

# A Strategy Proposal for User Consultation

*this strategy was agreed and arrived at by the Westminster User Groups over a period of about 6 months, chiefly as a result of three planning days held at intervals. Most of its contents, in summary form, are now in process of being accepted by CNWL Trust, Westminster PCT, City of Westminster Social Services and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Social Services*

## Introduction

This paper offers a protocol (see Appendix One) which sets out some principles for good user consultation and describes four different methods for consulting with users. In doing so, the protocol is suggesting that the most common consultation approach - an invitation for users to join a professional steering group or meeting - is not the only - and not always the best - way of enabling the user voice to be spoken freely and listened to properly.

The protocol looks at the respective roles of support worker and group Chair, and suggests some boundaries to help define their differences and their relationship. It also makes some initial proposals for a consistent system for paying users.

The protocol should be seen in conjunction with the Consultation diagram (see Appendix Two) and the Ground Rules (see Appendix Three).

During the process of agreeing the protocol, local user groups also made the following decisions and would recommend them to others.

1/ The user groups will bind themselves to upholding the ground rules. An individual's membership of the group will depend on that person's ability to behave according to the ground rules, to a reasonable extent.

2/ The groups will prioritise the activities described in the Consultation diagram. In other words, they will keep working on being accountable to and in contact with the wider user constituency, in all ways possible ; and they will concentrate on further developing their involvement in staff recruitment and staff training. If ever the groups have to choose between conflicting demands on their time, the prioritised activities will take precedence.

3/ Any request for user consultation, however it comes through, will be presented to the group for discussion on whether or not to accept it. Services wishing to consult the user group will therefore be asked not to approach individuals from the group, but go direct to the support worker.

The group will not just discuss *whether* to meet the request, but also *how best* to meet it, ie which of the consultation methods described in the protocol would in this case most effectively ensure the user voice is spoken freely, and accountably, and is listened to properly.

It would also be hoped that in making their requests, the service representatives themselves would take some share of responsibility for thinking about the most appropriate way to consult, so that the method chosen becomes a creative issue of mutual concern and carefulness.

Implicit in the protocol is also the notion of a contract between user groups and services, by which both parties commit themselves to procedures and practice that best enhances careful and genuine user consultation. South London and Maudesley NHS Trust have called their version of this idea a "Reciprocal Code of Conduct" – which seems a helpful title. Such a code, once finalised, would need to be agreed at senior management level by the various services concerned, and issued to all staff as a Policy directive.

Below is a specimen draft of such a code, agreed recently by the Westminster User Groups. It essentially gathers together proposals made in the protocol at various points, plus a few additions, plus a specimen template letter that could be sent to user support workers by service staff who wish to consult with service users.

# **First Draft of a Reciprocal Code of Conduct for Consultation between Services and User Groups**

Services will aim at all times to consult in ways that best enable the user voice to be spoken freely and with confidence, and to be heard carefully and to good effect.

Services agree that on issues in which professionals wish to consult with users, the constituted groups only should be approached, working according to the protocols of those groups. It is not acceptable that individual users who are not user group members should be approached or co-opted. The reason for this is that the core user groups have had long-standing support, experience and training, and involve themselves in a pattern of accountability to other users.

Services agree that applications for consultation should be made formally to the user group support worker, by phone or by letter. Individual core group members should not be approached separately to take part in this or that meeting.

Services agree to respect and follow the user groups' preferred options for how they should be consulted with, working through the group support worker. This may be through attendance at Trust meetings (three users at a time) attendance by the manager(s) concerned at a user meeting, or by using the "Feeder Group" approach (see below).

The user groups commit themselves to manage the public money entrusted to them in a way that is competent and open to scrutiny.

The user groups commit themselves to offer consultation in a way that accords with their own codes of behaviour, commitment priorities and individual competencies.

The user group takes responsibility for ensuring that its representatives are chosen on the basis of their competency for the task, but will seek help as needed to obtain the resources needed for this (such as training).

