



Supporting People

Guide to user involvement for organisations providing housing related support services

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Users, and improving the services delivered to them, is an important aspect of the **Supporting People** programme aims. The key to improving users' experience of service delivery and to achieving user empowerment and increased independence is to involve them in a range of ways.

The guide to user involvement, of which this is a summary, discusses how support provider organisations – including Registered Social Landlords, Local Authorities, and specialist support organisations – can involve service users in all aspects of housing related support services.

The guide, and this summary, will also be useful to local **Supporting People** commissioning bodies and teams with responsibility for monitoring the quality of support services. Specific issues for them are set out towards the end of this summary.

The guide contains many examples of successful user involvement, where the objective of involvement has been well thought through, and the approach has been geared to what is appropriate to the groups of clients, and to the setting in which the support services are being provided. This summary contains a selection of these examples.

A package of guidance on the quality and monitoring processes has now been published by ODPM and can be found on the **Supporting People** website at: <http://www.spkweb.org.uk> under General Documents and Discussion/General Documents/Quality and Monitoring. Specific guidance on involving users in quality and monitoring processes will be published later in 2003 by the ODPM. Readers are advised to read this guide, in conjunction with this further guidance.

The guide envisages the development of user involvement activities as a gradual process, and one that is responsive to the capacities and preferences of the users.

Why involve Service users?

There are three key reasons:

1. When effectively implemented, the involvement of users can lead to the development of independence skills; including self-esteem and social skills and facilitates users' inclusion within the community. It can be a way of bringing users together to enable them to share experiences and gain support from each other and from those working for the support agency. An example of this from Key Ring:

Key Ring

In Key Ring schemes, people with learning disabilities live 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, who is based within the same locality and whose role is not that of a professional but more of a trusted friend. Additionally, users derive support from each other. Network members meet informally once a week at a central venue within the locality e.g. community centre, pub. People are encouraged to attend, but not obligated.

Users concerns and interests dictate the content and pace of the discussion although staff attend the meeting too. 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 towards that end. 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.

2. User involvement can ensure that services reflect the needs and wishes of people who use them and it can create a sense of ownership, but only when involvement initiatives are sustained by action. YMCA Housing illustrates this:

YMCA Housing

This participation in a management project was located within a special needs hostel for a diverse group of young people. The aim was to involve residents, staff and the management committee in developing move-on accommodation of 8 flats.

The process of involvement started with a discussion resulting in an agreement about the kinds of decisions and the appropriate level of decision making power which users could hold. There was a range of issues, and for each one, the role of users was established as ‘decisive’, ‘consultative’, or ‘informative’.

There were joint activities to get people feeling comfortable working together, including team building games, design of and participation in a communications course, and an outward bound weekend, in which every area (finance, content and accommodation) was the responsibility of the group. A variety of creative working methods were used, to develop skills in decision making (such as small group work, role-play, two sided debates and open negotiation).

3. User involvement can also help to guarantee a better quality of service and can add value to service planning, development and delivery. A good example of the involvement of users in evaluating and improving the quality of services is by Stonham Housing Association.

Stonham Housing Association

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. These are facilitated by external consultants, who have expertise in these methods. 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) and refreshments are provided. The findings from the groups are considered by the Board and action is prioritised, agreed and 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, towards the aim of shaping more responsive, sensitive and reflective practice.

Successful user involvement

The starting point in making user involvement successful is to understand and respond to the immediate needs concerns and interests of service users. From such beginnings, and through the growth of mutual trust, confidence, skills and expertise, user involvement can be gradually developed.

