disabilities, in ordinary housing, with support organised through networks. Each network consists of nine flats/houses scattered within a neighbourhood. Support is available from a community living worker, living within the same locality whose role is not that of a professional but more of a trusted friend. Additionally, users derive support from each other. It has in recent years expanded from being a London based service to one operating across four regions in England, encompassing some 200-300 people.

Process of involvement: Network members meet informally once a week at a central venue within the locality e.g. community centre, pub. People are encouraged to come along although it is their decision. Whilst members of staff come as well, users concerns and interests dictate the content and pace of the discussion. Users also organise their own refreshments. The network meeting is not intended as a substitute for people developing their own social networks in the community, but as support and assistance toward that end.

Benefits: Network members draw support and friendship from each other and develop confidence in their own ability to manage independently. The network provides a bridge to community activities and resources that are the means of facilitating community integration, expanding social networks and ensuring a sense of belonging.

Factors in securing success: The service is underpinned by a philosophy that users are more capable, resourceful, gifted and enterprising than they themselves (and often others) realise. Sharing experiences as well as finding solutions to problems together is seen as one way that users can realise their own goals and dreams. The role of community living workers is to support independence and not create dependency. This requires that users are enabled to make their own choices and to learn from experience i.e. the emphasis is not on avoiding risk but through support and skills development, to enable people to manage risk appropriately.

Encouraging people in the belief that they are of value, that they have an important contribution to make, and that their involvement really does make a difference, is crucial toward ensuring their continued participation. This is further illustrated in the service below, which provides a range of housing with support to older people. It also draws on the skills and interests of older users. In this way the capacity of the agency to respond sensitively to need is enhanced. Moreover users' strengths are channelled to increase self-esteem and provide a sense of purpose and self-worth.

8 DURHAM AGED MINEWORKERS HOMES

The agency provides services to some 2000 older people via: independent housing with low level support, sheltered housing schemes and a residential care home, in former coal mining areas of the North East.

Process of involvement: Each scheme elects a representative from among the residents, for a period of 3 years and there is a network of around 70 representatives covering most of the housing schemes. Representatives can access a welfare fund to organise social events. Some run coffee mornings weekly to enable those who cannot easily get out to socialise with one another.

Benefits: As well as being a conduit of information and views to and from older people in individual housing schemes, many of the scheme representatives provide neighbourly support for frail residents as well as for those who are lonely. They see this as a two-way exchange that gives value and purpose to their lives.

Factors in securing success: The agency provides support to representatives to enable them to carry out their role. Staff are also available at local surgeries to deal with any issues that people might want to raise directly with them.

Some people may be particularly difficult to involve at group level – for example, because of the extent of their own personal difficulties, illness, or suspicion and mistrust which may result from experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Whilst it is important to consider involvement at this level as voluntary, problems of engaging people should also provide a spur for creative and imaginative thinking about the kinds of inclusive forums that can be developed. The following example is illustrative of an approach that has successfully involved young people who are generally reluctant to participate in conventional meetings.

9 GIPSIL, LEEDS

GIPSIL is a community-based service providing furnished supported tenancies to some 100 young people (16-25 years) that includes care leavers, as well as single parents and their children. One of the projects, called *Spark* provides additional support to tenants who are accessing college, training and work.

Process of involvement: A core feature of *Spark* is a weekly evening meeting, which offers an opportunity for people to meet together, share skills and experiences and gain support from each other and from GIPSIL. The evening is structured around a formal meeting to consider plans and opportunities for the future, a group meal and a social activity e.g. people might chat informally or watch a video together.

continued

Spark in association with Vera Media, produced a short film documenting the lives of five young people in the community, which was shown at the 13th Leeds International Film Festival. It has since been shown as an information and training film by a number of local, national and international organisations.

The *Cyber Suite* was developed in response to an expressed need of young people for a place to get together to surf the net and access e-mail. It was secured in part through their fund-raising efforts. It acts as an informal drop-in facility for young people, not just those within the project but within the wider community as well, to improve their IT skills and to raise issues informally with support workers.

Benefits: *Spark* users have accessed courses to develop skills and training in addition to existing work and educational commitments. For example, skills gained in fundraising facilitated a successful bid for £1000 to develop the group's activities. This project also demonstrates how user involvement can be 'grown'. Starting from the kinds of things that people want to do, they are offered opportunities and encouragement to develop skills and capacities, in order to pursue those interests, and to assume increasing responsibility for organising and developing projects themselves. Not only does this improve motivation, it enhances their capacity to take control over their own lives, whilst being actively involved in developing services and organising day-to-day activities.

Factors in securing success: Three factors in particular have been central in successfully involving young people. First, there is the relative informality of the forums for involvement. Second, they have been built around the kinds of things that are of interest to young people. Third, skill development has been an integral part of the process of involvement, which in turn has expanded the opportunities available to people to develop activities of interest to them.

The adoption of a similar approach and method in the project described below demonstrates that significant steps forward can be made in involving people who are isolated and have complex needs. The process started from the identification of common interests, offered opportunities for people to do things together that they found effective and that they enjoyed and helped them to take responsibility for negotiating difficulties and conflicts. It required a commitment to persist through the inevitable ebbs and flows of the process, willingness on the part of staff to work with people, and an investment of time and money.

10 HEREFORD EXCLUDE ME IN PROJECT: YMCA

YMCA Housing provides housing related support within hostels, flats, foyers as well as youth and leisure facilities to some 7000 young people, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, many with challenging behaviour and some with offending and/or care backgrounds.

The *Exclude Me In Project* developed in a dilapidated, 8-bedroom house, which was the home of 7 young men, all with substantial needs, a strong drugs culture, de-motivated, cynical and with little experience of doing anything together.

Process of involvement: Initial meetings with residents identified a need to do the house up and decorate their own spaces as well as an opportunity to do 'some training'. Funding of £3000 was secured for decoration, training and activities (under the Exclude Me In scheme, developed through the YMCA Youth Work Unit).

Key features of the project were:

- Working with people in groups to identify what training and activities they wanted to engage in; costing initiatives and managing the funding.
- Getting individuals to take responsibility for specific areas e.g. one resident was responsible for training and for finding out from individuals what they wanted; another dealt with organising activities.
- Working together to negotiate problems and difficulties. For example, tensions developed because some young people put more energy and commitment into house decoration, whilst others spent little or no time. A solution was proposed by residents to deal with the conflict and was accepted by the group. This involved a 'carrot and stick' approach, whereby points were earned for work done, which could then be spent on activities.

Benefits: Tangible outcomes achieved through the project included: improvement in the living environment, engagement in activities, skill development. Subjective outcomes, from the perspective of staff and residents, were increased self-confidence, development of negotiation and decision-making capacity, improved quality of relationships between residents and between residents and staff. The experience of working together also provided the springboard for the establishment of a participative residents group that met every two weeks, and fed directly into the Housing Committee and Board.

Factors securing success: Key to the success of the initiative was access to seed corn funding. Having first established what young people themselves wanted, the process of involvement was geared to achieve their goals. Positive experience of involvement within the project has broadened the sphere of involvement and facilitated the establishment of formal structures for developing a dialogue between users, managers and the Board.

From local to broad based regional and national forums

For larger organisations, providers may wish to get people together to learn from experience in different areas, to build a sense of identity and mutual support and explore possibilities and options for meeting needs. There are two broad types of participatory forums considered here: those that involve people on some ongoing basis and those that are convened for a one-off consultative exercise or as an occasional event.

ONGOING USER FORUMS

Some agencies organise regional and national events that provide an opportunity within a relatively informal atmosphere for sharing information, ideas and experiences, between staff, managers and users on the one hand and between schemes and localities, on the other. They enable users to raise issues of concern to them and providers to test out new ideas. Relatively small organisations, albeit dispersed over a wide geographical area, for example, Key Ring and Elfrida Society, have an annual conference that is part discussion and part social event that enables users to initiate ideas on matters of interest to them. Support provided to enable users to attend included: travel expenses, and assistance from staff members. Likewise, Strutton Housing Association, which provides housing related support to people with HIV/Aids, organises open regional tenant forums with directors and managers available to respond to issues raised by users. The Users Forum within Leonard Cheshire, described more fully in case study 24 (chapter five), has established regional training events and conferences, bringing users together from all parts of the country. A significant feature of the training is that it is provided by people who are disabled themselves.

A very different approach is the establishment of a user group, drawn from a wide geographical area and encompassing people in dispersed schemes, which has been developed and supported by Stonham Housing Association. This was one of a number of initiatives that was given impetus through the Advocacy and Self-Help Project, which was set up by Stonham in South-West England with funding from the National Lottery over a three year period. Whilst the project funding has ended, the user group has been sustained through ongoing support from staff in the service.

11 SERVICE USER GROUP: STONHAM HOUSING ASSOCIATION

The service user group comprises both people with mental health problems and those with learning difficulties, across a dispersed, fairly rural area. It has been established for some three years, it aims to:

- Act as a 'self-advocacy' forum, so users can meet regularly and have an opportunity to voice their needs and views.
- Use group meetings to establish support networks, share information and develop social contact.

continued

- Encourage users to promote self-advocacy and gain the confidence and skills to integrate fully into the local community.

Process of involvement: A member of staff facilitates the group, and helps with publicity material, accessing funding and training opportunities. A self-advocacy organisation for people with learning difficulties also provides support. Meetings are held every 4-5 weeks. Although only some 6 or 7 members attend regularly, there are over 60 people on the mailing list, many of whom come to the social events organised by the group, on about a monthly basis.

Benefits: A regular meeting place has been secured, which also provides an office base for the group. Active members help out in the office, organising events and producing publicity material. They in turn have been supported through training in IT skills, website design and funding applications, with some success.

Factors in securing success: Dedicated time and commitment from a member of staff was necessary to get the group off the ground and provide continuity, support and assistance to those interested in being involved. Meetings are chaired and minutes are taken by members of the group and the staff member acts primarily as a facilitator. As the group has become more established, its reliance on the member of staff has diminished somewhat. Even so, some users' variable health means that a regular and consistent commitment is not always possible.

Involvement requires considerable commitment from people whose energies may already be much depleted in dealing with the tasks of everyday living. Care should be taken to ensure that involvement is not onerous on people; that there is support available from staff for those assuming responsibility and leadership; and that the groups are open, facilitating renewal and expansion.

ONE-OFF EVENTS/FORUMS

Sometimes it makes sense to bring people together for a specific purpose. These may be people from different services, which are run by the same agency, or people from a number of different agencies may come together around an issue that is of common concern.

