

Advocacy

Summary of a Report on Consultation with Service Users for the Department of Adult Care Services, Wiltshire County Council

1. Qualities and experience looked for in an Advocate

1.a The advocate

Attitude and personality are important, as well as being non-judgemental and having respect for different cultures. Qualities looked for include respect for confidentiality, being honest and trustworthy and an ability to listen and to feel empathy. Sympathy is definitely not required.

1.b The advocacy

The 'Advocacy Relationship' is one of equals. The advocates role is to empower and enable the Service User, to 'listen to what I want, find out how to do it, and to support and help me to do it', and the role should have status and 'teeth'. Advocates do not need to be an expert on a particular subject, but should know how to find out about things. However, an advocate working with a Mental Health Service User would need access, and maybe specialist knowledge, of legal framework concerning Mental Health Service Users.

2. When an Advocate can Help

An advocate can support the Service User through the 'maze of officialdom'; finding relevant information to empower the Service User and allow informed choices to be made, and entitlements understood. S/he can also provide support and enable the Service User to get his/her views across. There may also be a specific issue that a Service User will want support to deal with.

3. Ways of Promoting and Informing about Advocacy

Advocacy is particularly needed at the point of access to services, when a Service User can feel particularly isolated. Information should always be given in an accessible format, and in an appropriate manner. An initial 'signposting' access point - with various accessible options of contact - could help promote advocacy by having a recognisable countywide first contact. If this was available, care must be taken that it does not become another 'layer' - it must quickly/immediately signpost.

4. How can Advocacy be Provided.

It is important that a service is accessible to everyone in Wiltshire, and that the standard of service provided is maintained to all people in all areas. It is important that people and/or groups providing advocacy communicate and co-operate with each other to share good practice, maintain agreed standards and provide the most appropriate service to individual Service Users. Independence from service provision is important as is involvement of Service Users in, as a minimum, any management and/or advisory groups.

5. Recruitment and Support of Advocates

A basic agreed training programme should be provided for advocates. Such training should include listening skills and finding information. Service Users should be involved in provision of advocacy as advocates and/or in an advisory capacity.

6. Problems / Things to Remember and Take into Consideration

It is important service providers are informed and educated about advocacy and that it is not seen as threatening. A culture should be promoted that allows, recognises, accepts and welcomes advocacy. Appropriate and timely advocacy may help avoid some difficult issues arising, and will be of benefit to Service Providers and Users.

7. Other Points Raised

Advocacy does not always need to be impairment specific. An issue around housing, for example, may be common to many people. Also, having one impairment does not mean a person does not have/will not acquire another.