Effective user involvement in **Supporting People** requires an 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. Some principles that can be used to guide provider organisations towards successful user involvement are set out below:

Seven principles that can help to deliver effective user involvement

1. To make user involvement effective, providers are advised to think of involvement not as a separate activity but as an approach to working with people that is integral to the culture and ethos of the service and the working practices of all staff.
2. User involvement works best when it is ‘grown’ and nurtured, starting with activities that stem from users’ immediate needs, interests and concerns, expanding and deepening in an iterative fashion.
3. Effective user involvement is inclusive and anti-discriminatory. Support and access needs to be provided to enable people to be engaged to the extent and at a level that they feel comfortable. Specific initiatives will need to be put in place to ensure that individuals and groups, who have experienced discrimination in their day-to-day lives, have a voice. The type of support required will vary from person to person.
4. Effective involvement requires imagination, creativity, energy and commitment to engage people effectively, and an openness to respond positively to the demands for change that flow from it.
5. 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.
6. User involvement requires careful nurturing. Minor successes can be hard won, but they may be the building blocks for greater achievements.
7. 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’.

Users can be involved on four levels:

User involvement can progress through a series of levels from small projects, of direct relevance to users, to those which are more abstracted from users' immediate concerns, such as initiatives in which users are involved in management or governance.

Level 1: Exchange of information

Organisations can improve the dialogue they have with users by providing information that is relevant to them. In order to know what information users would like, staff will need to be creative in the ways they support and listen to users, and in how they feed information back into the organisation. Enabling people to express their needs, preferences and concerns and to share their experiences on a daily basis will be a good way of keeping information provision relevant to users. This can be through processes such as assessment of users' needs, or through specific initiatives such as the one illustrated in the example below from the Elfrida Society:

Elfrida Society

This example covers people with mild to moderate learning disabilities that live in a range of types of housing with support. Staff make use of different media, for example art, drawing and audio-visual tools to facilitate communication with service users.

Users were directly involved in developing materials to promote healthy living and manage common illnesses. Specific features of the process of involvement included: identifying each individual's talents and interests relevant to the project (e.g. drawing), providing training for people who need to develop specific skills (e.g. word processing) and testing out the material developed with other users. Overall benefits of the project were:

- Users worked together, and with staff.
- Users' confidence was strengthened by taking things at a pace they were comfortable with.
- Users had the opportunity to shape and influence what was produced.
- Users developed new skills.
- A culture of engagement was facilitated.

Level 2: Planning day to day activities – providing opportunities for people to get together

Enabling groups of service users to express their views and influence decision making requires both appropriate opportunities and forums for involvement, and the necessary support and skills to participate. If users are not supported, they will be unable 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.

There is a range of different approaches to engaging groups of users in shaping the form and process of service delivery on a day to day basis. These cover small-scale local initiatives to broader national forums, relatively informal to more formal mechanisms and can encompass users whose relationship with the service is relatively short term, as well as those who have a long-term involvement with a service. Examples of each type are included in the guide, but an example of an informal small-scale project is given below, which is the approach taken by Gipsil:

Gipsil

Gipsil provides for young people in supported tenancies. One of the projects, called **Spark** provides additional support to tenants who are accessing college, training and work. A core feature of **Spark** is a weekly evening meeting, which offers an opportunity for people to meet together, share skills and experiences and to gain support from each other and from Gipsil staff. The meeting involves a formal meeting to consider plans and opportunities for the future, a group meal and a social activity.

Spark, in association with Vera Media, produced a short film documenting the lives of five young people in the community. A cyber suite was also developed in response to an expressed need of young people for a place to get together to surf the net and use email. It was secured in part through the users' own fundraising efforts. It acts as a 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. The cyber suite is an example of an initiative of a project engaging with users' immediate concerns and interests, and which provides the foundation and a venue for future involvement initiatives.

Level 3: Involving users in more broad-based activities such as planning and evaluation of services and policy development

Involvement in the sorts of activities that are, sometimes, further removed from the immediate interests of the user will be most successful where there have been successes in earlier and smaller involvement projects. Where organisations have developed a good day to day dialogue with users, in a way that engages them, involvement in service planning, development, policy and evaluation will be more effective.

Involving users in these more broad-based activities will also be more successful where they are made relevant to users, where involvement activities are linked to the needs and interests of the individual users, and where access is facilitated and support provided.

