

Taking ownership: Achieving real and meaningful user involvement

Andy Alder, Development Worker, Self-Build, Derbyshire

Funded by the central Health Authority, Self-Build was set up in 1998 for users of the Northeast Derbyshire Community Mental Health Teams Rehabilitation Service with enduring mental health problems. The project aims to fill a person's week, once they are through any crisis, with meaningful daytime activity.

Part of Self-Build, the Conservation Group meets on a weekly basis with the rehab team providing transport. Full training in health and safety is given to group members including a "tools talk" at the start of every session. The group is insured through the Health Authority and BTCV (www.btcv.org) for both public liability and personal accident.

Future initiatives for Self-Build include a vegetable box scheme, grown in service-users' gardens and delivered to scheme members; a Woodland Craft Project; and local exchange trading scheme (LETS). The group is also looking for an allotment to grow trees from seed, and to carry out their own projects such as keeping chickens and growing vegetables.

Partnerships

The strong partnership with Local Authority Countryside staff enables members to work on community projects alongside other people in integrated pursuits; this has also allowed members to talk about their work at conferences and network with other groups and individuals. The group has worked with the Derbyshire Countryside Rangers, the Highland Regional Authority at Loch Ness on a conservation holiday, and on a variety of local environmental and community projects.

User involvement

Self-Build is all about people getting involved, making decisions, learning and feeling worthwhile in a safe but ever-changing environment. Group members have an equal say in the running of the project with regular meetings to discuss any issues or suggestions, such as work they do or do not want to undertake, planning and training (every sixth week is a training session or site visit). Members do not have to attend every week, but must show a commitment to attending the Group.

The Group always makes its own decisions on

direction, giving it the feel of something that is both self-building and self-owned. Staff are seen as facilitators to make things happen, though of course this role encompasses trainer, listener, supporter, and many other functions besides.

Self-defined objectives

The members together created the Objectives for the Group, to:

- create and maintain a stimulating and valued work environment with an emphasis on opportunities for personal development
- create and maintain a safe working environment and sense of belonging for service users within the Group
- provide service users with the chance to undertake positive work within their local environment and beyond
- raise awareness within the Group and the community of environmental issues
- enable Group members to become involved with other agencies and projects
- enable Group members to work towards employment in land-based industries if desired
- enable Group members to achieve and maintain empowerment in their lives.

To anyone setting up a project on these or similar lines:

- don't worry if the funding looks bleak: go with what you've got
- network and get others on board
- it doesn't matter how large the project is....
- or how long it takes to get where you want to be.

As long as it is happening and people are benefiting.

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Self-Build is run by people with mental health problems. Group members decide what they want to do, such as conservation work and gardening.