



Service User Advisory Committee

Brief Description

A Service User Advisory Committee consists of members of the target group and advises the service organisation on needs assessment and intervention planning, implementation and evaluation. Committee members may be current or potential service users. The committee is incorporated into the organisational structure and is involved in decisions about services for the target group. The strength of a Service User Advisory Committee is that it offers members of the target group direct participation in decision making. The degree of participation may be more or less developed depending on the possibilities. An added advantage of this method is that participation takes place over a longer period. This continuity supports collaboration.

Prerequisites

- Target group members are prepared to sit on the committee
- The service organisation is prepared to consider the advice of service users

Applications

- Advice on all stages of intervention planning and implementation

Process Overview

1. Recruiting target group members to participate in the committee
2. Determining committee structure
3. Integration into existing decision-making processes
4. Convening and supporting the committee

Resources Required

Time:

Recruiting target group members to participate in the Advisory Committee usually requires the largest effort. It may take weeks or months depending on how well connected the service organisation is to the communities it is trying to reach. Committee meetings take place at regular intervals depending on the service organisation's need and members' availability. Monthly or quarterly meetings are common. As they do for all committees, preparation and debriefing as well as administrative support take effort, the extent of which mainly depends on the scope and content of the meetings.

Personnel:

One worker should serve as the contact person for members and support the work of the committee.

Materials:

Meeting room and materials for taking minutes must be made available.



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Other Costs:

Compensation for members may, for example, take the form of vouchers. Refreshments served during meetings contribute to a positive working environment.

Working Steps

1. Recruiting Target Group Members to Participate in the Committee

Committee members can be recruited via existing contacts within the target group, especially via current service users. Existing networks and organisations (clubs, associations, informal meeting places etc.) may also be important contact points for recruiting members.

2. Determining Committee Structure

The structure of a Service User Advisory Committee should be determined together with its members. It is important that the service organisation as well as the members consider the structure sensible and workable. Meeting frequency, forms of discussion and facilitation should be designed to maximise members' individual opportunities to participate in the meetings.

3. Integration into Existing Decision-Making Processes

The Service User Advisory Committee should be integrated transparently and effectively into the decision-making processes of the service organisation. This means building the committee into the structure of the organisation. It should be clear how and on which topics the committee is asked for advice, how its recommendations are treated and how management provides feedback to the committee.

4. Convening and Supporting the Committee

As they do for all committees, preparation and debriefing as well as administrative support take effort. A staff member of the service organisation should take this on. Supporting the committee also includes, as does working with all volunteers, developing ways to keep in contact with individual committee members. Equally essential is public recognition of the contribution that target group representatives make to the organisation as members of the committee.

Please Note:

- The degree of influence it has on the service organisation's work is crucial for the committee's success. It is not sufficient to simply convene a Service User Advisory Committee. The organisation should first clarify internally how the committee's recommendations will be considered. Otherwise it runs the risk of creating a kind of pseudo-participation, which will frustrate and de-motivate committee members.
- If committee members are recruited solely from among the organisation's current service users, there is a great risk that the views of populations not yet reached remain unrepresented. Successfully inviting target group representatives previously unfamiliar to the service organisation can maximise information gain about the concerns of the target group.



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- Public recognition and keeping in contact are the cornerstones of every successful partnership between paid staff and volunteers. These two components play a particular role in the development of a Service User Advisory Committee because members do not necessarily hold committee work in high regard.
- Advisory Committees not infrequently hold views different from those of paid service organisation staff on the direction and design of interventions. The perspective of service users differs from the “professional” point of view. This difference is the strength of the Service User Advisory Committee because it balances the “blind spots” a service organisation can develop. To bridge this gap through dialogue, however, is a great challenge for all involved.

Further Advice

- A Service User Advisory Committee’s structure should be adapted to the ways members usually discuss topics. Many members will not arrive with committee experience. Facilitation needs to respond creatively by using various forms of interactive communication that encourage member participation.
- Children’s Committees are also possible. Assisted by age-appropriate adult facilitation and support, groups of children can voice their opinions on concrete topics.
- Direct and easy to understand communication about the Service User Advisory Committee’s impact on the service organisation’s decision-making processes is necessary for a committee to be successful. Committee work is only then rewarding for target group members when they receive timely and transparent feedback about their influence. Opportunities to interact with the service organisation’s board or management team during committee meetings promote communication.

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Further Reading and Links

Jugendbeirat der Bundesinitiative „Jugendonline“ (Bundesfamilienministerium)
www.netzcheckers.de

(Youth Advisory Committee to the Federal “Youthonline” Initiative (Federal German Ministry for Families) www.netzcheckers.de (In German))

Klientenbeirat und Angehörigenbeirat
Einrichtung: Hilfe nach Maß, Hilfsangebote für Menschen mit Behinderungen (Sigmaringen)
<http://www.hilfen-nach-mass.de/index.php?page=beirate>

(Client Advisory Committee and Relatives’ Advisory Committee

Service organisation: Help Made to Measure: Assistance for People with Disabilities (Sigmaringen)

<http://www.hilfen-nach-mass.de/index.php?page=beirate> (In German))