Among agencies providing support to homeless people, Speak Out events are successful in engaging people, who are reluctant to participate in ongoing forums. Here, homeless people present issues that concern them with invited representatives from key agencies, including the police and local authority. They have a useful role to play in giving people a voice and ensuring that individual problems can be posed directly with those who have the solutions in their hands.

Key to the success of initiatives that bring people together to share experiences is that they are sustained by action. Mechanisms have to be developed to ensure that the issues posed are followed through, and responsibility attached to those in positions of power to effect change. It is important that the messages heard and responded to reflect users' priorities and do not simply accord with what providers and services want to hear. Enthusiasm for involvement quickly turns to cynicism, if there is no action and feedback.

It is also advisable that providers review and reflect on the usefulness of particular methods and approaches for involving groups of users. What worked in one set of circumstances may not be appropriate or effective for example as the experience of involvement develops or services change and expand. For example, the extension of the Key Ring network to regions beyond London and the South East, and the inclusion of users across metropolitan, urban and rural areas has posed a raft of new issues around appropriate forms and forums for engagement at regional and national levels.

Prerequisites for bringing users together

Across the diversity of user groups and initiatives described above, there are a number of common issues that providers should think through and plan for, in order that the process is a positive experience. These include:

- Ensuring that the forms of involvement take into account the length of time users are likely to remain in the service.
- Consideration of the resources that will be required (staff time and money), for example:
 - Dedicated staff time to provide continuity and support to the group.
 - Support, encouragement and training for staff to facilitate groups.
 - Skilled, independent advocacy support, separate from service providers.
- Financial backing to purchase equipment, organise publicity, provide training opportunities and an accessible venue.
- Acknowledgement that enhancing users capacity to organise themselves will not occur overnight. It will take time and investment in developing skills.
- Understanding that not everyone will want to participate to the same extent and that opportunities for different levels of engagement should be provided.
- Ensuring that too much pressure is not placed on individuals over an extended period of time and that it remains open to new participants and new ideas.
- Developing clear boundaries on the role and scope of decision-making power and the extent of involvement of users and staff, so that both can sign up to, and accept responsibility.

The benefits of bringing users together

Involving users collectively can ensure significant outcomes that contribute to the objectives of *Supporting People*:

From a user perspective this includes:

- Personal development: increased confidence, self-esteem, problem-solving capacity and negotiating skills.

- Practical skills development that not only reduces dependence on other people, but has the potential to offer more adventurous activities and expand employment options.
- Pooling skills and experience and reducing social isolation.
- The development of more responsive services.

From a staff/agency perspective this is likely to:

- Increase trust and confidence between users and staff.
- Enhance user independence and control.
- Develop confidence that services that are more responsive to user expressed needs.
- Increase the effectiveness of the organisation.

Key learning points

Providing opportunities for service users to come together and have a voice in organising and developing activities is a fundamental part of the process of engaging them in decision making about day to day activity and service delivery. Central to the success of such initiatives are the following:

- The forms and types of participatory initiatives should be broad-ranging, to enable people with different interests, capacities and experiences to be involved at the pace and to the extent that is appropriate and comfortable for them.
- Start with users immediate interests and needs. Draw on the kinds of things that people want to do as an opportunity to expand their skills and expertise.
- Clarify the role of user forums and the power they can exercise – the developmental process for individuals may be frustrated or undermined if the forum does not have a real role.
- Don't expect immediate successes – people will likely need time to develop trust and confidence in the process.
- Support should be provided to people in negotiating ways through problems; don't seek to impose solutions when difficulties arise.
- Opportunities should be explored to build on and harness users' own strengths, energy and enthusiasm.
- Openness, creativity and flexibility are essential in developing participatory forums. Ongoing reflection of what works, why and with whom is a necessary part of mutual learning and dialogue between staff and users.

CHAPTER FOUR

Involving users in Planning, Policy and Performance measurement

In this chapter, four broad themes or areas of involvement at strategic level are considered:

- Service planning and development.
- Shaping policies and procedures.
- Staff training and recruitment.
- Evaluating the scope and quality of provision.

Service planning and development

From the examples given in previous chapters, it will be evident that in the context of open, participatory forums, users can both identify areas for service development and shape the content and form of future services. Establishing a dialogue with users at an individual and scheme level can facilitate mutual trust and confidence as well as enhance their motivation and skills to participate in broader planning arenas that may be more abstracted from individuals' immediate needs and concerns.

Involvement in broad-based service planning is most effective where it is born of an established, positive dialogue between users and providers. For example, securing users' participation in shaping and designing new schemes often arises directly out of the experience of involving individuals' in contributing to the refurbishment of their own homes. The following example offers a useful illustration of this 'growing' involvement in which as a result of previous successful initiatives that began with users' immediate interests, a more broad-based engagement in service planning was achieved. A positive experience of engagement at the level of the individual prompted the provider to develop a formal group, involving users directly in designing and planning new schemes.

12 ADVANCE HOUSING AND SUPPORT

This agency provides a range of housing and support (including floating support) for over 1000 people, some with mental health problems and some with learning difficulties, across the Midlands and Southern England.

Process of involvement: The agency embarked upon a programme of work on some of its properties in order to provide better facilities for the people who lived in them. Existing residents were involved in the plans for refurbishment from the outset. They were asked to indicate where they wanted to live during the refurbishment, and they were offered the opportunity to work with architects and technical staff to show how they wanted their rooms to look, in terms of the use of space, colour schemes, fittings and furnishings.

The agency has now built on this initiative and established a design group to facilitate the involvement of residents in the design of new properties and refurbishment schemes. A group of four tenants and two technical staff has been set up and aims to:

- Develop tenants' ability to work as a team.
- Develop tenants' technical ability so they can contribute in a meaningful way to design.

Benefits: For users involved, the result has been a marked improvement in communication and social skills and enhanced self-esteem. Additionally, there is the possibility that if the tenants can develop their skills they could form a consultancy group, under an employment initiative being developed by the agency.

Factors in securing success: Three factors in particular have facilitated and sustained users' participation in the Design Group: the opportunity to develop skills in areas they have an interest in, being able to socialise with other people and the persistence of staff to maintain the momentum. A significant motivating factor in attracting individuals and establishing the group was organising outings, including residential weekends that people found enjoyable.

Engaging users in service planning requires both the development of a range of skills and expertise – on the part of staff and users – and changes in working practices and decision-making mechanisms within the agency. Involvement also necessarily involves negotiation and working through conflict and difference. These issues are illustrated in the example below.

13 PARTICIPATION IN MANAGEMENT SCHEME (PIM) PROJECT, YMCA HOUSING

YMCA Housing provides accommodation and housing with support in a range of hostels, flats, foyers as well as youth and leisure facilities to some 7000 young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, many of them with challenging behaviour and some with offending and/or care backgrounds. Involvement with the agency averages about a year, though some services deal with a more transient group. The PIM project was located within a Special Needs Hostel for young people with a variety of backgrounds and a range of needs. The aim was to involve residents, staff and the management committee in developing move-on accommodation comprising eight flats.

Process of involvement:

(a) Clarifying the level of involvement

The process started with a discussion about the kinds of decisions and the appropriate level of decision-making power that users could hold. These were clarified as follows:

Decisive: For some issues, residents were responsible, with any management committee members present, for making final decisions. These decisions were fed back, firstly to the development committee and then to the management committee. Examples of issues here included: rules regarding overnight guests, type of cookers and meters, colour schemes and carpets.

Consultative: For other issues, residents and staff were consulted but the management committee made the final decision. Examples included: tenure, access, level and frequency of support.

Informative: There were some areas where residents did not influence decision-making. Here decisions were fed back to the residents via the key worker. Examples were: rent and arrears policy, landlord involvement in breach of contract.

(b) How the group worked

A variety of working methods were employed encompassing creative ways of developing skills in decision making, and joint activities to get people working together. Decision making skills were enhanced through small group work, role-play, debates and open negotiation. Joint working was facilitated through team building games, design of and participation in a communications course delivered by the local college, and an Outward Bound weekend for which every area – finance, food, content and accommodation – was the responsibility of the group.

Benefits:

- Development of trust and confidence between group members, so that people felt able to express concerns about behaviours, attitudes and motivations.

continued

- Enhancement of negotiating skills and ways for dealing with difficult decisions e.g. working out an allocations procedure for the new flats that reflected both the different size and aesthetics of the flats and the needs, attitudes and commitment of residents.
- Group members continued commitment to participation after moving in to the new accommodation, which development was user-led.

Factors in securing success: Considerable difficulties were experienced that required commitment, negotiation and creativity to overcome. Firstly, it was important at the outset to clarify the responsibilities for decision-making. Secondly, among users, a major challenge was to get people to attend meetings regularly when they were not accustomed to making such commitments. Two factors in particular helped to sustain participation: the first was holding meetings at a set time on a regular basis – this formed as a weekly event on the same day and the same time; the second was having reflective sessions with the group from time to time – to consider what were the things that worked and what might be needed to sustain interest. Flexibility and openness to new ideas and suggestions were important here.

Achieving change in methods of working and decision-making mechanisms is unlikely to proceed in an even, consensual manner. Where staff and managers have been used to operating in a particular way, involving users in decision-making can be expected to generate tension and conflict. Even where staff may agree in principle to involve service users, this does not mean that it will proceed smoothly in practice, especially when it becomes evident that they will have to cede some control over decision-making.

SECURING CHANGE IN DECISION MAKING PROCESSES REQUIRES:

- Support for staff to sustain motivation and work through the issues involved in ‘letting go’ of power.
- Making explicit at the outset the kind of influence the different stakeholders will have on decision-making and the areas that are open to negotiation.
- Establishing feedback arrangements that facilitate communication between all the interest groups involved and that enable concerns to be expressed and conflicts resolved. For example, managers may find it is better to meet with staff and users separately and together.

Engaging with the wider community: service development initiatives

A number of providers of housing with support have as an explicit service purpose, the inclusion of people in everyday life and within local communities (an objective, which is central to *Supporting People*). This is reflected in the approaches developed by those

providers to involve service users and in resulting service development initiatives. In the first example, the agency sought to draw upon users' experiences and willingness to help others, both to challenge stereotypes of homeless people and to develop their skills and capacities to build a better life.

14 THE GROVE HOUSING TEAM: FOUNDATION HOUSING

This project started from the recognition that young homeless people had a lot to offer that was often overlooked because of their status as service users. Training and support to young people is provided to enable them to go into secondary schools and talk to students about what it is like to be homeless.

'Our kids have lots of life experience and energy and why should they not be able to help others so they can avoid the pitfalls they themselves have experienced'.

