

## Practice Seminar Summary

### Voices of Experience: Best Practice in Service User Involvement for Women Facing Multiple Disadvantage

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#### Against Violence and Abuse (AVA)

AVA is a charity working to end gender-based violence (<http://avaproject.org.uk/>). With a mission to inspire innovation and collaboration and encourage and enable direct service providers to help end violence against women and girls, it has a demonstrable track record of effecting practical change within service delivery as well as changing policy. It has particular strength in leading innovative projects which address the complexity of issues relating to violence against women and girls. AVA's work with children and young people includes the award winning prevention platform ([www.preventionplatform.co.uk](http://www.preventionplatform.co.uk)).

#### The Stella Project

The Stella Project has pioneered work around multiple disadvantage, working to address the overlapping issues of gender based violence and abuse, drug and alcohol use and mental health, criminal justice, homelessness and the removal of children. The project works for positive, sustained improvement in the way services are delivered to survivors, their children and perpetrators. (<http://avaproject.org.uk/ava-services-2/multiple-disadvantage>).

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## Introduction

On July 20<sup>th</sup> 2016 AVA held a seminar to explore the themes of best practice around service user involvement for women facing multiple disadvantage. The seminar provided an opportunity to explore existing models, best practice and to hear from experts by experience themselves.

This summary brings together the key points from the seminar – it is not intended as a definitive guide but as a summary of the views and ideas put forward on that day.

The event is part of a series of seminars being funded by Trust for London as part of the [Access to Safe Housing](#) project, improving access to refuges and accommodation for women facing multiple disadvantage.

### Speakers:

- Sandra Morgan, Beneficiary ambassador for Opportunity Nottingham
- Donna Douglas, Chair of the Newcastle and Gateshead expert citizen group
- Annie Vince, Director of Rise and Shine Today Ltd
- Paula Harriott, Head of involvement at Revolving Doors
- Stephen Hughes, Criminal Justice Interventions Manager and Commissioner for Wandsworth
- Sarah Robinson, Research Manager, national evaluation team, Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs

## Summary

### Definitions and a note on language

- It was fed back that we did not spend enough time at the event explaining what we meant by service-user involvement. A piece of work produced by Clinks and Revolving Doors outlines the meaning and differences between ‘involvement’ and ‘co-production.’ - <http://www.clinks.org/resources-guides-toolkits/guide-service-user-involvement-and-co-production>. This piece offers both a model and support resources.
- It was noted by many that the language ‘service user’ is problematic as it puts the power with the agencies providing a service and does not view people who use those services in equal terms. Opportunity Nottingham consulted on the term service user and decided to use the term ‘beneficiary’ to describe those who were participating in the Fulfilling Lives Programme.
- Work by the national service user network for mental health has helpful things to say about the language of involvement – see in particular their piece [‘The Language of Mental Well-being’](#)

## How to make participation meaningful?

*“Being heard is the start of a change.”*

- Offer people training and skills: give people training in peer research; provide opportunities to shadow workers, offer pathways to paid work.
- Use personal development plans to show progression, change and success
- Use peer mentoring, support and advocacy to help broker relationships to wider services
- Feedback, feedback, feedback – make clear how involvement has led to change

## How to recruit women?

*“Women need somewhere safe to sit around and talk.”*

It was noted that women’s voices are often silenced, ignored or not present in expert-by-experience groups and that there needs to be work done to ensure women’s voices are being heard.

Suggestions included:

- Offer food, put on lunches
- Provide childcare
- If possible pay people for their time
- Think about different options for involvement, some people will thrive in a group, others will not.
- Be aware of women’s fears around their children – women mistrust professionals because they are scared of losing their children, this acts as a major barrier.
- Domestic and sexual violence are central experiences for the majority of women who face multiple disadvantage; services must acknowledge and recognise this. As one expert noted: ‘I wasn’t allowed to speak to men’ and so ‘I wouldn’t speak to men.’ This was twofold: the violence she faced was a barrier to accessing support, plus, her experience of male violence created trust issues when being in a male space.
- Women only spaces are crucial as a step to getting women involved.
- While it is crucial to maintain boundaries, divisions need to be broken down. Thus, it is important to offer common ground and shared experiences with people to build trust and equality in relationships. It was noted that giving a piece of yourself allows a woman to feel more confident in giving a piece of themselves. However, the focus should always be on that woman.
- Peer research is a crucial means to breaking down barriers; it helps women know that the person they are talking to ‘gets it.’
- Don’t just offer support, offer progression help women see how their involvement is creating change.