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Planning: tenants have successfully been involved in projects to manage and inform the design of new provision and two examples – Advance Housing and the YMCA – are included in the guide.

Engaging the wider community: the guide provides examples of involvement activities that have supported users in engaging the wider community. In the case of the Elfrida society, this was achieved through action research whilst in the example from the Grove Housing Team, former homeless people went into schools to talk to children about their experiences of becoming and being homeless.

Involving users in shaping policy, and selecting staff, as well as setting and evaluating standards for services: The Stonham Housing Association example which has been discussed above involves users in evaluating services. The way in which this evaluative information is then acted on is an important feature of the model.

Level 4: Involving users in service management

Users can be involved in service management in a number of ways. Options for board level contributions include having user representatives on the Board, having elected representatives, and advisory forums to consult and involve in board decisions. A parallel structure to Board level representation was created in the case of the Disabled People's Forum, part of Leonard Cheshire, in which the user forum is a means whereby users can have a route into shaping strategy and practice at governance level.

User involvement in governance is also most successful where it builds on a history of initiatives that directly engage with their interests. User involvement in governance is not the starting point of a user involvement strategy, but is one of the features of it. An example of involvement in governance is from the Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes Association:

Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes Association

Users living in sheltered housing and other types of housing, elect a representative for a period of three years. There are 70 representatives in total. These provide the bridge for a flow of information between the agency and the residents. Representatives meet staff and members of the executive committee each quarter, to feed in the views of residents and they then provide feedback on decisions made to the users they represent. A recent innovation has been the election of three people from among the residents' representative group on to one of the key sub-committees of the management board.

Building on current involvement activities

In seeking to involve users more in all aspects of services, providers are advised to ensure the process of involvement chosen is inclusive, that it facilitates the growing independence and integration of the user, and is not focused on the needs of the organisation.

Where possible, providers should base all involvement activities on an understanding of the needs, experiences, capacities of users and their preferred methods for being involved, and ensure that people are given the right kind of support to participate.

Creativity and flexibility will be important in making involvement work, and so providers are advised to be reflective about what types of involvement works for whom. It will be important here to reflect on the power differentials between users and staff. The empowerment of users may pose a personal and professional challenge to those who regard themselves as 'experts'.

Developing a constructive dialogue demands on the one hand, a commitment to active listening, acknowledging different perspectives and sources of expertise, and working through negotiated solutions to problems. User involvement is likely to involve training and support for all staff involved.

Providers need to be explicit about the part users are to play in decision making, be clear about the purpose and objectives of the involvement, and be committed to carrying through changes in decision making processes to enable users to have a real voice.

Challenges faced in making user involvement effective

Embracing risk

User involvement is inevitably risky. But if it is to be effective, then it will be disruptive of the usual power relationships that exist between managers, staff and service users. How the organisation handles the problems, tensions and conflicts that arise is a matter for local determination, but the point is that this can be anticipated.

Fostering a culture geared to independence of the user inevitably produces tensions between managing risk of the user to themselves and others, and supporting autonomy, and this poses difficult questions for providers that are not easily answered. Central in devising appropriate strategies to manage these tensions is an organisational culture that places emphasis on understanding users' strengths and capacities, and on understanding the constraints on their ability to exercise choice and control. Providers may also wish to

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examine how and in what ways peoples' skills and competencies can be enhanced toward achieving more control in decision-making about aspects of their lives and the services they receive.

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 that facilitate participation across the spectrum. This will require a culture in which there is mutual respect, an embracing of differences, and a commitment to supporting individual and collective rights.