Process of involvement: The young people go into schools on a number of separate occasions and sessions involve:

- Telling their story – to get over to the students that homelessness is neither romantic or attractive and enable them to seek help if they have problems.
- Budgeting games – getting kids to work out how they would survive on benefits.
- Trivial Pursuits/Board Game – about managing life e.g. you are reported for noise pollution, go back X squares; you get accepted on a training course, move forward Y squares.

Benefits: Involvement of users in helping others challenges traditional stereotypes of homeless people and enhances their own feelings of self-worth and esteem. Accredited training is provided through courses at a local college. The experience offers an opportunity for young people to get work in related areas.

Factors in securing success: Personal and skills development – in the form of confidence building and communicating with people – are essential. Ongoing support from staff is also required to assist users in dealing with any problems and difficulties that may arise. Training and accreditation offer a route for some young people into employment.

A different approach to highlighting the discrimination experienced by service users and to provide them with the resources and skills to confront exclusionary processes is illustrated in the example from a service providing support to people with learning difficulties.

15 ACCESS TO THE COMMUNITY INITIATIVE: ELFRIDA SOCIETY

The initiatives described below had the aim of raising public awareness and helping to redress the degree of social exclusion experienced by people with learning difficulties.

Process of involvement: The *Out and About Project* involved service users visiting local restaurants and compiling a guide to highlight those places that were accessible for people with learning difficulties.

Another project has involved users in collecting information for a research project on the accessibility of GP surgeries for a primary care trust. They have helped to develop the interview questionnaire, as well as a pro-forma to describe the physical environment. Practice managers have been interviewed, and the interviews videotaped. Video cameras have also been used to describe the physical location.

A third project – *the Wild Bunch* – has arisen in response to an expressed need from service users for a club night for people with learning difficulties and their friends. Early stages of the project involved getting people together, working with them to identify and develop the whole range of skills needed to take on the project – DJ, lighting, stage, publicity. The project secured the help of local artists to develop the club's own musical, lyrical and visual identity. Subsequently, a Wild Bunch Committee was established to enable people with learning difficulties to take a lead in promoting, managing and working on future events. This was made possible with the enhancement of users' confidence and expertise.

Benefits: Users have developed a range of skills that are transferable to other areas. They have also developed confidence, self-esteem and the ability to challenge discriminatory practices as well as to develop their own approaches to securing an ordinary life.

Factors in securing success: At each stage of the projects, people have been supported through confidence building and learning the skills necessary to carry out the work. Tasks have been broken down into 'bite-sized chunks', related to the goals of the project (interviewing people, using a camera, compiling a report using text, drawings and photos, lighting, mixing sound). Achieving mastery in relatively simple tasks has enhanced users' capacities to take on more complex tasks. A significant feature of all these initiatives is that users viewed them as important toward securing an ordinary life.

A number of agencies have sought to work with users to make a film or video as a way of challenging negative stereotypes. Leeds Irish Health and Homes, which provides supported tenancies to Irish people with a range of problems including mental health problems and substance abuse, secured funding to make a film with tenants to highlight their experience of discrimination living and working in Britain and to illustrate their support needs. It has also supported the development of a women's group, recognising the specific needs of women in the context of a resident population that is dominated by single men.

The example above raises a more general issue for providers. Dealing with diversity among service users and providing appropriate support to challenge the different kinds of disadvantage experienced by them may require the provision of specialist services. For

example, the West Pennine Housing Association has established specific services for Asian women and finds it easier to involve them in the framework of these services. Other approaches to managing diversity and establishing an anti-discriminatory practice include the employment of specialist workers and the forging of relationships with external, community based agencies to develop and sustain support networks⁹.

Shaping policy

Most services have some mechanism for consulting with users in developing their policies and procedures. For this to be effective, it is important that the timing and scope for consultation allows the development of a dialogue with, and feedback to, users.

Whilst acknowledging that some aspects of policy may not be negotiable, a key distinction may be drawn between processes for involvement that are primarily passive and those that engage people more actively in a dialogue. Both are illustrated in the following example.

16 DISABLED PEOPLES' FORUM, LEONARD CHESHIRE

The Disabled Peoples Forum within Leonard Cheshire has been established with the aim of securing an independent voice for users in the agency. It is supported by a staff team of disabled people.

Process of involvement: There are three distinct ways in which users have a say in the development of new policies and procedures. First, there is a formal three-month consultation period with service users in respect of all new policies, before they can be implemented. Second, forum members participate in working groups developing policy. Third, user views, expressed through regional meetings and training events, shape policies and procedures. The principles and elements of agency policy on advocacy and self-advocacy for example, were derived through such informal processes.

Benefits: Involving users in policy development contributes to wider ownership and ensures that service users' issues and concerns are reflected in agency policy and procedures.

Factors in securing success: Opportunities for involvement should not only be reactive and consultative; they should also enable service users to have direct say in how and to what extent they insert their views and experiences. Even so, there will inevitably be some areas that are not negotiable, such as anti-discriminatory policies and practice.

⁹ See Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) (2000) Reflecting the Needs and Concerns of Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in Supporting People, London: DTLR.

Staff recruitment and training

Increasingly agencies are involving users in the recruitment of staff. The training and support needs of people should be addressed if this involvement is to be anything other than tokenistic. Some services find it helpful to employ trainers with similar life experiences to those of their users.

17 EAST THAMES HOUSING GROUP

The agency provides a range of accommodation and support, from small residential care homes to group housing and individual flats with support. It caters for some 600 people across different user groups – older people, people with learning difficulties and mental health needs, within London and Essex. It offers specialist accommodation with support for women with learning difficulties who have been abused.

Process of involvement: The learning disability service within the agency has sought to involve service users in the recruitment of staff at all levels. 12 residents with learning difficulties across different schemes have agreed to be involved in staff recruitment. Training in selection and recruitment procedures has been developed and facilitated by Powerhouse, a self-advocacy organisation of people with learning difficulties. It includes issues such as confidentiality, equal opportunities and framing questions. Users sit on all recruitment panels, alongside other panel members. If appropriate, the user panellists will seek to ascertain the views of more disabled people, for example by visiting people in homes to explore what they value from staff.

Benefits: Over time, users have developed more confidence in expressing their views in recruitment and selection panels. Their involvement has meant that the service has developed greater sensitivity to the kinds of staff attributes that are valued by users. It also enhances users' sense of ownership of the service. Both staff and users find it a rewarding and valuable experience.

Factors in securing success: Training and support from an independent advocacy service has ensured that user expertise has been developed and enhanced.

Other approaches to involving service users in recruitment include having a two-stage interview process. Firstly, a panel of users interview all shortlisted candidates, and their views are then taken into account in the final selection which is undertaken in an interview by staff. However, as well as involving users in recruitment interviews, providers should give consideration as to how they might participate in earlier stages of the selection process, for example, in developing the job specification and in short-listing candidates.

Involving users in staff training, for instance as part of an induction process, can be a useful way of instilling a culture and ethos of involvement. It serves to reinforce the respective skills of staff members on the one hand and user expertise derived from personal experience and insight, on the other (see Annex 1, for examples of how users might be involved in staff training in different settings).

Performance: evaluating the scope and quality of provision

The *Supporting People* programme emphasises that users should be involved in evaluating the scope and quality of services. This chapter sets out some of the ways in which users can be involved in the evaluation of services, and provides an introduction to the range of methods that can be employed to access user views of the services they receive. A package of guidance on *Supporting People* quality and monitoring processes has been developed for Commissioning Bodies and provider organisations, and specific guidance on involving users in quality and monitoring processes is currently being developed. Readers are advised to consult this guidance which can be found on the *Supporting People* website at: [Http://www.spkweb.org.uk](http://www.spkweb.org.uk) under General Documents and Discussion \ General Documents \ Quality and Monitoring.

DEVELOPING AND EVALUATING QUALITY STANDARDS

A useful starting point is involving users in setting and reviewing of the standards by which services will be measured. A greater depth of involvement may be achieved through the participation of users directly in developing quality standards that become the means whereby services are evaluated. The initiative below describes the proposed development of a charter in housing that is intended to be compiled, audited, inspected and awarded by older people. It reflects a departure from traditional approaches to assessing quality standards in two key respects. First, older people will be involved in setting the criteria for quality standards. Second, the standards will encompass housing in its most general sense: aspects of the environment, the building and the home.

18 SENIOR CHARTER INITIATIVE: ANCHOR HOUSING

Anchor Housing, a main provider of supported housing for older people, has developed the project.

Process of involvement: By involving older people through panels, the project aims to assist them in identifying what is valuable, essential and desirable within their housing environment. From this, a charter will be developed which will incorporate the standards and criteria developed through the panels and tested through the involvement of other key stakeholders (including the experience of similar initiatives in Europe and elsewhere). The resulting charter will be piloted and its impact on services, practice and design assessed. It will offer a tool for older people to choose and differentiate between housing types and projects. Training will also be provided to develop the potential of older people to act as assessors and auditors.

As the project is only in development, it is not possible to assess benefits and outcomes. However, it draws on the experience of a successful initiative in the Netherlands – the Senioren Label (or Senior Citizen Label) – a consumer quality certificate of older people's housing that is fully controlled by older people.

LINKING INTO DECISION MAKING

In involving users in the evaluation of the services it is important that the views and experiences expressed influence service planning and development. How can users be involved in negotiating priorities, developing action plans, reviewing and assessing progress?

In the two examples below, there are quite different processes for the involvement of users, but in both, there are formal mechanisms in place that link the gathering of views with the development of action plans and feedback loops.

19 EAST THAMES HOUSING GROUP

Process of involvement: A thorough review of the experience of the service among different groups of users is carried out every two years, using external facilitators to support the process. Feedback loops and explicit action planning mechanisms flow into the business planning cycle, and users are involved in evaluating the resulting changes. Among the 130 or so users with learning disabilities, for example, in-depth interviews about their experience of the service are carried out with some 20 service users, from different schemes. These interviews are facilitated by an independent advocacy organisation – People First. A report and an Action Plan are prepared in accessible formats and sent out to all users, not only those who were interviewed. After six months, meetings with groups of users are organised to explore how the Action Plan has been implemented, and to consider further changes that might be required. These meetings are also facilitated by People First.

