

We need to put pressure on mental health commissioners to fund more user-led services

## the bigger picture

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One of the targets in the national service framework (NSF) for mental health, and so part of the annual 'traffic light' monitoring system for mental health services, is the development of service user-led services. This is not intended to include self-help user groups, although clearly these are an important form of empowerment. It is intended to pick up organisations that are managed and run by users to deliver a mental health service to others.

This requirement is repeated in the Department of Health's guidance on commissioning mental health day services. In the February issue of MHT, Raza Griffiths questioned whether the professional establishment would allow such a realignment of the balance of power. In response, I felt it would be useful to describe my own journey in trying to facilitate the development of such services.

As head of social care in the London borough of Southwark, I have been involved in assisting user groups to build their capacity to take on the delivery of services, and have recently secured funding for a user development worker to assist in the further development of local user groups. There are a number of key tasks in capacity building: to carve out regular opportunities to sit down and plan, assisting groups with putting in funding applications, and supporting them to build up their management committees and organisational structures, and to take on the additional pressures involved. All of this requires a sensitive partnership in which the user group needs to retain control of the process, while meeting the requirements of funders, and does not feel other agencies are having too much influence over how they develop.

In Southwark we have regularly secured sums of around £30,000 to £40,000 from different sources to fund pieces of service user-led project work, such as delivering arts workshops. Local user groups such as Cooltan Arts and Creative Routes have, on the back of this, been able to run drumming sessions, photography classes, acting workshops, and, in the case of Creative Routes, a major street festival. I have, wherever possible, also encouraged them to pursue links with larger arts organisations in Southwark, such as Tate Modern, the National Theatre, the Young Vic and the South London Gallery. These organisations are under pressure to meet social inclusion targets, so it is a good time to approach them. Also, it has been important to encourage other departments

in the local authority, such as the social inclusion unit, to support them with finding and maintaining premises, obtaining local Neighbourhood Renewal funding, and establishing local networks. The Bonkersfest street festival, for example, required help with arranging the licensing and policing.

The service users involved have contributed a massive amount of energy and enthusiasm, and I see a huge number of advantages to user-led services. The very fact that they are managed by service users is inspirational for the clients who come to use them; they are better at encouraging the development of friendships and networks between service users; they are more empowering than most day services, and – in the case of Southwark's groups – they lead people to take on other opportunities outside the user movement.

One possible disadvantage is that users could become over-dependent on or trapped within the 'user world', although in my experience those who want to move on do so, and the friendships people form when in these services continue to sustain them.

In the last couple of years it has also been possible to get some larger grants from grant-making organisations such as the Tudor Trust to start appointing staff, which has been a step forward for these organisations. But managing staff and their pay and conditions is a big responsibility, and one issue that has emerged is the need to provide support to those who take on paid roles in these organisations.

One of the problems we are beginning to encounter, though, is that there is still no overt recognition from local commissioners that such user-led services need core funding. There has been some tacit acknowledgment that in time there may need to be disinvestment in existing services in order to facilitate the development of service user-led organisations. However, no core funding has been forthcoming to date. It is unclear how long user-led services can exist on grants alone, as over time existing grant bodies tend to want to fund new and different projects. I believe we need to start putting increasing pressure on mental health commissioners to fund more such services. It is also an area that badly needs researching, to provide the evidence base needed to convince commissioners of the value of going down this road. A random controlled trial comparing the outcomes for users of user-led services with those of people using statutory day services would certainly be helpful. ■