The user group commits itself to remain actively accountable to the wider user constituency in the area - through the regular production of newsletters, through open meetings, through regular contact with all the user centres in the area.

## **Other Items**

Hospital in-patients should not be approached for consultation except through the Patients' Councils or their workers.

If managers wish to consult on a policy or paper in the making, they should try to consult at an early stage – rather than wait until it is finished and then send the document, (often very thick) asking, "what do you think of it?"

On the issue of research projects, it is requested that there should a centralised "clearing house" concerning users and user views and/or consultation - to avoid unnecessary duplication and repetition.

## **First Draft of a Pro Forma check-list for managers wishing to contact user groups**

Contact :

The User Support Worker  
Name/address/number

Explain role and place of work

Explain the project or issue you want to consult on

Give indication of the time and other commitments required

Be prepared to discuss which involvement method would seem most suitable (do not assume that inviting individuals onto your committee is necessarily the best or only way)

## Appendix One

# User Group Protocol

## The Context

Health and Social Care Services are now required to consult with, and be genuinely influenced by, the people who receive their treatment. This is clear and has led already to a great many attempts to fulfill the new requirements.

Altogether less clear is how to do this thing - how to consult properly, thoroughly, responsibly, carefully, meaningfully, genuinely.

Service professionals quite often complain - with justice - that Society's expectations of them are unreasonable. There seems to be no limits to what they are supposed to be able to do. But at least those professionals have job descriptions, person specifications, contracts, codes of conduct and government and local policies - which may sometimes be resented but which serve as useful guides and offer boundaries. Within these boundaries, the individual knows - at least to some extent - where he/she stands and what's expected.

Service Users, working with services as consultants, have no such guides, no such boundaries. It is new territory, almost entirely uncharted. And - unlike the care organisations, whose codes and definitions and policies have all been developed over many years - any attempt to provide something similar for user groups has to be done at high speed.

Let no-one mistake the importance of this task. User groups include people who are still vulnerable and perhaps confused, who have many other demands and commitments in their lives, who are unused to being put on a pedestal - and suddenly they are being approached from all quarters, to engage in this, talk at that, commit to the other. There is such a thing as human nature and as the codes that surround professionals are ways of catering for human nature when under pressure, so similar codes are swiftly needed as far as user consultation is concerned. Otherwise this wonderfully creative opportunity for making services more responsive to the people they serve, will be spoiled and squandered, and people will merely be hurt by the consultation process, and will hurt each other.

Structures and Codes of conduct are needed to enable services and users alike to engage in consultation in a way that is respectful, responsible, caring - and genuine. The following offers some initial thoughts and guidelines on the sort of structures that might help.

# Ways of Consulting Service users

A user group identified the following principles as central for any strategy for user consultation. They are quoted here straight from the flip chart :

## PRINCIPLES OF USER INVOLVEMENT

**RESOURCES** - Access to what is needed to do the job

**NOT TOKENISM** - ownership - what will be done with outcomes

**PROPER PREPARATION** - users properly equipped, training, where from, being clear, smaller groups

**ONGOING SUPPORT** - not too much pressure, regular meetings, opportunity for feedback, mutual support, remuneration

**STANDARDS SET BY USERS**

**EMPOWERING**

**PROPER CARE/ATTENTION TO PARTICIPANTS**

**INDEPENDENCE** - objectivity

**NO DUPLICATION**

**INTERACTIVE/TWO WAY PROCESS**

**FEEDBACK TO STAKEHOLDERS** - outcomes, process

**METHOD FIT FOR PURPOSE**

**APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION - LISTENING**

**USE ROBUST METHODOLOGY**

**USER FRIENDLY STRUCTURES**

**ENSURE THE WORK WE DO REFLECTS THE DIVERSITY OF SERVICE USERS IN KCW**

**INVOLVEMENT/FEEDBACK TO STAFF** - frontline

**WHEN NOT TO CONSULT**

**AVOID USER PROFESSIONALISATION** - remote from constituency

**GO TO WHERE THE USERS VOICE IS MOST CONFIDENTLY SPOKEN**

This meeting was held when users were less in demand than they are now, but already pressures were building up and there was a growing sense that invitations to the odd user to attend this committee or that steering group may well be irresistibly flattering to the individual concerned, but did not necessarily amount to “appropriate communication – listening” or to “going to where the users voice is most confidently spoken.”