Benefits: This process delivers the agency with in-depth information about users' experience of the service. Moreover, the establishment of clear mechanisms for feedback and action planning mean that a dialogue is created between users and providers that links experiences and need to business planning and change management. This link promotes a trusting relationship between the organisation and users, and demonstrates the high value to the organisation of users' views

Factors in securing success: While qualitative interviews enable providers to discern what is important to people, the themes and proposals for action derived through this method, are tested out with a much wider group of users. Moreover the use of external facilitators means that users can speak freely without fear of upsetting staff on whom they are reliant for support. The process requires investment of both staff time and resources, including payment for external facilitation.

The methods described in the above example for gathering information and devising and reviewing action plans are particularly suited to the relatively small size of the agency and its location within a discrete geographical area. In the example below a different approach was developed, as the agency is a considerably larger, national organisation, and it caters for a diversity of client groups across many different types of services.

20 STONHAM HOUSING

Process of involvement: Focus groups are organised on an annual basis to provide systematic and qualitative information on users' experiences of the services and aspects of unmet need. External consultants with expertise in the method facilitate these groups. The groups tend to be organised around a particular theme or client group and involve people from different schemes. They are held in a comfortable venue (e.g. hotel) with refreshments provided. The consultants write the report, which is then considered by the Board of Directors. An action plan is agreed, in which objectives are prioritised, agreed and this is then fed into the business planning process. The report and management decisions arising out of them are fed back to users through the Service Users Annual Report. Additionally, Practice Development Advisors, in each region, whose remit is to address care quality and consistency across the organisation, work with staff directly on the issues raised, toward the aim of shaping a more responsive, sensitive and reflective practice.

Benefits: Service users have the opportunity to express their views in an open relaxed atmosphere as well as to share experiences with others who have similar kinds of needs. For the agency, it offers a comparative picture of users' experiences across different types of schemes in a way that facilitates detailed action planning. It also feeds directly into staff training through the work of the practice development advisors.

Factors in securing success: The process enables the experiences of a relatively large group of users to be accessed by the agency. The use of external facilitators with expertise in running focus groups and working with people with different support needs can ensure the quality of the product(s). While users are not directly involved in setting priorities for action, a significant feature of the process is the link to staff training and development.

The approaches that have been described above, toward establishing standards and assessing quality of provision, can be adapted and employed in the course of such formal processes as *Supporting People* Service Reviews and Best Value Reviews.

Techniques for accessing users' views

Many of the approaches described earlier in the guidance – meetings, discussion groups, ongoing relationships with users, community development and youth work models – provide continuous information about user views on the scope and quality of the services that are offered. Additionally, methods for systematically gathering information that draw on research skills and techniques may be employed. These are considered below along with the issues that require consideration in deciding appropriateness.

FOCUS GROUPS AND INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Qualitative one-to-one and focus group interviews are more useful than structured (quantitative) methods in exploring the views and experiences that are most salient to users. One-to-one interviews allow an in-depth exploration of individuals' motivations, feelings, and aspirations, as well as helping to establish the aspects of the service that are

important to them. These approaches enable users to talk about the things that are important to them in their own terms.

Focus groups on the other hand involve interviewing a group of people (6-8 ideally), with the aim of creating an environment that nurtures different perspectives and opinions. Ideas and views emerge through the process of interaction between group members raising issues that might not have arisen in a one-to-one situation. However, themes may not be able to be explored in the kind of depth that is possible in an individual interview, such as personal or highly sensitive issues.

Users may also be trained and supported to design and use open-ended, qualitative methods such as interviewing and observation. It is less common to engage in qualitative peer interviewing than it is to involve peers in structured or semi-structured interviews. In part, this reflects the level of skill demanded to carry out qualitative interviews and the need for some understanding of research methods. Therefore where participative approaches to qualitative interviewing are employed, training should be given in the use of the method. Ongoing support will also be required that engages peer interviewers and researchers in reflecting upon the process and meaning of the interview material. Shared understanding, albeit in the context of exploring the other persons' experiences and views, can facilitate the development of rapport and insight, and contribute to the production of valuable information. It is generally seen as an enjoyable experience for interviewers and interviewees.

Whilst these qualitative methods are useful in exploring the range and depth of experience with services, they do not seek to, nor are they effective in providing, a representative picture of users' needs or the quality of service provision to meet those needs. It is therefore advisable to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to both develop an understanding of experience from the perspective of the user (using qualitative approaches) and then to assess how those experiences may vary across different activities, schemes and services (using quantitative approaches).

STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

As described above, qualitative methods can help to define the key issues that are important to users, and the criteria that users' use in evaluating services. The findings from qualitative projects can be extremely useful then in the design of quantitative (structured) survey instruments as they provide the range of topics that should be included in the survey.

Structured Interviews can be held with users to establish what different groups think of different aspects of services. Interviews and analysis can be undertaken by external researchers used to working with users with different needs, or users themselves can be involved in developing, designing and administering questionnaires. In this way, they can contribute to shaping the content of the information collection tools. Additionally, their views on how questions may be interpreted and understood, will be invaluable¹⁰. Training and support is required for peer interviewers, for example, in developing skills in interviewing, in dealing with confidentiality and in responding to any difficulties that may

¹⁰ Rose, D. et al (1998), *In our experience – use focused monitoring of mental health services in Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority*, London: Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. Also see, Hutchison, M. and Secker, J. (2001), *Evaluation of mental health services provided by Advance Housing and Support*, London: Institute for Applied Health and Social Policy.

arise from the experience. Training and supporting user-researchers to participate in service evaluations is seen as having mutual benefits – in terms of the expertise and commitment they bring, the confidence and skills gained and the rapport that may be developed through shared experiences.

SATISFACTION SURVEYS

Many agencies routinely use self-completion satisfaction questionnaires as a way of getting user views on the scope and quality of the services provided. They are relatively easy to use, but on close examination, the technique is found to have significant drawbacks when applied in the arena of social welfare. Apart from the fact that many people do not respond (20% response rates are typical), it is not evident what exactly is being measured, or how one should interpret the answers.

Firstly, the term ‘satisfaction’ is ambiguous and unclear. Even when qualitative approaches are used first, there is unlikely to be a consensus on what components of service should be included. Moreover, how people interpret and respond to questions, will reflect their expectations of what is possible, their prior experience of alternatives, and the nature of their relationships with staff. Users may express high levels of satisfaction with a service either because their expectations are low, they have little experience by which to compare ‘good’ and ‘poor’ services, or negative views of the service may be seen as reflecting badly on staff with whom they have a good relationship.

Secondly, peoples’ experiences are likely to be considerably more complex than can be captured in a single measure. A simple question (e.g. *Are you satisfied with the information you received?*) does not take into account the fact that people’s need for information may vary across different stages of their involvement with the service. Yet, if the results are to inform service development, it becomes crucial to understand what specific features of service require action.

Thirdly, satisfaction questionnaires, unless based on users’ views of what aspects of the service are important, tend to reflect providers’ priorities, when these aspects may not necessarily be what are important to users in terms of the quality of a service.

It is not surprising that satisfaction questionnaires generally produce very high levels of satisfaction across services that are very different in content and quality. Moreover, they invariably produce more positive responses than where people are offered the opportunity to describe experiences in their own terms.

It is possible to develop more effective ways of gathering quantitative information from users as has been described above, by using qualitative approaches in the first instance, to establish the dimensions of the service that are valued by people, and then using this information as the basis for developing more structured questionnaires¹¹. Such structured questionnaires need to not emphasise the importance of establishing a level or measure of satisfaction, as long as the questionnaire supplies representative information about different service users’ experiences of the service that they are receiving.

¹¹ Henwood, M., Lewis, H., and Waddington, E. (1998), *Listening to users of domiciliary care services: developing and monitoring quality standards*, Leeds: Nuffield Institute for Health, University of Leeds.

Key learning points

Involving users at strategic level can pose difficult challenges for agencies.

EFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF USERS IN SERVICE PLANNING, POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT REQUIRES:

- The development of a process that is inclusive, underpinned by a strategic framework that has as its starting point facilitating independence and integration.
- An understanding of the needs, experiences, capacities of users and their preferred methods for being involved.
- An assessment of the changes that need to occur in staff working practices such as the relationship between users and staff at all levels.
- Reflection on how users views can impact on organisational change and decision making processes.
- A transparent structure through which consultation processes will work, identifying mechanisms for decision making into which user views can be fed.
- An appreciation of the way in which user involvement can be 'grown' from smaller scale initiatives, to wider strategic arenas, such as involvement in planning and policy development. Skills, confidence and enthusiasm gained through positive experiences at the individual and scheme level can provide the springboard for engagement in more strategic ARENAS.
- An attitude that supports increasing empowerment of users: the empowerment of users may pose a personal and professional challenge to those who regard themselves as 'experts'. Developing a constructive dialogue demands a commitment to active listening, acknowledging different perspectives and sources of expertise and working through negotiated solutions to problems.
- That user involvement is considered to be an opportunity, and not an obligation imposed on people, An inclusive approach requires a whole gamut of forums and mechanisms for involvement in which different users can engage. It is not simply a question of drawing from a set menu of methods and techniques, but negotiating the ways in which users wish to be involved.

CHAPTER FIVE

Involving users in Service Management

Guidance on tenant participation (see Annex 1 for list of resources) emphasises the importance of including tenants in the development and management of housing services. In most social housing, the model of tenant participation is based on a system of representation by which tenants are elected or appointed to serve on the management committee. This approach works well where tenants have a long-term investment in the service and relevant skills and experiences, upon which they can draw. However, the model is likely to exclude people who require considerable support and capacity development to be involved, to discriminate against those whose relationship with the service is episodic and/or short-term and may reinforce inequalities between different groups of tenants/residents.

Within housing related support services then, traditional approaches to user representation on management committees, may not be the best way of achieving participation in running the service. In previous chapters of the guidance specific projects that were organised and managed by users themselves were described (for example, the Cyber Suite in GYPSIL, the Wild Bunch Committee, involving users of Elfrida, the Cheltenham User Group, within Stonham Housing Association). GYPSIL for instance involved young people with chaotic lives who have traditionally been difficult to engage within formal, committee structures. Similarly, the YMCA PIM project successfully involved young people living in short term schemes in planning 'moving-on' accommodation. This included agreeing criteria for eligibility for move-on housing. The experience of these initiatives suggests that representation on management committees is not always the most effective way of involving users in management of services.

User representation on management committees can be effective, but it requires close attention to the following:

- Clarity about the purpose of user representation.
- Training and support needs.
- Access.
- Remuneration.

These issues are considered further below in relation to concrete examples drawn from providers of housing related support services.

Creating systems for accountability

PARTICIPATION OF USERS AT BOARD LEVEL

For providers, an important issue to clarify at the outset is the following: are users on boards/committees expected to act in a representative capacity or is their role to ensure that the user experience informs decision-making at strategic and management levels?