## Commissioning Process

*“hold your nerve”*

Paula Harriott, Head of involvement at Revolving Door and Stephen Hughes, Criminal Justice Interventions Manager and commissioner for Wandsworth discussed their experience of The Commissioning Together Project, Wandsworth. The project recruited and trained a team of nine people with multiple needs to be skilled researchers and conduct peer research. The peer researchers assessed the gaps and solutions for services, researchers then worked with commissioners to implement recommendations.

Advice to commissioners:

- Commissioners have a key role in creating opportunities
- Often it's senior people who need to be reassured (and challenged) about working with service users. But you have to be mindful of risks (perceived and real) and "hold your nerve."
- There will be risks, put plans in place to mitigate those risks, the benefits will always outweigh the risks.
- You must show a commitment to people involved, don't be late, don't check your phone in meetings, don't talk over people, show respect
- Be open to staff being interviewed and consulted and reflect on the power dynamic of this – this will improve the power dynamics of all services.
- Show good faith, allow involvement in direct commissioning and make good on recommendations

## Evidence of Change and Impact

### Opportunity Nottingham

Opportunity Nottingham are one of the Big Lottery Fulfilling Lives areas. They created a group of beneficiaries who attend strategic meetings, undertake peer research and ensure experts by experience were shaping service delivery. A key outcome of this work was to create a pledge that services would sign up to, outlining what they are going to do for you. The pledge has become a tool to empower those accessing services to be clear about what they can expect and ask for.

### Arise and Shine Today Ltd

Arise and Shine are a group of survivors who came together in peer support following abuse, they created the term 'ariser' to refer to themselves. 'Ariser' reflects the idea of coming back into being after abuse, it offers a positive vision of survival and moving forward.

From being a peer-support group they quickly realised that they were the experts in abuse and wanted to find ways to shape services and ensure that they were being made for women. The group

has become a force for change within Brighton and have been consulted on local authority strategies to ensure the voices of domestic and sexual violence survivors shape services.

Key recommendations from Arise on how to have influence:

- Sit on local strategic groups: VAWG forum, domestic violence forum, all party parliamentary groups. Find out about local authority forums and attend them.
- ‘Wherever a strategy is being developed or a decision taken there is always a survivor there.’
- Ask to look at tender documents and feed into them, ask to see how recommendations are being met.

### **Wandsworth Commissioning Together Project:**

The Commissioner noted:

*"I have delayed a procurement process in order for the group to carry out research and make recommendations, and having seen the results of that work to date this has proved to be the right decision. This work will play a significant role in shaping the new service. The peer research team clearly understand the role and the techniques they have learned and it's heartening to see that a good sized core has stayed together over time and developed friendships and provided mutual support to each other. I was also very impressed with the confidence they showed in delivering their verbal presentation recently. I feel fortunate to have had this opportunity on this borough and I would certainly encourage others to seize the same opportunity if offered to them."*

### **What it means to be an expert by experience?**

*"For those of us who have been done to, to be done with is really illuminating."*

- It offers a space to have agency
- It offers a chance to trust again and feel valued
- It increases confidence and self-worth
- For women this is a pathway to recovery from abuse: "we don't want to be victims all our life we want to work, we want to learn, we want to teach, but we want to be safe."  
However, recovery is a slow process "you will have to live this [abuse] for the rest of your life, so how can this be framed in positive and realistic ways?"
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### **Key points / Recommendations**

*"We need to put survivors at the top"*

- Make women with lived experience the centre of processes from design to the delivery

- The use of language needs to be considered and consulted on to move away from the term 'service user.' Suggestions from the seminar included: 'experts by experience,' 'beneficiary,' 'co-producer.' There should be consultation about what groups and individuals want to be called.
- Women need safe spaces to meet. This can be a crucial means to get women involved into wider networks.
- Domestic and sexual violence are at the heart of women's experiences and this has to be recognised in the context of multiple disadvantage
- Commissioners must have courage and hold their nerve – participation is the means to make effective change
- The power dynamics of society can end up being reflected in microcosm within expert by experience groups. Work must focus on ensuring everyone's voices are heard including BAMER, women and LGBTQ people's voices.
- Power has to be addressed, services recognise that they are there to serve and provide and must work 'with' and not 'for'.
- Crisis intervention is not enough for women, the gaps need to be filled and women are experts in what those gaps are and how they want them to be filled so find ways to recruit and listen to those women.
- All people have strengths, so dig deep, find them and focus on them.
- Make involvement and participation the culture of working, have policies to back this up and review how it is being done.
- 'We need a systemic change' that offers a pathway into work for those that offer their time, skills and knowledge. It is crucial to build capacity to enable this change.