

4 different examples of alac in practice *continued*

2.2 Service User Engagement and Empowerment – Mental Health

Participants: Mental Health Service Users and Carers

Linking Voices is one of the few organisations in the UK that has designed itself around mental health service users and carers, emphasising the importance of people with different experiences of mental health services talking together and seeing each others' perspectives. The organisation is led by a Strategy Group that aims to lobby and campaign, educate and foster active learning and provide hope and support for its members.

Promoting and Outreach / Engagement Process

Delivery of this aspect of the project has been made possible through one of the learning participants registered as part of the earlier work with the Project Managers' group. She was connected to her own network of potential learners – The 'Linking Voices' group and was able to work with them to identify and meet the distinctive requirements they articulated.

Course content or forms of experiential learning

We have developed informal and semi-formal learning activities that include both users and carers and Health Service employees in the development of skills for participatory evaluation. This has included active participation in a series of (10) half-day workshops exploring issues related to participatory evaluation, testing potential tools, sharing experiences and developing material to contribute to a national toolkit.

The aim was to develop skills and confidence to work in new ways and to actively involve members in shaping the development of tools for use beyond their immediate field. This support has been offered through the series of Participatory Evaluation Approach workshops that members took part in (and helped to shape) as well as by supporting the work of the Project Manager and employment support activities provided through the organisation.

Reflective Practice: The project provided support for individuals to develop confidence in undertaking Participatory Evaluations and to support the learning needs of the organisation to operate in new ways. This support included providing resources for activities within the organisation that supported skills profiling and the confidence-building of individuals to take part in employment-related activities, (such as contributing to the sustainable activities of a social enterprise for example). The group has been assisted by the ID Project, which has consciously sought to 'build time' within the group. Members from the User-Focussed Monitoring group, for example, have recently contributed to the ongoing development of a participatory toolkit using the Take Part learning framework, and have been designing and undertaking a user-led evaluation of the professional support systems available for people in mental health crisis.

Specific Learning Needs & Barriers to Participation

This activity was controlled and directed throughout by the participating organisation, Linking Voices.

Participants for the Participatory Evaluation Approach workshops were drawn from across the East Midlands Hub's network (not just related to mental health) and the members of Linking Voices committed significant extra time in additional learning sessions organised by themselves to support the development of their evaluation team.

Linking Voices are creating their own support and advice networks with various social enterprises as well as support from the ALAC Project. The following needs have been identified by this learning group:

- Need to provide learning through a support infrastructure, building on existing local strengths and connections and respecting personal confidentiality and other needs.
- Need to embed informal learning in existing activity at venues and on occasions that suit the learners and are recognised by participants as safe and comfortable places to learn.
- Need to ensure learning is directed and controlled by the learners.
- Need to remain sensitive to health and social needs especially when providing general events that include other groups and individuals (e.g. additional planning sessions for the participatory evaluation have been designed to explore with learners what the sessions might involve, to enrol interested individuals and to address learners concerns, e.g. on confidentiality, emotional security and potential stigmatisation).

4 different examples of alac in practice *continued*

Take Part aims and objectives

This group (of mental health service users and carers) was already part of a community group 'Linking Voices' - i.e. connecting those with experiences of the services for mental health, either as carers, users or providers. Linking Voices (as the name suggests) is explicitly concerned with creating and maintaining dialogue between service providers and service users and carers. Our role in this project has been to work with the organisation to find ways to help strengthen their existing voice. We have done this both by direct support for the Project Manager and by providing opportunities for exploring participatory evaluation approaches with group members.

Headline reflections

Social change / justice

- Involving service users and carers in developing mental health provision in Lincolnshire
- Enable service users to shape and influence service provision

Inclusion / participation

- Support for skills development, confidence, participation and overcoming barriers to learning
- Encourage excluded groups to engage in public life
- Strengthen active citizenship in the voluntary and community sector

Challenging inequalities

- Organisational learning re active citizenship and empowerment
- Employment support – including working as an evaluator, working in a social enterprise and general skills auditing

Promoting diversity

- Identifying / remembering the significant skills base within this group of learners
- Support to develop new organisational forms and activities – promoting new employment opportunities or active engagements
- Promotion of wider sense of well-being
- Promoting a more diverse concept of 'researcher' and 'evaluator'

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Been very successful - adults learnt as much as the children

ALAC Participant

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Outcomes & lessons for the future

The work with Mental Health service users and carers highlighted another aspect of active citizenship work - that is the need to provide learning experiences that support the capacity of citizens to engage with public services (& vice-versa). In this case the organisation involved already had a distinct identity and the role of the project was to work alongside participants to provide learning experiences and one-to-one support that helped individuals and the organisation to develop its activity.

Two important lessons were learnt with this group - firstly the need to ensure the feeling of security experienced by all the participants - particularly, when interacting with people unaware of their particular needs - and secondly the need for the organisation to keep its information about its members confidential. The importance of the organisation being in control of its engagement with the project was stressed from the outset and remained an important dynamic throughout.