Involving users at board level may have the objective of creating a system of representation that is accountable. Here user representatives are elected to reflect the views and interests of service users generally. They also have a responsibility to provide feed back on what has been decided. This is the approach adopted by the provider in the example below. Using a traditional tenant participation model, with additional support, the agency has successfully involved users in governance.

21 BOARD MEMBERSHIP: ABILITY HOUSING ASSOCIATION

The service provides a range of accommodation and housing related support to some 400 people, most with physical disabilities and some with learning difficulties, throughout South-East England.

Process of involvement:

(a) Structure: Each scheme has a tenants' forum, chaired by a tenant. Each local forum elects representatives to an area forum (3 area forums) that meets every two months, chaired by a tenant. Each area in turn elects three representatives to a Tenant Consultation Committee that also meets bi-monthly and has access to secretarial support. Finally, the Tenant Consultation Committee elects two representatives who are full members of the management board and sit on sub-committees.

(b) Support and access: The timing of the forums is intended to ensure that decision making is informed by tenant views at each level of the agency. Thus, the Tenant Consultative Committee meets one month after the tenant forums and one month before the management board. Support includes:

- Independent advocacy to facilitate involvement.
- Minutes and agendas written in an accessible style.
- Training provided on participating in meetings/committees by an independent advocacy service.

Benefits: From a user perspective, there is a sense of being valued and being able to make a positive contribution as well as an opportunity to develop skills. From the agency perspective, it fosters a sense of ownership and investment in the service.

continued

Factors in securing success: Considerable resources have been invested to ensure success. Similarly, structures and processes for decision-making have been adapted to ensure effective user participation.

Others methods of establishing dialogue between service users and trustees/managers are illustrated in the following examples. Whilst these sit within the framework of a representational model, they fall short of full participation of service user representatives with voting rights on boards.

The initiative described below builds on a long history of resident representation, including quarterly forums involving representatives and members of the Board. At the same time, residents also bring with them considerable skill and capacity for self-organisation through their previous experience in the trade union and labour movement.

22 ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES: DURHAM AGED MINeworkERS HOMES ASSOCIATION

It is a provider of different kinds of housing with support, including sheltered housing for older people in the North East of England.

Process of involvement:

(a) Structure: Users in each scheme elect a representative for a period of three years (around 70 in all). These provide the bridge for a flow of information between the agency and the residents e.g. delivering the Newsletter, Residents Handbook. Many of them take on informal caring responsibilities for those who are most frail and they can access a welfare fund to organise social activities. Representatives meet quarterly with staff and members of the executive committee to reflect the views of residents and provide feedback on decisions and action to those they represent. The quarterly meetings are well attended – with the majority of representatives coming along. A recent innovation has been the election of three people from among the resident’s representative group on to one of the key sub-committees of the management board.

(b) Support and access: The agency has tried to make quarterly meetings for representatives both interesting and enjoyable. They are organised as social events with a buffet lunch, in a relaxed atmosphere, and representatives may bring a friend if they wish. There are also speakers on topics of interest to residents (e.g. welfare benefits).

As part of their induction onto a sub-committee of the management board, user representatives are given training in assertiveness and committee skills in preparation for their new role.

continued

Benefits: For users, their role as representatives gives them a sense of purpose and value, as well as harnessing their capacity and willingness to be ‘good neighbours’. The value for the agency is that it ensures that service planning and development is more responsive to user need.

Factors in securing success: This model has worked for these older users since the agency can draw on considerable existing capacity among residents. Moreover, since each scheme is small and retains strong links with local communities, it can effectively exploit informal systems of communication, alongside more formal methods. Moreover residents tend to remain in the schemes over a long period of time.

The development and experience of the User Advisory Forum below is illustrative of the level of support that is required for a meaningful exchange to occur between users with particular needs on the one hand and board members on the other. In this case, enabling users to participate effectively required that attention was paid to producing minutes and action points in accessible formats, and support was provided both before and after Board meetings. It also poses another important issue, namely, that it is not only users who require training to participate at Board level – other Board members also require training to facilitate the inclusion of users in proceedings and decision-making.

23 USER ADVISORY FORUM: ELFRIDA SOCIETY

It provides housing with support in different settings to people with mild/moderate learning difficulties.

Process of involvement:

(a) Structure: The Board of Trustees initiated the idea of the forum, as it was concerned to establish a formal link with users. In existence for little over a year, the Forum comprised 2/3 representatives from each of six different user groups within the agency.

(b) Support and access: One staff member worked with the Trustees, to raise their awareness of issues involved in communicating with users. Another staff member provided support to Forum members, meeting with them prior to meetings with the Trustees. The purpose of the pre-meeting was to consider the issues the Trustees wished to get their views on and to prepare what they wanted to discuss with the Trustees. Meetings were videotaped, and minutes produced in accessible formats (using visual cues and plain language). These provided the basis for feedback and discussion within the respective groups. The Forum met with the trustees three times over the year.

Benefits: Trustees viewed the User Advisory Forum as an important initiative and meetings were seen as lively and interesting. For users, the experience was more mixed – board meetings were not necessarily seen as a way of achieving change in their lives in contrast to their experience in individual projects.

continued

Factors in securing success: The engagement of users at this level required considerable support from staff – pre-meetings, de-briefing sessions, material in accessible formats. Moreover, it also required training and support for other board members to facilitate a partnership approach with users.

One of the difficulties experienced by users was the apparent length of time it took for the board to respond to issues raised – what had seemed important at one point had been overtaken by other pressing issues by the time a decision was reached. As a result of reflection on the experience of the Forum over its first year, the intention was to develop it to better reflect the needs and interests of service users and to be less constrained by the concerns of the Board of Trustees.

FACILITATING ACCESS

Facilitating access to Board meetings involves considerably more than ensuring that the venue is accessible. Other issues to consider include:

- the timing, structure and length of meetings;
- practical assistance to enable people to attend (travel and child care expenses);
- attention to communication needs, for example, loop systems, interpreters for those with sensory impairments, pictorial language documents and other assistive technology;
- relevant material in formats to meet user need e.g. Braille, audio tapes, video, large print.
- training will also be required – for users and Board members – to enable an effective dialogue to take place. Such training may include: personal development training e.g. (assertion skills); committee skills, as well as developing people’s knowledge about the agency and its business.

Having a user voice on management boards

For some supported housing providers user membership on management boards is aimed at ensuring that the experience of service users informs decision-making at senior level – users are not expected to act as representatives. It is the expertise they bring as service users that is valued and drawn upon. Some agencies have established an effective user voice on management boards using such an approach¹².

A number of agencies in this study that were providing support to people whose relationship with the service was intermittent and transient, had involved former users, who had established settled lives, at governance level. Others had invited users onto Boards, not as representatives, but to enable the experience of service users to be heard directly at Board level. It is important however that service users are clear about the distinction between representation and user voice and have an opportunity to express their views about it. In a large survey of sheltered housing tenants for Anchor Trust, for

¹² See Keeble, M. (2000), *Just do it: A directory of examples of service user involvement in supported housing*, London: The Housing Corporation.

example, older people expressed dislike and mistrust of having non-elected resident representatives on the landlord committees and management groups¹³.

For providers seeking to develop user involvement on boards of management, there are further important questions to be considered:

- What scope does there exist for users to insert on board agendas the kinds of things that matter to them?
- Are there aspects of decision-making from which user representatives are excluded? Is there clarity and openness about what these might be?
- Does involvement at this level make a difference in terms of the quality of peoples' lives and the services they receive?
- As well as specific skills training to facilitate participation, how can the agency ensure that inequalities of power – whether to do with gender, ethnicity, or need – are not reinforced through the participatory structures?
- Can involvement at governance level be 'grown' on the body of 'bottom-up' initiatives?

Alternative models

DEVELOPING PARALLEL STRUCTURES TO BOARDS

In the following example, a parallel structure involving service users has been developed, which is supported by staff members with a disability. It is both a means whereby users can develop their own conception of their needs and have a route into shaping strategy and practice at governance level.

24 DISABLED PEOPLE'S FORUM: LEONARD CHESHIRE

Process of involvement:

(a) Structure: The Forum is part of an initiative developed within Leonard Cheshire to enhance user involvement within what was a traditional, paternalistic organisation. The approach was developed by the Forum Manager based on her experience of leading the Wiltshire Users Network, an independent user controlled organisation. Different aspects of the initiative have secured time limited funding through a combination of Lottery grants, the Department of Health and grants from charitable and voluntary organisations. The Forum is a loose, umbrella initiative that aims to 'provide training opportunities for disabled people to learn assertiveness skills and empower themselves and facilitate their participation within Leonard Cheshire.'

continued

¹³ Riseborough, M. (1996), More choice and control for users? Involving tenants in social housing management, in, A. March and D. Mullins (eds), *Housing and public policy: citizenship, choice and control*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

(b) Support and access: A group of 25 disabled people make up the Forum staff group, including a project manager. The Forum provides independent advocacy and individual mentoring support, facilitates regional forums and provide training, the latter in conjunction with freelance trainers. The project manager is also a member of the Senior Management team. The forum has a number of functions:

- Establishment of a database of service users as a means of contacting people directly with involvement opportunities.
- Publication of a quarterly newsletter written for service users, workers and Trustees, from the perspective of users.
- Organising training events for users to develop awareness of rights and understanding of the social model of disability, to enhance assertiveness skills and to gain support through meeting with similar others.
- Organising regional forums (10 regions) to enable people meet regularly within a safe environment at a comfortable travelling distance from their homes.
- Participation in mainstream activity of the organisation with appropriate support and preparation
- Mentoring users to support them to achieve goals to which they aspire.

Benefits: The Forum seeks to achieve bottom up change using a community development approach thereby:

- Creating a project that disabled people can identify as their own.
- Developing the project in response to users' identified needs e.g. training and mentoring.
- Being proactive in creating opportunities for others to learn from the experiences of disabled people.
- Being an agent of change within the organisation – in attitudes and culture.

Factors in securing success: The establishment of the Forum has required considerable investment of resources and has been successful in attracting time limited funding. Whilst it operates independently, there are direct reporting lines to the Director of Services, which enables regular feedback and influence for change in the organisation.

DEVOLVED MANAGEMENT

Many of the agencies described in the guidance offer considerable autonomy to individual schemes, within the framework of a broad set of principles. This allows flexibility in the opportunities offered for involving people in the management of individual schemes, not necessarily as an alternative to involvement in governance at national level, but as complementary to it. Thus, for those users who may not necessarily want to be involved in

the governance of the agency at national level, they can participate in strategic level decision making at a more local level, around the things that are of particular relevance to them.