At the time of the Regent’s College meeting, bad experiences were already accumulating. Not only were individual users in large groups of professionals feeling de-skilled, overwhelmed and unheard, but even significant gatherings of users in meetings often found these tiring, full of professional jargon, haste, technical detail and the underlying tensions of inter-organisational politics. Some users are expert and formidable in dealing with these conditions. But most people would wish to avoid them and consultation strategies should not be based on creating conditions that only a bare few individuals can tolerate.

The hour-glass diagram attached to this paper suggests various methods by which services can monitor their relevance and usefulness to the people obliged to make use of them. Not all of these methods involve a supported user group, and nor should they. Service monitoring should seek as rich and complete a picture as possible.

But user groups, properly supported and equipped, do offer an invaluable source of advice, expertise and first hand witness from a place of confidence and eloquence. All concerned in the process have an obligation to ensure that the best possible conditions are created for this witness to be freely spoken and properly heard.

The following consultation models are presented here, with comments on their merits/disadvantages

### **Model 1.**

#### Users invited to attend meetings, join Boards/ Committees, etc.

This seems to be the model that everyone first thinks of when talking about user consultation.

However, generally speaking, there are many disadvantages to this approach, not least that it rarely offer the conditions in which “the users voice is most confidently spoken” or is listened to as carefully as possible. (see “Principles” above).

And is this really “consulting” ? Is it not rather “co-opting” ? The difference is centrally important.

Although in some cases there is no alternative, it is certainly not to be seen as the only model, far less the best one.

But if, for whatever reason, it is agreed that this model is the one to be adopted for a particular project, user group members who are used to working together should attend as a pair or - still better - as a trio.

Following the meeting, they should report back to the remainder of the user group and receive feedback.

Every effort should be made by the chair of the meeting concerned to make the users present feel welcome and part of the session. In return, the meeting has a right to expect the users present to be capable of participating in the meeting in a meaningful and positive way.

## **Model 2.**

### Users invited to attend a major seminar or conference.

Some users enjoy attending conferences and get a lot out of them. So long as the conference-goer then reports back to the rest of the group, the user movement as a whole can benefit.

However, conferences are one thing ; consultation is another. It occasionally happens that large events are set up with a few users present – and these events are then claimed to have been examples of good user involvement and consultation. However, this approach does not normally constitute an acceptable way of consulting with service users, unless conducted with great care.

For instance, the organisers should ensure that carefully prepared support systems are available in case of need and that it is the constituted user groups who are invited to attend, since these have experience, a support system already in place, and are accountable to a wider constituency.

But even here, it is questionable whether mere individual attendance is the best way for the user voice to be heard on such occasions – if this is the aim. Better are prepared and time-limited presentations, given by users in strength, supported if necessary by their support worker ; or even videos that can relay users' experiences without exposing them to the full impact of a large audience.

## **Model 3**

### Managers attend user group meetings or seminars to consult on particular topics

This model gives more depth to the user voice, since the group is likely to be on its own territory, in larger numbers, and therefore at its most confident and fluent. The meeting is under the control of the user chair, supported and facilitated by a familiar support worker. Therefore it can function at its own pace and create its own process, rather than following the (usually frenetic) service agenda.

This model has been adopted by Westminster PCT and Westminster Social Services for meetings between Commissioners and user groups in Westminster and Kensington ; it is a model practiced also by the CNWL Chief Executive, who visits each user group on a six-monthly basis.

An important aspect of the model is that issues raised in the meetings, or promises given, should not be left hanging. In the case of professionals visiting on a regular basis, the next meeting is usually sufficient for reporting on issues discussed earlier. In the case of one-off visitors, other ways must be found that issues are not left unresolved.