Recognising and valuing the diversity of people using support services

The expectations, capacities and circumstances of the people using support services are diverse and their relationship with the wider communities in which they live will differ from one person to another. This and the diversity of services across a range of settings poses a challenge for providers in developing effective user involvement. Responding to these challenges means that:

- Involvement has to start from an understanding and willingness to respond to the immediate practical needs and concerns of users, as well as starting with the issues that they want to work on.
- Understanding what people bring with them in terms of experiences of social exclusion and vulnerability is crucial to knowing how best to involve them.
- Support aimed at people taking responsibility and control of their lives must acknowledge their diverse experiences of exclusion and enable them gain greater access to and integration with the wider community.
- 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. Reviewing approaches and incorporating the lessons drawn from experience and any shifts in the nature and form of service delivery is essential.

Key issues for Commissioning Bodies and Supporting People teams

Local Commissioning Bodies and **Supporting People** teams responsible for commissioning services and monitoring the quality of provision will want to ensure that providers are developing effective approaches to involving users. Proposed standards for user involvement have been published by the ODPM as part of the package of guidance on **Supporting People** quality and monitoring processes that has been developed for Commissioning Bodies and provider organisations. Readers should therefore consult this other guidance. The specific guidance on involving users in **Supporting People** quality and monitoring processes is due

to be published in 2003, whilst the rest of the package – the titles of which are listed below – is now available on the **Supporting People** website (see end for reference):

- 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.

In assessing provider performance, local authorities are advised to consider written strategies and everyday practice, as well as specific user involvement initiatives. The checklist below may be a useful starting point for seeking evidence of good practice in user involvement.

Good practice checklist:

- Providers demonstrate an understanding of the range of reasons for working at meaningful involvement.
- There is evidence that involvement activities further the goal of independence and integration into the wider community as well as making use of and developing the skills of users. Involvement is seen to shape and improve services.
- Involvement begins with the needs and interests of users, rather than stemming solely from the needs of the organisation. Approaches to involvement are based on a dialogue with people about the kinds of activities and forms of involvement they would prefer.
- Involvement is not an add on to the service, but an integral part of service delivery and users are supported to be involved in a range of aspects of service delivery including most or all of the following:
 - Development and provision of information
 - Assessment of client need
 - Assessing gaps in service provision
 - Day to day choices about services and activities
 - Longer term planning of services
 - In engaging the service and its users in the community
 - Development and revision of policy
 - Staff selection and training
 - The review and evaluation of services
 - Service management and governance
- Involvement is inclusive, and initiatives are sensitive to the support needs of the range of users. Organisations provide adequate and appropriate support, based on knowledge of what people bring with them in terms of experience and vulnerability.



- Involvement is something that all staff are engaged in, not just those involved in specific user involvement initiatives, and staff are supported adequately to make effective involvement a reality.

Local Authority involvement of users in developing Supporting People strategies

The guide does not explicitly address how users might be involved in consultative processes relating to **Supporting People** strategy and service development. Section 20 of the **Supporting People** Administrative Guidance¹ focuses on this aspect. However, involving users effectively at service level should 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.

Notes:

1. **Quality and monitoring processes:** A package of guidance on the quality and monitoring processes has now been published by ODPM and can be found on the **Supporting People** website at: www.spkweb.org.uk under General Documents and Discussion/General Documents/Quality and Monitoring. Specific guidance on involving users in quality and monitoring processes will be published in 2003 by the ODPM.
2. **Training:** Readers of this guidance may also wish to see and use the pilot **Supporting People** Training modules 001a (for Local Authorities) and 001b (for providers) which



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can be found on the **Supporting People** website at: www.spkweb.org.uk under General Documents and Discussions/General Documents/National Training Framework – Training Modules ONLY.

3. **Consultation:** Readers wishing for more general guidance on consultation may wish to read "Listen Up" published by the Audit Commission.
4. **Future user involvement projects:** Two projects are being 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. 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.

Further information

Copies of the full guide **Supporting People: A guide to user involvement for organisations providing housing related support services**, code ISBN 1-851126-17-1 can be obtained from the ODPM Literature Centre as can further copies of this summary:

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The guide & summary are also available gratis on the **Supporting People** Knowledge Web: www.spkweb.org.uk under How it will Work/SP Overview/Papers & Publications.

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