Further issues for consideration

FEES AND OTHER REMUNERATION

The importance and practicalities of appropriately rewarding or remunerating people requires consideration. Will users be paid for their time? If so, are they made aware of the implications of payment on entitlement to Benefits? Are there other forms of remuneration on offer e.g. training opportunities?

For some user organisations (for example, Wiltshire and Swindon Users Network, referenced in Annex 1), an important principle of user involvement is that the expertise of users in committees and time limited planning groups should be acknowledged and valued financially, even if this is only a token. This can pose difficult problems for housing related support providers. Where users are on benefits, monetary rewards will impact on such payments. Some agencies respond through the provision of non-monetary rewards, in addition to appropriate expenses, for example:

- Training opportunities to enhance life skills and employment prospects.
- Voluntary experience which helps on a CV.
- Developing their wider employment and training potential.
- Support/gifts in kind e.g. equipment given to individuals to help them undertake work.

Providers should ensure that user expertise is appropriately remunerated and the form the remuneration takes is negotiated with users in advance of their involvement.

APPROPRIATE LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

For most people in housing related support services, their goal is likely to be independence in managing their own lives. Being involved in how the agency is run may not necessarily be seen as part of that objective. For some people however, wanting to be part of, and contribute to, the governance of the agency flows from:

- Their belief that they have a unique contribution to make from their own experience as users.
- A commitment to give the time and energy to effect change.
- Confidence and capacity 'grown' through the opportunities and support provided in previous successful smaller involvement activities.
- Interest in being part of the creation of democratic and accountable structures.

A flexible and mutually appropriate level of engagement requires a service ethos and working practice that places the emphasis on accountability to service users and a commitment to open up with them new avenues for dialogue and partnership.

Key learning points

In developing a strategy for user involvement at governance level, providers of housing related support may wish to:

- Consider whose purposes/interests user involvement is meant to serve. Is it about legitimating agency decisions or is it about opening up decision-making processes to those who will be affected by them. Is it about effecting real change in the quality of peoples' lives and the services they receive?
- Consider what support/assistance is required to make involvement at this level effective for users with different capacities and needs. This will have to encompass considerably more than training in running meetings and setting agendas. It should also address discriminatory and exclusionary processes and the power differences between users, staff, managers and Board members (and then address their training needs).
- Explore different ways of ensuring that users can have a voice in the governance of the agency, such as regular and informal visits to projects by management committee members and the potential to devolve decision-making to user representatives.
- Offer a variety of ways in which the views of service users can influence management decisions. These might include, briefing sessions, accessible literature, shadowing and mentoring schemes.
- Consider user involvement in governance as emerging from successful participatory processes, and not the starting point of a strategy.

Whatever, the approach to involvement adopted, the focus should be on developing the capacity of users to insert their needs and views into decision making structures at all levels; and broadening and deepening the capacity within the agency to facilitate and respond to, the range of user interests and need.

CHAPTER SIX

Developing a Strategy and Practice for Effective User Involvement

In the introduction to the guide, an emphasis was placed on the centrality of user involvement toward achieving the objectives of *Supporting People*: developing a needs-led approach to service provision and enabling very diverse groups of vulnerable people improve their capacity to live independently, integrated into local communities. User involvement therefore has to be integral to the objectives of housing related support services and the foundation on which policy and practice at all levels, rests.

Effective user involvement in *Supporting People* requires considerably more than structures and mechanisms for participation and consultation, although those are important. It requires a root and branch, evolving process that encompasses shifts in the power relationship between management, staff and users; as well as changes in organisational arrangements, decision-making processes and working practices of staff at all levels. Similar conclusions have been drawn from evaluations of user involvement in other areas, for example, Community Care¹⁴.

This final chapter begins by providing a summary of the key elements and underpinning principles that will guide providers towards involving users effectively in *Supporting People* services. It sets out are the key features of organisational culture and the resources and support that agencies may wish to mobilise in order to implement an effective user involvement strategy and practice. Lastly, a framework for developing and evaluating an initiative is offered.

Guiding principles of user involvement in *Supporting People*

The experience of user involvement initiatives – both those described in the guide and the evidence drawn from research – indicates that the first steps in developing practice are understanding and responding to the immediate needs, concerns and interests of service users. From such beginnings and building on the growth of mutual trust, confidence, skills

¹⁴ See Miller, C., Goss, S. and Holloway, C. (1993), Initiatives in user and carer involvement- a survey of local authorities, *Office for Public Management Occasional Papers*, No. 4, London: Office for Public Management; and Barnes, M. and Wistow, G. (1995), Achieving a strategy for user involvement in community care, *Health and Social Care in the Community* 2: 347-356; and Lindow, V. and Morris, J. (1995), *Service user involvement: synthesis of findings and experiences in the field of community care*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Bristol: The Policy Press.

and expertise, user involvement can be ‘grown’ – extending into wider arenas and deepening into more active partnerships with providers.

Agencies seeking quick results may be tempted to focus on high profile activities that are visible rather than to engage in securing some deeper change that requires thorough ground work. The starting point in any involvement strategy has to be to understand the immediate needs and interests of the individuals and groups for whom the services provide support. In identifying a particular initiative to involve users, while the immediate objectives may be limited and tentative, what is key is that the initiative is located within, and contributes to, the goal of improving users’ life quality and independence. The question providers should ask is: *‘how can the service engage users in ways that further the goal of enhancing users control over their lives and improving their life quality?’*

A recurrent theme of the guidance is that user involvement is both a process and an outcome. It matters how people are engaged as well as what is achieved as a result of their involvement. At the same time, what counts as success cannot simply be measured by the degree of user engagement in service planning and delivery processes. What is also important to defining success, is that people have experienced some positive changes in their lives – in the quality and appropriateness of the services they receive and in developing the confidence, skills and capacity to assume greater control in making their own life choices.

User involvement processes are effective, where they are inclusive. Users require both opportunities and forums for involvement to influence decision-making as well as support and skills to participate. What is appropriate and necessary in terms of support will reflect the needs, capacities and abilities of individual service users. It will also reflect the diverse cultural needs of individuals and groups for whom services are provided: specific support arrangements should be put in place to challenge inequality, exclusion and discrimination. At the same time, approaches and methods for involving people will have most chance of success when they have been devised through a dialogue with users about what is most likely to engage them.

User involvement is something that should pervade every aspect of the agency’s relationship with service users. Developing policy and practice on user involvement therefore might mean expanding the scope of involvement into different arenas. It could also mean deepening involvement processes within specific aspects of the agency’s activity. For example, providers might have a perspective of shifting from the provision of information to users to working in partnership with them to produce the material.

The process of user involvement cannot be reduced to a set of formulae. Rather, it is a fluid and dynamic process. What is possible and achievable will reflect the interaction between: the capacities of users and their experience of and relationship to the service; the opportunities available for personal and skills development; and the openness and commitment of the agency to engage people effectively and to respond to the demands for change that emerge as a result. Moreover, methods and forms of involvement should continually evolve and change, reflecting: increased confidence, self esteem, capacity and skills on the part of users and staff; changing relationships between users and staff and the development of more participatory decision-making systems and mechanisms.

User involvement is inevitably a ‘risky’ enterprise in that success cannot be guaranteed in advance. It is disruptive of the usual power relationships that tend to exist between managers, staff and service users. It will inevitably throw up problems and challenges,

tensions and conflict. However, solving problems and negotiating between different and competing interests are necessary components of all social relationships.

These features of user involvement can be encapsulated into a set of principles, as follows:

UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF USERS IN SUPPORTING PEOPLE SERVICES:

- User involvement will achieve the aims of *Supporting People* where it is not a separate activity, but an approach to working with people that is integral to the culture and ethos of the service and the working practices of all staff.
- User involvement should be ‘grown’ and nurtured, starting from users’ immediate needs, interests and concerns, expanding and deepening in iterative fashion.
- Effective user involvement is inclusive and anti-discriminatory. Support and access should be provided to enable people to be engaged to the extent and at the level with which they feel comfortable. Specific initiatives should be put in place to ensure that individuals and groups who have experienced discrimination in their day-to-day lives, have a voice.
- Effective involvement requires imagination, creativity, energy and commitment to engage people effectively, and openness to respond positively to the demands for change that flow from it.
- User involvement is not only about setting up structures and systems for consulting with people although that is part of it. It is a complex, fluid, dynamic and negotiated process.
- User involvement requires careful nurturing. Minor successes can be hard won, but they may be the building blocks for greater achievements.
- Involvement does not have a fixed end point. Rather, participation is ‘*both a journey and a destination: a way of doing things and an end result*’¹⁵.

The next section of the guide considers the features of organisational culture as well as the resources and support that agencies can mobilise in order to implement an effective strategy and practice for user involvement.

¹⁵ Novas-Overtures (2001), *Have we got views for you! Service user involvement in supported housing*, Novas-Overtures, p8.

Organisational culture

SERVICE ETHOS

Distinctive features of services that embrace user involvement are:

- An emphasis on supporting or developing individuals' independence through the acquisition of skills, alongside the opening up of opportunities to exercise choice and control in ever wider areas of users' lives.
- A focus on securing integration into the wider community, of people who for one reason or another, have experienced discrimination and social exclusion (for example, because of a disability, drugs/alcohol abuse, ethnicity).

These features demand that user involvement is integral to an agency's perception of their role and function. User involvement in these organisations will permeate the working practices of staff at all levels and is not just be the responsibility of specific post-holders as it is implicated in and germane to, service activities on a day-to-day basis. Where specific user involvement workers have been employed to develop user involvement, the emphasis is on shifting organisational culture and providing support and training to staff to enable them to integrate involvement into their own practice. They are the spark plug starting the motor, but the organisation and its entire staff constitute the engine that drives the whole process. Useful illustrations in the guide of this approach are the Advocacy Support project in Stonham (case study 11) and the User Forum in Leonard Cheshire (case study 16).

The inclusive conception of involvement presented in this guide means that the arenas for user participation are extensive and wide-ranging. They can encompass every aspect of the relationship between users and service providers, either as individuals or collectively in groups. From this perspective also, all encounters between service users and providers should be imbued with an ethos of involvement. This should apply for example, to the giving and receiving of information, accessing the user perspective on the scope and quality of provision or engaging people in service delivery processes and governance. What matters is not so much the level at which people are involved but the quality of their involvement.