## **Model 4**

### The "Feeder Group" Model

According to this model, the user group is asked to spend time with its support worker considering a topic or policy issue. It is effectively the "Away day" approach.

The support worker is briefed on the policy to be discussed and takes responsibility for relaying it to the user group in palatable form. The support worker also takes responsibility for passing back the results of the user group's deliberations to the appropriate manager or meeting.

The advantages of this model are seen as similar to those of model 3 but even more suitable for creative thinking - in conducive surroundings, in familiar company.

In Westminster work according to this model resulted in

the meetings (or ward round) code that has now been presented to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for mental health in Portcullis House, Westminster

a report on Good Practice Indicators from a user perspective (see elsewhere on web-site)

a particular model for user involvement in staff recruitment, which involves a separate user panel (see elsewhere on web-site)

a crisis card design which has led to the production and local distribution of a high quality crisis card

a detailed specification of the Crisis House that users in Westminster are still campaigning for.

Model Four thus lends itself to innovation and creativity, rather than just a response to the service agenda.

All four models described here have been tried in West Hampshire. The “feeder group” model was the one used by a visiting team from the Sainsbury Centre as part of their evaluation of the Trust’s services. The “feeder group” model was found to be the most successful of the models as far as results were concerned and the most popular among the majority of the users involved.

## The User Core Group - To whom is it accountable ?

### The wider user constituency.

The core user groups are not obliged to “represent” in themselves, or in what they say, all the users of a locality ; the expectation that they should do, and any criticism that they do not, are bogus.

However they *are* morally responsible to make every effort to remain in touch with and accountable to the wider service user constituency. Otherwise there is the danger that they become slowly a small separate elite, more part of the services than of the user experience they speak for.

This possibility is made stronger by the introduction of payment for consultation tasks. This is not to say that payment is wrong - on the contrary, it’s an obvious necessity. However, the fact remains that only the core user groups have access to this extra source of funding, through being available for consultation ; the wider constituency do not. All too easily the core groups could become jealous of this “perk” and cut themselves off from their less fortunate peers as a way of defending it.

But unless the core group prioritises its accountability to the wider user constituency, the group’s meaning and validity will be in question, its right to be listened as a user “voice” greatly weakened. Thus the group’s full adherence to the pattern of accountability outlined in the diagram attached should be made a condition of local funding and recognition by local services.

The pattern described in the diagram sees the core-group’s accountability to its constituency as a widening arc, extending through “Associate Membership”, to Open Evening attendance, to newsletter readership.

The Associate Member meetings should take place every quarter, their membership drawn from people in touch with the group and /or recruited at the Open Evenings. The core group administrators should keep addresses and contact numbers of the people who come to the Associate member meetings, so that Associate members can be informed of future meetings, receive the latest newsletters, etc. The meetings should be led by the core group chair, should include feed-back and updating of developments by the core group, and allow for issues and concerns to be raised by the Associate members.

Open Evenings seem to work best when they are held in the local hospitals. Food and entertainment should be provided, and the atmosphere kept chiefly social. But a brief description of the groups’ activities should be given, with newsletters on offer, etc.

The newsletter should contain useful information and issues of local concern, and come out every six months. Every effort should be made to distribute it to each mental health service user in the locality. It is not enough just to pin up the newsletter in the odd waiting room. Worker teams should be asked, not just to take copies with them on their visits to individual service users, but if possible to go through the contents with them, drawing out the features of especial interest.

## **Recruitment to the Core Group**

The ideal number for an effective working group is 10 - 12. As far as the core groups are concerned, every reasonable effort should be made to keep recruiting to this approximate total and to hold it constant. The accountability pattern described above would be the chief source of new recruits.

There need be no limit to the numbers of Associate Members and an open invitation to Associate Member meetings should be offered in the Open Evenings and written in each issue of the newsletters.

