

Practice example: Creating a successful steering group – Liverpool & Southwark

Background

All of the implementation sites put together, with SCIE's support, a steering group (sometimes called project or implementation group) to devise an action plan to implement the recommendations of 'Think child, think parent, think family'. There was little specific guidance as to who should sit on these steering groups, although the guide's emphasis on senior involvement in making the necessary changes to practice made the presence of senior managers desirable. The guide also touches on the involvement of families themselves in service improvement, and the action plans all had sections on user involvement. It therefore seemed beneficial to include service users or their representatives on the steering groups.

Intended outcomes

The aim of all the steering groups was to formulate, and then act upon, a plan to put into practice the key recommendations that were most pertinent to the local situation.

Practical actions

All of the sites put together dynamic and effective steering groups. In Liverpool, the group had by and large worked together for some time in advance on the implementation project, and was chaired by senior staff. For most of the project, it was chaired by the Assistant Director for Children's Services, and in the earliest stages was jointly chaired by adults' and children's assistant directors. In addition, the group included a participation lead from mental health user groups, and a Barnardo's young carers' service development worker. Southwark had a well-established mental health family strategy group, chaired by a director of services, which took on the steering group role for the implementation project. It too included people who had used mental health services themselves.

What actually happened

As groups who had worked together before, the steering groups in Liverpool and Southwark were able to get going on their action plans more quickly than those steering groups which were coming together for the first time. In these latter groups, early meetings tended to be focused on people getting to know each other and each others' roles, and learning to function as a team. In some cases, this meant overcoming some degree of organisational distrust and lack of awareness that had developed over time. Southwark and Liverpool, to an extent, avoided this and worked more effectively from that start, which in the context of a two-year implementation project was a real bonus.

The effectiveness of these groups was also linked to being led by senior managers. The presence of senior managers on the groups sent a message that this was work which needed to be prioritised, and other people's attendance at the meeting tended to be consistent as a result. It was also notable that, in meetings chaired by people in a position to make wide-ranging decisions, actions were completed much more swiftly. The contrast was between sites where, when an idea was mooted, the response was 'I will check with my manager and report back next month', and those where the manager was in the room at the time, and was able to say 'yes, we will do that.'

Coupled to this top-down authority was a bottom-up dynamism injected by users, user representatives, and voluntary sector staff. Less constrained than others by the bureaucracy of large statutory bodies, these steering group members brought a valuable frontline perspective and a flexibility about what could be achieved. This consistent combination of senior staff, and voluntary sector and user group members, many of whom had worked together for some time, seemed to be what made Liverpool and Southwark steering groups effective.

Advice for others

Embedding a project like this in an existing group's work would therefore seem to have the advantage that the group will already have developed ways of working, and will not need to spend valuable time getting to know each other and learning how to work together. If a new group is to be formed, there might well be the advantage of generating the enthusiasm that can come from new developments, but we would highlight the need to allow for time for the group to bed down before it can start to perform effectively.

The right mixture of people is key. All of our sites had committed and creative frontline staff and first-line managers, as well as subject specialists such as communications or workforce development leads. These people were vital to the project's successes. Combining them with senior managers who could ensure that things got done, and people with experience of services who could steer the group so that the right things were focused upon, appeared to be the best recipe.