



The Rt. Hon. Rosie Winterton, MP,
Minister of State for Health Services,
The Department of Health,
Richmond House,
79 Whitehall,
London SW1A 2NS

Friday 23rd June 2006

Dear Rosie Winterton,

Re : Service User Consultation in Mental Health

We wish to pass on our deep concerns regarding standards of managerial practice in consulting with users of mental health services. We urge the need for a binding and central protocol of good practice in this area as a matter of urgency.

One of the signatories of the letter, Rogan Wolf, is founder and secretary of Hyphen-21. In the name of this charity he runs a national project called *Poems for the Waiting Room*, which is currently funded by the Arts Council and the Department of Health Equality and Human Rights Group. The project's latest collection of poems-posters consists entirely of poems written in non-English languages, each with its English translation alongside. The poems are for display in all suitable health-care settings.

Rogan has also acted for some years as support worker for mental health service user groups and in that capacity helped formulate and promote a code of professional conduct for ward rounds and similar meetings. The purpose of the code is to make these meetings less intimidating for the person at the receiving end. The code has become policy in several Trusts and has won the support and commendation of the Department of Health and of NIMHE, with a commitment on the part of the latter to help promote the code nationally.

Rogan believes that, just as this code has proved necessary to ensure good professional practice from clinicians required to assess and monitor, so a binding code is needed to ensure good practice from managers required to consult.

Dr Jan Wallcraft, the other signatory of this letter, is a prominent member of the national mental health service user movement and is chiefly responsible for a report on consultation called "On Our Own Terms." The report is up on the web-site of the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. It draws on material and findings from 318 user groups around the country. The report's steering group comprises of several other names of significance in the country's mental health service user movement. The report finds that, while consultation done well can improve people's mental health, done badly it actually does damage. The report sets out several principles for good consultation and proposes that "*A task force should be set up to develop a set of national guidelines for user involvement, based on the Draft Principles on User Involvement in this report (p. 63). The Department of Health (DoH) should then issue guidelines to StHAs, PCTs and NHS trusts.*"

That recommendation from a significant user-led study has not so far been followed up. In the meantime we both know of practice that bears out all too vividly the finding in Jan's report that consultation done badly does harm to people's mental health – to a worryingly extreme and unacceptable degree. We see standards being set by default in the absence of guidance, and *co-option* thus gradually becomes a norm and expectation, so that the

valid aim of skilful and careful listening that leads to results, becomes instead that token service user at every professional meeting, swept up and along by a busy, stress-filled system.

We do not wish to highlight particular instances here, since we are convinced that those we know are not unique. They are, however, deeply disturbing and leave us with no choice except to take action. We both hold the view that service user consultation and involvement in mental health is more complex than in most other care groups, has to be undertaken with greater care and skill and, accordingly, has to set its own standards. We also both take the view that consultation must be undertaken with the same level of skill and care as all other interactions between mental health service practitioner and mental health service user. The raw management model is not sufficient or appropriate. It cannot be acceptable that services designed to improve people's mental health end up doing it harm through careless consultation.

Therefore, we ask for your support for and sponsorship of the principles set out in "On Our Own Terms," along with its recommendation that these principles should form the basis of a binding protocol for all UK mental health PCT's and Provider Trusts. We would further recommend the creation of a team of advisors that could offer support and guidance to Trust personnel on particular issues of consultation.

We would be happy to meet with you to discuss these issues further. In conclusion, we can only repeat our conviction that this matter is urgent and requires the best attention of all concerned. We ourselves feel duty-bound to keep pursuing the issue until that attention has been given.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jan Wallcraft

Rogan Wolf

cc Professor Louis Appleby
National Director for mental Health