

INVITATION TO A MEETING

You are telephoned by Jill Bloggs, a Manager from the new Primary Care Trust. There is a senior planning meeting starting up, she says. It will meet regularly once a month and will include senior managers from all the local services and professional disciplines. It is a Government requirement that all such meetings should now include service user representation. "Could a user go along?" she asks. It's being held tomorrow at 9.00 am.

Although it's extremely short notice, it feels very flattering to be invited to such an important-sounding event. And anyway, you say to yourself, it's a government requirement, so you've got to go. You decide you'll go. You have heard that some users insist on attending this kind of meeting in small groups for mutual support, never alone. But when you put that point to Jill Bloggs, she says that the room will be too small and, anyway, it only needs one user in a meeting for the user voice to be properly heard. All that earlier talk about users having to be "representative" is out of date, she says.

Jill Bloggs gives you travel directions and you arrive next morning at 5 to 9. You are actually feeling quite nervous and haven't slept well. You go up to the receptionist and say you've come for a meeting.

"Which meeting, darling?" the receptionist asks. "We've *four* meetings starting at 9."

"The meeting Jill Bloggs is running," you say.

"How am I supposed to know which meetings these people go to?" says the receptionist, snappily. The phone's ringing and people are queuing behind you. You're feeling worse by the minute. "Try Room 506X(b)third floor," she says. "The lift's over there. Who are you, by the way? What organisation?"

"I'm Rashida Chatterjee, I'm a user." The receptionist's eyes widen slightly and suddenly she's inspecting you closely. The whole reception area seems to go quiet. "Sign here, please," she says, in a new softer voice, as if trying to soothe you.

Ten minutes later, you get to the meeting. The receptionist had sent you to the wrong room and you've been wandering the corridors. You are feeling rather desperate.

You knock and enter. The talk stops. About fifteen pairs of eyes swivel round at you. There is no chair for you at the long table. "Hello, sorry I'm late. I'm Rashida Chatterjee," you say. You want to sound confident, but your voice quavers.

"Oh, Rashida !" Some one jumps up and rushes over to you. It's Jill Bloggs. She turns to the meeting, "This is our User Rep," she says proudly.

Everything stops while they find you a seat and provide you with a great mound of papers. You wish they'd all just look away. You wish you weren't there. At last the person at the end of the table, who seems in charge, addresses you and tells you her name (which you don't take in). Then in turn, all those other people say their name and job title, all fifteen of them. None of the names sink in. It feels like being a patient in a ward round.

At last the introductions are over and the Chair asks the meeting to return to the agenda. You can't find the agenda among all your papers. Your neighbour helps you.

The meeting is conducted at high speed. The atmosphere is taut, superficially friendly, but underneath you can feel all sorts of tensions. Everyone seems to speak with caution, from behind a mask. The language they speak is difficult to follow, full of specialist words. "I don't belong here," you say to yourself.

The Chair keeps referring to different fat reports among the papers. It seems that people are supposed to have read them already and in detail. This is the first time you've even seen them and they're all in small type, all hugely detailed and in many ways quite incomprehensible.

"Does the government require me to read all this?" you ask yourself. "But this has nothing to do with me!"

"But it has *everything* to do with you, Rashida!" the Chair replies, with feeling, from the head of the table. To your horror, you realise you were talking out loud.

Instructions

In your small groups:

1. Read this story carefully and discuss what contributed to Rashida's discomfort.
2. If you were co-ordinating a similar meeting what would you do differently?
3. As a user, what steps might you take to ensure that you are treated properly when invited to meetings? Might there be a better way for service users to make their voices heard ?