Rooting user involvement in agency policy and practice requires a shift in organisational culture from doing things for people, to doing things with them. To make such a shift effective and not simply the stuff of empty rhetoric requires leadership, commitment, and enthusiasm from the top, sustained through the provision of support and training for staff at all levels and developed through a culture of openness and valuing of different perspectives. Fundamental to the process is a consideration of the kinds of capacities and skills that may need to be fostered within the agency and among service users and an investment of resources (both staff time and money) to effect change.

In the initiatives described throughout the guidance, there are three common elements that contributed to success. First, people were motivated to become involved because it was something that they themselves were interested in. Secondly, involvement was viewed as a learning opportunity by staff, a means through which users could expand not only their practical skills, but also their capacity to manage conflict, engage in negotiation and work together. Thirdly, the form, scope and content of participatory processes were developed in an ongoing dialogue with service users.

Fostering a culture geared to independence inevitably produces tensions between managing risk (of the user to him/her self and to others) and supporting the autonomy of the individual. This inevitably presents difficult questions for providers that are not easily solved¹⁶. What appears central in devising appropriate strategies to manage these tensions is an organisational culture that is not risk averse.

An organisational culture designed to rise to these challenges is one that:

- places emphasis on understanding users' strengths and capacities.
- understands the nature of constraints on users' ability to exercise choice and control.
- focuses on learning how and in what ways service users' skills and competencies can be enhanced toward achieving more control in decision-making about aspects of their lives and the services they receive.

Efforts may be made in relatively narrow areas in the first instance, depending on people's existing abilities and capacities, but there is the potential to expand these, in both the scope and depth of involvement.

Support and training for staff

Since effective user involvement implies a more equal power dynamic between staff and users, it is essential that staff are enabled to work in ways that are empowering and inclusive of all users. The development of an empowering practice requires **firstly**, that staff are supported, trained and given the time to build upon their existing skills for:

- **Active listening:** starting from where people are at, their experiences, perspectives and interests to facilitate a dialogue.
- **Supporting 'voice':** building up peoples' confidence and skills to express themselves in whatever ways are appropriate for them and which value diversity.
- **Enabling reciprocity and exchange:** recognising and building on peoples' strengths and capacities is crucial to the development of partnership.

Secondly, it means that the service offers the space, opportunity and systems for staff to:

- **Evaluate and reflect on practice:** flexibility in trying out different approaches to involvement; opportunity to review experiences, ensuring that mutual lessons learned can inform new approaches; openness to challenge exclusion and discriminatory practice.

¹⁶ Stephenson, O. and Parsloe, P. (1993), Community care and empowerment, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

- **Input into decision-making:** mechanisms for feedback and action in response to the views/needs expressed by users and staff.
- **Manage change:** this phase of the process may involve a re-consideration of practice, structures and processes for decision-making within different layers of the organisation.

Reflective practice

User involvement is likely to result in challenges to service priorities, working practices, and decision-making structures and systems. Involving service users can be uncomfortable and the outcomes are not always predictable.

'It's a white knuckle ride- you never know if it will work'. (Service manager)

It is important that agencies are open to trying out new initiatives. In addition, built into the process there should be opportunities for managers, staff and users to reflect on, and evaluate the process and outcomes of involvement initiatives and to learn from these.

Integrating involvement into the fabric and decision making structures of the organisation is not a once and for all process – it is an iterative and evolving one. The question is how to develop methods of participation that engender trust and confidence and facilitate participation across the spectrum – based on a culture of mutual respect and embracing of difference and a commitment to supporting individual and collective rights.

A framework for evaluating an initiative

The flow chart and accompanying text below provides a framework for planning and evaluating a user involvement initiative. It sets out the four key stages in the process, and the questions to consider at each stage. The focus is on both the process for involvement and the outcomes achieved as a result. Reference is made to the relevant chapters in the guide where these are considered in more detail.

STAGE 1: REVIEW AGENCY OBJECTIVES (SEE CHAPTER 1).

User involvement is integral to the aims of *Supporting People*: to improve the quality of life of vulnerable people by providing services that enable them to have greater independence and control in making choices in their lives. At the outset therefore, it is important to review the direction of the service:

Are the primary aims/objectives of the service compatible with, and geared toward empowering service users?

How is this reflected in the kind of support users are offered and the nature and quality of relationships with staff?

What changes might need to take place, at what level, to develop a more empowering service?

STAGE 2: AGREEING A FOCUS FOR USER INVOLVEMENT (SEE CHAPTER 1)

The purpose of user involvement in *Supporting People* is to seek appreciable improvements in the availability, quality, adequacy and appropriateness of the services people receive and in the quality of their lives as well. Key questions that should be considered (in dialogue with users) in relation to agreeing the focus for a user involvement initiative are:

Does the initiative contribute to improving the services people receive and enhancing their control over their own lives?

Does the initiative relate to real issues and concerns of users and reflect the kinds of things that are likely to be of importance to them?

What are the positive experiences of involvement that can be drawn upon in developing the initiative? How can this initiative be grown out of previous efforts?

What are the challenges to inclusive and effective involvement that this initiative should seek to address?

In agreeing a focus for the initiative, there are two important issues that require consideration. First, it is not the size of the initiative that is crucial. Size will depend on existing users' capacities, needs, circumstances, their relationship to the service, and what prior experience the agency is building upon. What is crucial, is that the initiative is feasible, contributes to the goal of empowering service users and that it builds upon what has already been achieved in terms of broadening and deepening the partnership with them. For those agencies that have little prior experience of user involvement or whose relationship with users is transient or episodic, the initiative may be relatively modest.

Second, if users have little experience of involvement, are disengaged for whatever reason or lack confidence and self-esteem it will not be enough simply to ask them what they want in terms of involvement. Opportunities should be opened up about what is possible from involvement and positive incentives offered to engage them (see examples in Chapters 2-5).

STAGE 3: FACILITATING INVOLVEMENT: ACCESS AND SUPPORT (SEE CHAPTERS 2-5)

Throughout the guidance, it has been emphasised that for user involvement processes to be effective, they should be inclusive and anti-discriminatory. If users – individually and collectively – are to be enabled to express their views and have a voice in service planning and delivery, it is essential that appropriate opportunities to get involved are offered and the necessary support and skills to participate are provided. Key questions for consideration in relation to facilitation of involvement, relate to access and support.

Consider what form or forms of involvement are likely to engage the widest range of people. Are their opportunities available for people to engage at different levels and to different degrees?

Are there some groups/individuals not involved? Who are they? What efforts have been made to explore why they are not involved? Is it that the opportunities on offer are not attractive to them? What types of activities might engage them?

What kinds of support do people require to enable them to participate? For example: in terms of personal development (self-confidence, problem solving, managing conflict and difference), practical support (translation/interpreting, assistive devices), capacity and skill development (literacy, numeracy, budgeting, planning and organising activities).

Providing appropriate access and support to enable users participate effectively will make demands on staff and will also impact on agency decision-making processes.

What staff resources are required (e.g. time, commitment, support and training) and how will they be provided?

What practical and financial resources are required (e.g. accessible venue, equipment, and incentives)?

How will user views and experiences be taken into account by the agency? What power will users have to effect change, and in what aspects? How might the agency's decision-making processes need to change to take into account the user voice?

STAGE 4: EVALUATING THE PROCESS AND OUTCOMES OF THE INITIATIVE

Success in terms of user involvement should be considered at two levels: the experience of the process and the changes in users' lives and the services they receive as a result. Moreover, evaluating success has to involve a dialogue between users, staff and managers. Even so, opportunities for feedback and evaluation may involve reflection by users and staff, separately and together. The first set of questions to explore here relate to the process of involvement:

What was the experience of the process from the perspective of users? What was positive about it and for which individuals and groups? What could have been done better? Who were those individuals and groups that were least successfully involved and what can be learned for the future?

From a staff perspective, what was positive about the process and what could have been done better? Were staff adequately prepared and supported? What are the lessons for the future? What are the implications for staff toward broadening and deepening involvement?

From the perspective of managers, what are the resource implications to engage users effectively? How can these be secured? How were risks managed? How can this be improved? What are the implications of involvement on how the agency works, how decisions are made and the working practices of staff at all levels?

The second set of questions concern the outcomes that were achieved.

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES ACHIEVED FOR USERS?

- Personal development?
- Skill development?
- Engagement with wider community/social networks?
- Scope and quality of services received?

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES FOR STAFF?

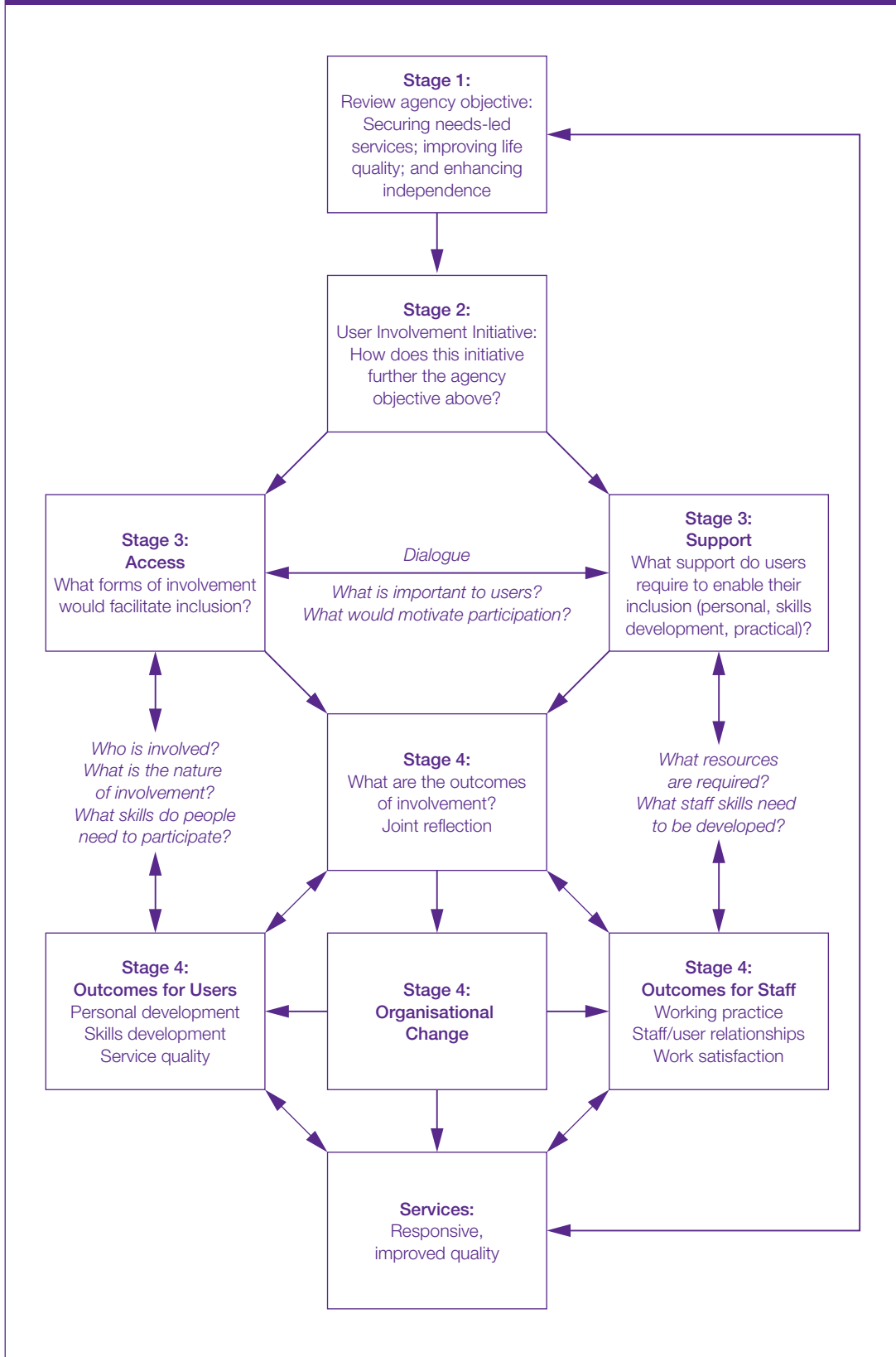
- Skill development?
- Relationships with users?
- Work satisfaction?