However, membership of the core groups should not be by open invitation. People interested to join the group will have to apply through being nominated. Alternatively, the name of an individual thought suitable by any core group member can be placed on the agenda for discussion in the group. If the group and support worker agree, that person should be approached and, if he/she is interested, meet with a group member and the support worker, and/or invited to attend a group meeting. If all agree, the person should then be invited to join the core group.

A person qualifies to join the core group if :

- He/she can attend the regular meetings and fulfil other group commitments
- can function in a setting of agendas, etc
- can act according to the group's ground rules
- has relevant skills/abilities to offer.

There are a number of service users who have a great interest in issues of mental health practice and policy, but who do not function well in groups, or find it hard to keep regular time commitments. The user groups will also make it their business to secure and maintain contact as best they can with this group, to benefit from their skills and pass on their ideas.

## Allocation of Work

The user groups and individual user group members are being approached from all sides, to take part in consultation or involvement of one kind or another. Often they are asked to participate in activities or in ways that show little understanding of the issues or problems involved in good consultation, no knowledge of the consulting methods that work best, no knowledge of other commitments that group members may have.

It is crucial that user groups do not succumb to the temptation of saying yes to all and any request, whatever its nature. Possible (and understandable) reasons for doing so are -

it is flattering to be asked, it makes you feel you matter  
you feel left out if you do not take part  
it's something to do  
it's difficult to say no  
others say yes, so why not me  
the extra money comes in handy

But user groups that function on an ad hoc basis, shaped entirely by demands and inducements, soon lose cohesiveness and direction, and consultation itself becomes a hollow facade. Individuals struggle for pickings, accountability fades into the background, and the group itself ceases to be a source of strength for its members able properly to witness for the user experience.

All requests for user involvement in local consultation processes must therefore be agreed to beforehand by the group, in discussion with the support worker. Thus, requests for consultation cannot be agreed to until or unless the group as a whole has discussed them in detail, in open forum, according to the ground rules.

The group will give priority at all times to its own core tasks as previously agreed - ie accountability to its constituency, staff recruitment, staff training and induction - as these develop (see diagram). From time to time the group will identify other priority areas to which it wishes to devote its time and resources.\*

Further requests for consultation will be assessed by the group and the support worker as follows :

- do they fit with the group's own priorities, and does the group have time to spare.
- which individuals in the group are best placed to help.
- which form of consultation seems the most appropriate in each case.

\*The group's ground rules and priority decisions must obviously be reviewable in the light of experience and changing circumstances. That review would be undertaken by the user groups, perhaps with help from advisors and/or a steering group, and/or the funders, by agreement. However, the ground rules and priority decisions must not be open to review at every new request, pressure or temptation. The review should be held annually and the decisions made at that review should be upheld throughout the year following.

# The Facilitator or Support Worker

## The postholder

acts as advisor for the group on which activities to concentrate on and how best to do so.

acts for the group as a kind of guide and anchorage, Guardian of its decisions, its ground-rules and its financial systems, to ensure the group remains consistently focused on its priorities, loyal to its principles and caring of all its members.

acts as link and liaison between services and user group, advising the group as needed on how best to access the services and liaise with them.

acts in support of the chair in preparing for the group meetings, in making decisions on requests made to the group, and how best to co-ordinate activities the group decides upon.

supporting the chair and other group officers in the pressures of their different roles and in their compliance with the group's ground rules.

supporting individual group members as needed, not as social worker or nurse, but to ensure their welfare within the group, so that each feels free to speak and is properly heard.

seeks to ensure the group remains as representative as possible of a multi-ethnic local population.

The support worker concentrates on the "process" of the group - ie is concerned with what helps people work best together, what is the best way to consult people, how to ensure the services approach the groups in ways that are manageable and appropriate, how the group takes its decisions and how it keeps to them, how it copes with the pressures.

The Support Worker must at all times seek to remain in accord with the Chair, ie hold the "process" of the group in harmony with the "content."

