

A Protocol for User Involvement in Interviewing

Introduction

In Westminster, it has been agreed that user involvement in staff recruitment will follow the model of a separate user panel, working in parallel with the main panel and informing its decision.

The user panel will assess candidates a/ on issues of specific concern to users of services and b/ on candidates' core relationship skills. In this way the user panel offers the main panel an extra tool in its overall assessment. In so far as relationship skills are an essential specification for mental health workers at every level, the user panel also offers the best possible test of this aspect of a candidate's abilities.

1. User Groups notified of pending interviews

The Trust will take responsibility for ensuring that Westminster User groups are informed well in advance of all pending senior interviews and invited to participate as a second panel.

Senior posts means all management posts down to Deputy CMHT managers and hospital ward managers ; it also means Consultant Psychiatrists. It does not mean specialist Finance or other Admin managers.

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2. Suitable Conditions to be Provided

For those senior interviews which take place at Trust headquarters, an appropriate support worker will take responsibility for ensuring

- that the user panel have a suitable room for their interviews
- that the timing of the user interviews in relation to the primary panel interviews allows the user conclusions to have full and proper weight in the final decision.
- Enough time is allowed for each interview, with breaks for the panel built in by agreement.

Someone should be available to offer a welcome to the users as they arrive, guide them to the room and supply them with refreshments as required.

3. Person Specs

The user panel will examine candidates on two particular areas of activity. Those two areas should appear as Essential Criteria in the service person/job specs, for clinicians and managers, as follows.

Ie “Ability to relate to service users with warmth, genuineness and accurate empathy”

“Evidence of genuine understanding of and sincere commitment to user involvement issues”

It will be accepted that the user panel will be the main recruitment tool for testing candidates in these areas. Candidates will be informed of this in the standard letters that go out to them beforehand.

4. Training, Confidentiality and Payment Issues

The services have a right to expect the user panel to have been adequately trained in Equal Ops interviewing, to have learnt interview techniques and to have prepared their questions carefully and be willing to share these in advance with the primary panel. In return, the users have a right to resources that will allow them to obtain training if required.

The services (and all candidates) also have a right to expect that discussions about candidates, and the panels’ reasons for decisions and recommendations, are kept strictly confidential to the panel group, and that any breaches of this will result in a person’s dismissal from future recruitment panels.

Opinions vary as to whether user panels should see candidates’ application forms. It is recommended here that there is a real confidentiality issue and it needs to be acknowledged. However it can be avoided if the user chair reads through the application and summarises basic work history details for the rest of the panel. Otherwise all candidates have a right to be told in advance that their application forms might be read by prospective patients.

In recognition of the stress, time and skill required of interviewers, services should ensure that adequate payment is made to users for taking part in staff recruitment, within the Disregard limits.

5. The Link between the two Panels must be strong and effective

For the user group to keep faith with this process and for the service itself to reap maximum benefit from the user perspective, each panel must have credibility with the other and the communication between them must be two-way.

- The user panel chair must be an experienced interviewer and be known and trusted by the primary panel members.
- Ideally there should be an observer from the primary panel present throughout the user panel interviews. This observer might even be the primary panel chair, and be able to act as user panel chair as well.

The observer should take part in the user discussions afterwards, comparing their impressions and observations with his/her own, so that the combination of perspectives becomes part of the final recommendation.

Clearly this has major resource implications for the services. It will require a clear decision on the part of the services that good recruitment is a high priority and warrants a major investment of time.

The ideal pattern this proposal implies is that candidates will be shortlisted down to about four. The user panel will see them during one half of the day, the primary panel during the other half. Candidates will thus be interviewed twice. And the observer will have committed a full day to the interview.

6. The Status of the User Panel Recommendation must be clearly recognised and upheld

If the conditions outlined above are met, the users have every right to expect their recommendation to be given full weight in the final panel decision. The user panel should be recognised as the best possible measure of the candidates' ability to relate to users, a genuine and substantive recruitment tool and an advance on previous assessment approaches in this area. Accordingly, if a user panel finds that a candidate lacks relationship skills to a substantial degree, that candidate will be deemed as failing on an Essential Specification criterion and will not be offered the job.

It is recognised of course that the user panel will not be interviewing candidates on all aspects of the Person/Job Spec and therefore cannot expect to have a determining influence on who should be appointed. However this should not deter the panel from stating a preferred choice, which should be carefully weighed by the primary panel ; and the primary panel should offer a full and clear explanation if that preference is not reflected in the final decision.

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