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES FOR THE AGENCY/SERVICE?

- Facilitated achievement of the objective of supporting independence and control?
- More responsive, needs-led services?
- Better partnership and wider ownership?

Finally, evaluation of the process and outcomes of the initiative can be the spur for building on the initiative. Methods and forms of involvement should continually evolve and change. As users develop their self-esteem and skills and staff at all levels become more confident in the possibilities of partnership, the scope and range of participatory initiatives can be extended and deepened. Doubtless new challenges and problems will be posed. However, as has been emphasised throughout the guide, and as the examples provided illustrate, what is key is that the problems encountered provide the creative spur to devise new solutions.

A Framework for Providers to use in planning and evaluating a User Involvement initiative



ANNEX 1

Resources

General

Age Concern (2000), *Involving older people: good practice guidance*, London: Age Concern England.

Although this is written for Age Concern Groups, there are useful sections on involving older people from ethnic minorities as well as involving older people with mental health problems and learning difficulties.

Caldwell, P. (1996), *Getting in touch: ways of working with people with severe learning disabilities and extensive support needs*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Research into Practice Series, Brighton: Pavilion Publishing.

Uses case studies to describe ways of communicating with people with profound disabilities.

Carter, T. and Beresford, P. (2000), *Age and change: models of involvement for older people*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

This report offers practical ways of increasing interest in participation across public policy.

Croft, S. and Beresford, P. (1993), *Getting involved: a practical manual*, Open Services Project.

Useful source of practical advice about involvement, and a helpful discussion of the different bases of involvement: consumerism and citizenship.

Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) (2002), *Reflecting the needs and concerns of black and minority ethnic communities in Supporting People*, London: DTLR.

The guide is intended to ensure that issues of concern to black and minority ethnic users, providers and their representatives are understood by those developing and implementing the Supporting People programme.

Riseborough, M. (1998), *From consumerism to citizenship: new European perspectives on independent living in older age*, London: Housing for Older People in Europe (HOPE) Network and The Housing Corporation.

This provides examples of innovative practice schemes that seek to include older people as citizens, which are drawn from across Europe.

RNIB (1993), *See it right: new approaches to information for blind and partially sighted people*, London: RNIB.

A guide to producing information in a format that is accessible to people with a visual impairment.

Simons, K. (1999), *A place at the table: involving people with learning difficulties in purchasing and commissioning services*, Kidderminster: British Institute of Learning Disabilities.

Considers issues to be considered in involving people with learning difficulties in service planning and development.

Tenant Involvement in Supported Housing

Keeble, M. and Forbes, D. (1999), *Knowing where you stand: agreements for supported housing organisations and residents*, Brighton: Pavilion Publishing.

This explores why supported housing providers should set up clear agreements with their residents about what they can expect from the services they receive.

Keeble, M. (2000), *'Just do it': A directory of examples of service user involvement in supported housing*, London: The Housing Corporation.

This describes how supported housing providers have approached user involvement. It offers useful practice experience and a menu of 'tips' to get started in involving service users.

Novas-Ouvertures (2001), *Have we got views for you! Service user involvement in supported housing*, Novas-Ouvertures.

Based on the experience of Novas-Ouvertures in involving users in supported housing, this report sets out both the challenges and opportunities of involving people who have traditionally been difficult to engage. The value and benefits of involvement in terms of developing individuals' self-esteem and independence is powerfully related through individuals' stories.

Department for Transport Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) (2002) *Supporting People Administrative Guidance*, Product 26: Service User Involvement in Supporting People, London, DTLR.

This sets out the vision and principles underpinning user involvement in consultative processes for Supporting People strategy and service development.

Tenant Participation

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) (1998), *Developing good practice in tenant participation*, London: DETR.

This offers a guide to developing a tenant participation strategy and processes for involving tenants in social housing. It also provides examples of good practice.

The Housing Corporation (1998), *Making consumers count: tenant participation – the next five years*, London: The Housing Corporation.

Here, the Housing Corporation sets out as a key objective for registered social landlords the involvement of tenants in decision-making about their housing.

The Housing Corporation (2001), *The BIG Picture: The involvement business*. London: The Housing Corporation.

This presents the business reasons as to why registered social landlords should not only listen to their consumers but also act on this information.

Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

Care and Repair (2001), *Learning to listen: involving service users in the development and delivery of home improvement agencies and related services*, Nottingham: Care and Repair.

An example of the use of the focus group method with older people in respect of services provided by home improvement agencies.

Evans, C., Carmichael, A. and members of the Direct Payments Best Value Project Group of Wiltshire and Swindon Users' Network (2002), *Users' Best Value: a guide to user involvement good practice in Best Value Reviews*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

This is based on experiences in Wiltshire where disabled people demonstrated the effectiveness of designing and executing the Best Value process themselves. Building on a strong tradition of local user involvement, disabled people worked within the Best Value framework to evaluate Direct Payments from their perspective.

Hutchison, M. and Secker, J. (2001), *Evaluation of mental health services provided by Advance Housing and Support*, London: Institute for Applied Health and Social Policy.

Describes the process and findings from a research evaluation that involved service users as peer interviewers.

Rose, D. et al. (1998), *In our experience – use focused monitoring of mental health services in Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority*, London: Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health.

Describes the process of involving peer interviewers in evaluating mental health services.

Shelter (2000), *A national consultation of people who have experienced homelessness*, London: Shelter.

A useful discussion of the kind of information that can be obtained through the use of focus groups, with homeless people.

User involvement in Recruitment and Training

Evans, C. and Hughes, M. (Eds.) (1993), *Tall oaks from little acorns – the Wiltshire experience in the training of professionals in care management*, Wiltshire: Wiltshire County Council and Social Services Department.

A useful booklet that has wider relevance to the issue of involving users in the training of staff than just care management. It includes a discussion about payment for users and the contexts in which this might be appropriate.

Lindow, V. (1996), *User involvement: community service users as consultants and trainers*, Department of Health NHS Executive, Community Care Branch.

ANNEX 2

Sources of Funding

A number of the initiatives in the guidance secured funding from the Community Fund of the National Lottery Charities Board. Criteria for funding applications are that proposals focus on:

- Causes of poverty and inequality.
- Improvement in the quality of life of the most vulnerable.

Contact details:

National Lottery Charities Board
St. Vincent House
16 Suffolk Street
London SW1Y 4NL
Tel: 0845 791 9191

ANNEX 3

Contact details for agencies cited in the guide

Provided below is information about how to contact the agencies referenced in the guidance. We have not included names, since people tend to move on.

Ability Housing Association
The Coach House
Gresham Road
Staines
Middlesex
Tel: 01784 490910

Advance Housing and Support
Midland Region
5 Faraday Court
Conduit Street
Leicester LE2 0JN
Tel: 0116 255 9935

Anchor Trust
Oxford Spires Business Park
Kidlington
Oxfordshire OX5 1NZ
Tel: 01865 854121

Carr-Gomm
Tenant Services Department
Gordano House
12a Clift Road
Southville
Bristol BS3 1RZ
Tel: 0117 953 8088
Web: www.tenantsonline.org.uk

Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes
PO Box 31
The Grove
168 Front Street
Chester-le-Street
Durham DH3 3YH
Tel: 0191 388 1111

East Thames Housing Group
3 Tramway Avenue
Stratford
London E15 4PN
Tel: 020 8522 2000

Elfrida Society
34 Islington Park St
London N1 1PX
Tel: 020 7359 7443

Foundation Housing
Tennant Hall
Blenheim Grove
Leeds LS2 9ET
Tel: 0113 368 8802

GIPSIL
27-33 Brander St
Leeds LS9 6QH
Tel: 0113 248 1301

Keyring-Living Support Networks
12-18 Hoxton Street
London N1 6NG
Tel: 020 7749 9414

Leeds Irish Health and Homes
355 Roundhay Road
Harehills
Leeds LS8 4HT
Tel: 0113 240 1130

Leonard Cheshire Disabled People's Forum
St. George's
Semington
Trowbridge
Wiltshire BA14 6JQ
Tel. 01380 870777
Email: info@forum.leonard-cheshire.org.uk

Leonard Cheshire
Cossham Gardens
Lodge Road
Kingswood
Bristol BS15 1LE

Performance Review
NACRO Housing
Tel: 0115 9628 944

Cheltenham Stonham Service User Group
Equals
287 High Street
Cheltenham
Glos
GL50 3HL
Tel: 01242 260 441

Stonham Housing Association Ltd
13 Oak Terrace
West Cornforth
Ferryhill
Co. Durham, DL17 9NN

West Pennine Housing Association
1st Floor
Pennine House
77 Union Street
Oldham OL1 1JZ
Tel: 0161 621 4151

YMCA Housing
Wood Street
Doncaster DN1 3LH
Tel: 01302 342 167

YMCA
Exclude Me In Project
St. David's Hill
Exeter
Devon, EX4 4DA
Tel: 01392 662 922

