



National Survivor User Network

by Tina Coldham

A lot of the proverbial has passed under the bridge since I was first diagnosed with depression 19 years ago. I don't use secondary mental health services any more, but I'm still a practicing depressive! Whilst depression is still difficult for me, it is grounding and keeps me in touch with the lived experience that others endure, which is enormously advantageous as I work in the voluntary sector and do consultancy. What keeps me going is the support from other mental health wobbly worker peers which is way more efficacious than a double dose of Prozac! The ability to support one another is fundamental and indeed I ran a DA self help group for eight years.

I now find myself Chair of the National Survivor User Network – NSUN - see www.nsun.org.uk. I'm always buoyed by that peer support and firmly believe we collectively hold the answers to cracking that mental health problem.

NSUN started life as an important piece of mental health service research with input from service users. They set out to find out the following:

1. To describe and analyse the mental health service user/survivor movement in England, particularly to find out about the extent to which Black service users are part of this or are organising separately.
2. To describe and analyse the state of the mental health service user/survivor involvement in England.
3. To make policy recommendations to build on and improve the current situation.

The resultant report published in 2003, is called "On Our Own Terms", and

can be found at the NSUN website in the 'about us' section. One of the main recommendations from the report is around building the capacity of the user movement.

Sadly, the work did not continue after publication and it was the tenacity of two voluntary sector workers, both with personal experience of mental distress, who picked up the mantle. They formed a planning group in 2006, and I joined along with other service user workers at national level to plot how we could push forward.

A successful bid was made to grant makers Comic Relief and the Tudor Trust for five year's funding and we are now in our third year of operation. I took on the role of Chair last year and working with our Manager, Sarah Yiannoullou

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has proved an interesting and testing time. The management committee is made up of people who have all had enduring mental health problems as we feel it is important to be led by those who have lived experience. We all bring various life skills to the table and the combination of these and personal distress keep what we hope to achieve grounded and of use to our peers.

We are building a membership base which is free to join for those with mental health problems – so please join via the website, or contact the office! We have various projects on the go around capacity building groups and



we commissioned a black and minority ethnic user group to reassess BME service user involvement experiences. We are also conducting a women's forensic advocacy group, who are looking at user involvement for people in prisons and forensic hospital situations. **All this is about enabling people to have a say in their care wherever they are, whoever they are.**

Future work will concentrate on training opportunities and we are also working towards independence as a service user led organisation and are keen to make alliances and draw strength from fellow organisations like DA.

So, when the grey days descend, this all feels overwhelming and too ambitious for me. However, the camaraderie and successes all add up to substantially boost me in what I care about in this endeavor. True understanding and healing starts with us, and we need to work together for better mental health services and public understanding.

National Survivor User Network
27-29 Vauxhall Grove
Vauxhall
London, SW8 1SY
0207 820 8982
0845 602 0779
www.nsun.org.uk