The support worker remains finally answerable to the user groups and has no vote in their decision-making processes. However, the groups will often be placed under great pressure, and it will sometimes be difficult for them to follow the ground rules they themselves have set and to hold to the priority decisions that they themselves have decided upon. In these cases the support worker has an important role to play, its status as yet unclear.

Whatever decisions are arrived at on this, there will be occasions in which support worker is placed in a position of being custodian of the group's ground rules, its previous decisions, its financial probity, its public accountability, and its overall well-being as a group of people. The role is therefore a vital element in the group's healthy functioning and will need the support of all the parties concerned to be effective.

It is recommended that decisions on the following topics should can only be made after consultation with the support worker, and that worker's views and perspective have been taken into consideration. (It may be the case that the Funders would want input on major funding decisions.)

- a new group activity or commitment
- a new group member
- a change in the ground rules or priority agreements
- expenditure not already agreed in budget discussions.

At the same time, the support worker is not empowered to take decisions, or involve the group in activities, without first gaining its assent in full discussion.

It is suggested here that if the support worker becomes convinced that the group is becoming detached from its own standards, and fails to obtain re-assurance through discussion within the group, the worker should be empowered to approach the funders and inform them that the group no longer enjoys his/her confidence. All attempts should then be made to resolve the difficulties as perceived, but in the last resort, the support worker is empowered to recommend the disbanding of the user group and the withdrawal of its budget.

The support worker is in turn answerable to the Commissioners and through them to the local user movement as a whole - there should be an annual review of the worker's tasks, with Commissioner and Chairs, following a review with groups as a whole. If the support worker has failed to fulfill the year's tasks as agreed, and cannot explain the reasons satisfactorily, and/or has lost the loyalty of the groups to a convincing extent, and if mediation efforts fail, s/he can be asked to leave.

# The Group Chair

The group chair :

co-ordinates the activities of the user group on the group's behalf

encourages an atmosphere of orderliness, purposefulness and good nature in the group's meetings, so that it has the best possible conditions in which to make its decisions, pursue its activities and act in the spirit of its ground rules.

As the support worker concentrates on the "process" of the group, the chair concentrates more on its "content" - ie running its meetings, getting the decisions made, co-ordinating arrangements, speaking for the group when required, working within and as part of the group when possible.

It is not the chair who makes decisions on behalf of the user group. It is the user core group, sufficiently quorate, that is responsible for all decision-making, subject to its proper observance of its own ground rules and provided it is fulfilling all its commitments to make itself accountable to the wider user constituency. The chair's job is to co-ordinate the group in its decision-making.

The chair must at all times follow the ground rules him/herself and encourage the rest of the group to do the same. If the chair fails to follow the ground rules, this becomes a matter for the group agenda, and can be placed there by any of the group members, including the support worker. If there are problems in this area, the group is empowered to insist the chair offer satisfactory plans for improving his/her performance and thereafter provide evidence of improvement. Failing real improvement within a month and consistently thereafter, the group is empowered to require the chair step down before the end of his/her prescribed period in office. The funders can be called on if necessary.

Quoracy means the agreed minimum number of group members present at a meeting empowered to take a decision. If the number of people present is lower than that agreed number, no decision making is possible on that occasion. It is recommended here that each user group is quorate when there are five members present. A Westminster-wide decision requires five votes in favour from each group.

