

Convincing campaigns: placing service users centre stage

Why involve service users?

There are several very good reasons to involve service users in campaigning work:

- 1) Having a relationship with the service user enables you to use their evidence more effectively.
- 2) It lets them know that you are working to change things for everyone.
- 3) It empowers them, as they play an active role in making that change happen.

In fact campaigning options can even be presented to service users in the same way that advice options are.

An advice service in the West of England was concerned about employment, debt and benefit problems experienced by service users with mental health issues. They researched the issue in partnership with the local mental health trust, university and service users. Service users were involved both in recounting their own experiences and interviewing others. The project led to recommendations for the improvement of local services.

This guide explores different levels of involving service users in effecting change – from snippets of anonymised stories to full blown media interviews – and notes some of the things to bear in mind along the way.

Recording service users' problems

Detailed information is at the heart of any campaign that's going to be taken seriously. By keeping a good record of the problems that service users bring to you, the outcomes of your efforts to solve them (whether successful or not) and any obstacles you came up against, you will build a bank of evidence that can be used to support arguments for change.

If you can, it is always worth trying to collect more emotive material as well; combined with the 'hard facts' it will increase the persuasiveness of any campaign. Introducing the concept of campaigning and illustrating the change it can achieve is a good way in for a more frank and revealing conversation about how an issue has affected a service user's life. It means that probing questions are not misconceived as being unnecessarily intrusive.

Service users are often pleased to know that, even if there is no immediate solution to their problem, something can potentially be done about it in the longer term. Not all advisers will feel confident talking in detail about campaigning options, though, so it can be useful to have a specialist member of the team that service users can be referred to, who can speak convincingly and reassuringly on the subject.

See also 'Convincing campaigns: using hard evidence' in this series.

Respecting service users' right to privacy

If campaigning work is an explicit part of your agency's role and the people who seek advice from you are aware of this, you can usually use anonymised evidence from service users' experience without express permission. However, the utmost care must be taken to ensure that individual service users cannot be identified from the evidence you use.

You should only ever pass on any details that might identify a service user to a third party, including an elected representative, campaign group or the media, if they have explicitly agreed to this. Failure to follow this principle may cause serious harm to your relationship with both service users and third parties, and may itself result in bad publicity for your agency.

Helping service users to complain

Letters of complaint are perhaps the simplest tool in the campaigning armoury: helping people to pass on details of their experiences to relevant third parties could help stop the same thing happening to others. Giving service users information about grievance procedures and working with them to construct their complaint may not always result in resolution of their individual problem, but it enables their voices to be heard and can be very empowering.

For example, a service user who has experienced harassment from a bailiff collecting Council Tax arrears might pursue a formal complaint with the firm responsible and/ or with a professional body to which that firm belongs. The matter could also be brought to the local authority's attention, to assist the council in monitoring and reviewing its council tax arrears collection arrangements.

Contacting MPs or other elected representatives

Advice agencies sometimes refer service users to their local MP, assembly member or councillor for help with resolving a specific problem. You could add impact to the service user's case by showing that it is a result of a policy failure which has also affected others.

You could offer a range of options including:

- helping a service user to write a letter to the MP
- directing the service user to the MP's surgery
- arranging a meeting with the MP and taking the service user(s) along.

Service users who are unable to afford school uniform costs have been encouraged to contact their MP as part of the Citizens Advice campaign 'Adding Up'. The key objective of this campaign is for school uniform grants to be widely available and for schools to minimise the cost to parents.

Involving the service user in a campaign movement

Depending on the extremity and pervasiveness of the problem, you might consider starting a full blown campaign movement. Here, some service users would be the catalyst for the campaign and others further down the line could be involved as contemporary examples of a persistent problem.

For example, you might invite a service user to attend the local Housing Benefit liaison group and give a face to face account of the issues they encountered, or perhaps to accompany advice agency staff to a meeting with a service provider. Other service users could be invited to participate by filling in model letters or postcards to MPs, which you could place in your waiting room.

If you are not in a position to take up an issue, you may know of another group that is already campaigning on it. For example, a local residents' group or tenants' federation might be campaigning on the housing issue that is affecting your service user. In a case like this it would be appropriate to give the service user details of the relevant organisation. You would, however, need to make it clear that it is not a recommendation, and the decision to get involved with that organisation is entirely theirs.

If you are involving service users in your own campaign, make sure that you keep them informed of developments, even if it is not a success. It may also be helpful to report back to your users more generally, perhaps by putting a notice or leaflet in the waiting area.

Placing service users' stories in the media

Media coverage can be extremely helpful in raising the profile of an issue. The media will often seek to interview service users in order to give a "human face" to a problem, which makes the impact of the story far greater.

If you are considering involving service users in media work, you should put their needs first and provide them with the support they may need to make an informed decision.

For more comprehensive guidance on the subject see 'Bringing your messages to life: working with clients as case studies' in this series.

Seeking permission from the service user

You may receive media requests for a service user's story, or for a direct interview with a user. Some service users might have already stated that they do not want media exposure, but many people are pleased to have the opportunity to publicise their experiences. However, do not simply assume that anyone would not want to "go public" on their issue – it is up to them, not the advice agency.

Supporting service users in media work

It has to be recognised that there is some risk of distortion attached to any media appearance, as the interviewee is not fully in control. Always consider the integrity of the journalist or outlet concerned before encouraging a service user to be interviewed, and make sure they are aware of the risks – in such a way that they feel informed rather than intimidated.

Factors to consider are:

- Publicity might help other service users facing similar problems.
- Publicity might affect the service user personally, e.g. by raising their profile in their community – this might be good or bad for them.
- A media appearance may result in other journalists or campaigners attempting to contact the service user.
- Your previous experience of the journalist or media organisation concerned is important: were they helpful and did they respect the interests of service users?
- Service users should be aware that only a small part of the interview may eventually appear, or that it may not be used at all.
- Service users may find it helpful to have a friend or adviser to support them when an interview is being conducted.

Be prepared to support your service users through the media process, whether helping them to prepare their points in advance of a media interview or accompanying them to a photocall.

Further resources

If your agency is part of a national network, you may be able to get support on involving service users in campaigning and media work. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) also runs a useful project called 'Count me in', about involving beneficiaries and users, with a range of case studies and advice.
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk > what we do > campaigning effectiveness > projects > Count Me In



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