

Practice example: Making it happen - Lewisham user group

Background

The steering group in Lewisham recognised that, as a borough, they lacked an organised user group of parents with mental health problems. This meant that the work risked being done without the input of the people it was designed to benefit.

Intended outcomes

The steering group wanted to understand the needs of parents with mental ill health, and their experiences of using mental health services in the borough. The group wanted to reflect and address these issues in the family strategy, joint working protocol, and other Think Family initiatives.

Practical actions

The group identified parents with mental health problems from within existing user groups and mental health forums. A flyer was developed to explain the nature of the proposed group and the work it would do. It was made clear that people would be paid to attend, from funds set aside to support the Think Family project.

Twelve people agreed to join the group. A local facilitator, Sarah, herself a mother with mental health problems, was engaged to run the group, alongside Nick, a manager from Building Bridges, a voluntary sector scheme that support families affected by parental mental ill health. Nick was part of the wider steering group, and Sarah joined the group to represent the voices of the users. A local children's centre was identified as a suitable venue.

What actually happened

The user group was set up specifically to advise on the work of the Think Family project in Lewisham, although it was hoped from the start that it would have therapeutic benefits and, in time, address wider issues the parents faced. Initially, eight meetings were scheduled, with each one focused on a particular aspect of Lewisham's Think Family action plan. In one session, the group looked at what training they felt staff needed to work in a whole-family way; in another, they examined the proposed new protocol for Think Family working, to ensure it met their needs as users; in a third meeting they explored how services could support families to be more resilient, and build on their strengths.

It has helped me realise I can do something, e.g go back to university. So I believe people who go through mental illness can do things for themselves. *A parent from the group*

The group has been like a mentor for me. It helps me. This is very important in my progress. I am leaving more positive ... and receiving good feedback is positive. *A parent from the group*

Wherever possible, the lead steering group professional for the topic under discussion attended the user group meeting, so that the views of users could be heard directly by those charged with making changes. This aspect proved very important to the parents, because it created a sense that they were genuinely being listened to, by people with the authority to make things happen.

This sense of being heard was one feature of the group which has helped it have a tremendous impact on the confidence and well-being of some members. Even more important was the opportunity to share thoughts and experiences with other people in similar situations. This allowed people the chance to be supported, but also to support others, and boost their confidence in doing so.

Group meetings were supportive, informal affairs, with some parents bringing in food they had prepared. The users encouraged each other to share thoughts, and actively worked to support the self-esteem of other members. This enabled some users to come to talk at events about parental mental health, and explore becoming registered as mental health trainers in their local mental health trust.

Advice for others

Creating a supportive environment, led by a user, has proved helpful in bringing the group together. A strong feature has been the presence of professionals working on the topic under discussion, so that there is a clear and direct link from user feedback to actual changes. The joint working protocol, for instance, was altered to reflect the views of users. This made the consultation feel meaningful for people, and boosted their self-esteem because they saw that professionals genuinely were interested in their point of view. Users have been named in Lewisham's documentation as contributors.