# The Payment of Service Users

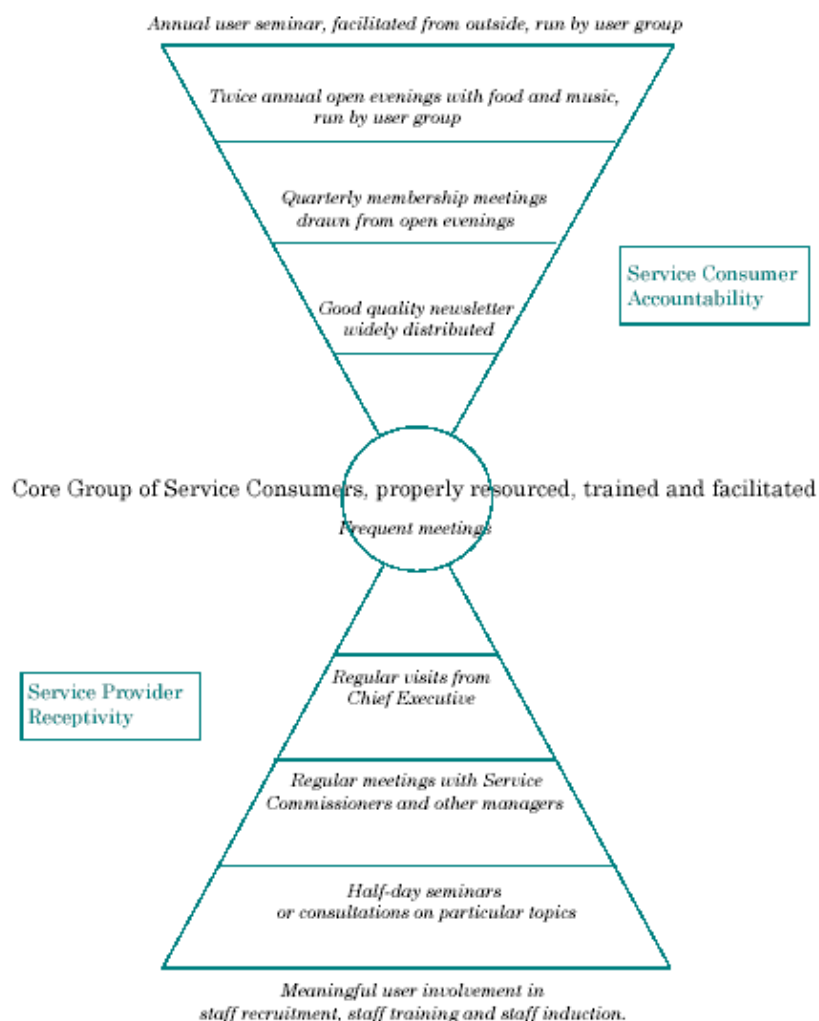
## Proposal in Summary

- There should be a common and consistent standard for paying mental health service users in a given catchment area
  - Within that catchment area, the various services that call on users for consultation – should be asked to comply with whatever arrangements are centrally agreed.
- All meetings with service users held for the benefit of services and/or service managers, and/or as part of the consultation process, should qualify for payment.
- Such meetings would include : meetings with commissioners, Business Plan meetings, staff recruitment interviews, steering group meetings, Partnership meetings, etc
- Meetings the user groups hold on their own behalf should be seen as voluntary activities, not qualifying for payment. These would include the regular user meetings, even those which visitors attend. However, meetings specially set up for visitors from the local services, at their request, would qualify for payment.
- The payment rate should be £15.00 a session, a session being a period of up to half a day. A user who gives a whole day's work should therefore be paid £30.00.
- There are offer a variety of different systems and budgets set up for the payment of service users across an area. Managers should discuss ways of ensuring that there is a payments system that is as clear and simple as possible. The feasibility of eventually running a centralised payments system should be explored.
- Care services cannot take responsibility for the way individual users manage their payments within the parameters of the weekly Disregard limit (currently £20). However they cannot ignore the issue. At the very least, the feasibility of an area-wide system for ensuring that all users who receive payment are given information on the Disregard should be discussed.
- The payment of users cannot be separated from how best to consult with them. It is proposed here that for the average formal meeting run by professionals on service “territory,” 3 users should be seen as the optimum number for good consultation ; in the case of meetings run by users (the whole user group present), a routine of one such group per month for each of the two regions should be seen as the norm, with more frequent meetings being held on occasion at the request of services. This of course has implication for budgets.
- The whole of the above refers only to the payment of users for the purpose of user *consultation*. It has no connection with different payment rates and systems used in the care services for paying people who take part in the different work projects.

