

## Challenging the Status Quo: Service Users as Co-researchers

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**Introduction.** It is increasingly expected that service users will be involved in research because “...whilst service user involvement is no guarantee of quality, if done well it should provide better research and enhanced implementation of findings” [RCN, 2007]. Whilst service user involvement is a laudable aspiration, the level of involvement varies considerably. There is an ever present danger of tokenism.

**The aim.** The aim of the respective study is to explore the lessons learnt about service user involvement from a multiple case study that evaluated assertive outreach teams (n = 4). It focuses on the service user aspect rather than the study per se.

**Materials and methods.** A multiple case study design was used to investigate the impact of government policy on the delivery of occupational therapy services, involving four assertive outreach teams with (n = 2) and without (n = 2) occupational therapists. Service users were involved throughout this project using a participatory model of user involvement that was congruent with client centred practice [Sumison, 2000]. To achieve this, the study was planned over a long time period [Involve, 2003; Consumers in NHS research support unit, 2001; Steel, 2004], an education programme was incorporated to ensure the lack of experience did not disadvantage anyone, and ten service users were recruited to ensure that the project would progress if anyone had to withdraw. Ethical approval was secured (Reference 07/Q1001/22).

**Results.** Service user researchers made an invaluable contribution to this study as participants and researchers. In keeping with their recovery journey, people only contributed to the study when they could; only one person was continuously involved in the whole process. They designed the interview schedules, conducted interviews, analysed data and participated in dissemination. We learnt that planning in longer timescales, managing the work with service users via a trust rather than university, having a link with a service user consultancy and adopting a flexible approach enabled service users to be actively involved in this project. Service users brought a different perspective to the interpretation of research. The service users' contribution was invaluable to understanding the impact of occupational therapists in assertive outreach teams. We found that being actively engaged, the data analysis process required prior research knowledge or experience beyond the education programme offered during the study.

**Conclusions.** Planning longer timescales, managing the work outside the university infrastructure, linking with a service user consultancy and adopting a flexible approach enabled service users to be actively involved in this study, which improved the validity of the study findings.