*Rogan Wolf*  
*Sept 02*

## Appendix Two

# A Model for User Consultation



*This model describes activities and meaningful involvements that can best be centred on a user group, properly supported. The model does not suggest that consultation should end here. For instance, it is assumed that all services would monitor their operations systematically and consistently through CPA plans, etc., and draw regular conclusions from this information. Services can also be monitored through "User Focussed Monitoring," a system conceived and developed by Dr. Diana Rose and originally run from the Sainsbury Centre, by which trained and supported service consumers assess local services through interviewing other users and visiting sites.*

## Appendix Three

### User Group Ground Rules

The group has an important role in giving service users a voice. To fulfil this role on behalf of users the group has to be strong and cohesive. Group members have a right to look to the group as a source of strength and inspiration, and an obligation to contribute to the group in a way that helps it be a source of strength and inspiration to others.

People with mental health problems are a minority group in Society and have first hand experience of being discriminated against in many ways. But Society discriminates against many other groups as well. People from ethnic minority groups are one of these. We can expect a user group to be especially sensitive to the experience of those who are at the receiving end of discrimination either in action or in words and to be rigorous in ensuring that the same is not repeated within the group. The group must therefore be rigorous in ensuring that it is as representative as possible of the wider population and rigorous too in ensuring that all its members feel 100% supported and attended to, whatever their race, creed, colour, sexual orientation or gender.

To help the group fulfill its role as a voice and power base for other users and as a source of strength and safety for its members, we should show we value and respect one another by :

- being ordinarily pleasant and polite to one another

- respecting the fact that everyone in the group has to deal with a mental health problem and/or aftermath in some shape or form ; and in consequence being especially supportive of one another and alert to one another's needs and mental state.

- listening properly to one another without interrupting and even when we disagree, showing respect for the view that's being expressed and trying genuinely to take it on board.

- contributing to the group in a way that allows others to have an equal say and does not drown out other views and voices.

- choosing our words in a way that shows respect for others and does not cause offence.

- supporting and showing appreciation of those group members who perform tasks on behalf of the group, and praising their efforts whenever possible. If there are improvements to suggest, they should be mentioned with sensitivity and in a way that does not put the person down.

- trying to contribute to an atmosphere that is purposeful but also pleasant, so that people can relax and feel at ease.

We should also support group members who have extra responsibilities ( ie the Chair, the Secretary, etc) by :

keeping to the agenda and, when sometimes that fails to happen, accepting and supporting the chair's efforts to return to the subject in hand.

not interrupting or undermining the chair either in behaviour or language.

showing appreciation of the efforts of group members in positions of responsibility, helping them if possible and if asked, and acting always in consultation and accord with the decisions of the group.

using the systems as laid down in the protocols and acting in support of them.

If there is bad feeling between group members, this should be brought up openly, either between the individuals concerned, or in the group, or both, depending on the circumstances. Group members should not talk about each other behind each other's back, or say anything about each other that they are not willing to say to the person's face. Every effort should be made by all concerned to find ways to resolve the difficulty. It is the responsibility of those involved not to allow the bad feeling to get in the way of the group's effectiveness or to cause them to break the agreed ground rules. Ordinary courtesy should still be the norm.

The open group is normally the right and proper place for the discussion of group issues ; while obviously discussion goes on outside the group on this or that topic, individual group members should not be pressured, outside of the group meetings, into changing their views on particular points. Conversation outside the group meetings should always be within the *spirit* of the ground rules – ie referring to others with respect, maintaining a spirit of trust, openness and trustworthiness, and avoiding back-biting.

The group discusses issues in an open way, and shares its minutes with other interested individuals and groups. However group members should not gossip in a personal way about group business, to people who are not part of the group.

All of us are likely to break the ground rules we agree to ; we therefore need to support each other in trying to keep to them and be genuine in our efforts to keep them ourselves. Ultimately it is for the group to decide what needs to be done in the case of someone who keeps breaking the ground rules we've agreed to and/or shows no respect for them. The ultimate sanction is of course expulsion from the group.

signed

date