

Response of the AOTMH Committee to the Commissioned Report  
Undertaken by Sarah King of the Impact Research Team : *Service User  
Involvement in the Association of Occupational Therapists in Mental Health  
(AOTMH): An Investigation and Recommendations.*

At the AOTMH conference in 2003, the AGM included some lively discussion about the extent to which the AOTMH was itself suitably inclusive of service users' views and the group concurred that the association wanted to be more proactive in collaborating with service users in its business. One of the outcomes was that AOTMH commissioned Sarah King to investigate and report on the current level of service user involvement within AOTMH. This report – with recommendations - was presented at the 2004 AOTMH Annual Conference. Sarah's work highlighted some important issues and suggested ways to increase user involvement. What follows is the response to Sarah Kings recommendations.

Sarah's Kings initial comment that 'there has to be a real commitment of all members of the AOTMH to service user involvement' is hard to argue with. She does not pull her punches, going on to comment,

*At the moment the situation is tokenistic at best and non-participatory at worst. The organisation has to support this involvement of service users totally, whole-heartedly, honestly and immediately. The whole membership must take responsibility at all times and in every communication and activity that is made in the name of the AOTMH.*

The response from members to her request for information via a questionnaire was disappointing in that the return rate was very low. Such apathy to the information request may support a view that involvement is only 'tokenistic' or absent. More optimistically, maybe there are good examples of user involvement that are simply not being reported. Again, her comment,

*It must be obvious to all members, service users and any outside body with whom they come into contact. Service user involvement is not a 'bolt-on' to existing practice, it is at the heart of all practice. It is a philosophy.*

is clearly appropriate.

Sarah King listed examples of good practice evidenced in the survey returns and we agree that the list should grow and grow with ever more creative ideas from real patient-centred care to every aspect of the service and this organisation.

Sarah King's specific recommendations follow, together with AOTMH's responses.

<i>recommendation</i>	<i>response</i>
<p><b><u>Find some champions</u></b></p> <p>Identify some champions of service user involvement from the start, service users and members who can encourage and support real commitment and develop a culture of partnership and cooperation within the AOTMH. The organisation needs to be seen to be operating at both national and local level at all times.</p>	<p>The AOTMH would like to make personal links with key people within user organisation and through these relationships seek to further develop meaningful partnership and co-operation</p>
<p><b><u>Service users on executive committee.</u></b></p> <p>To make this step would confirm your belief in and commitment to service user involvement to the whole organisation and it would be an indication to other organisations where you stand. It would probably be best to take a leaf out of the book of the Research and Development Ethics committee at the College of Occupational Therapy and in this instance hand pick an occupational therapist who is a service user or who has had experience of mental ill-health in the recent past. This will bring someone in who understands the language and nature of your profession and can view it with, as it were, two hats. This person would probably benefit from a second service user (perhaps not an occupational therapist) as soon as possible so they can give each other courage and bounce ideas off each other and stand firm in the face of the professionals. As the R&amp;D Ethics at COT found that sensitive chairing played a major part in the success of their involving a service user.</p>	<p>It was agreed not to follow up at present the recommendation to have a service user rep post on the committee; rather, we would prefer to consider to outreach into existing service user forums when undertaking specific pieces of work.</p>

<p><b><u>Service user representation of AOTMH on the council of the College of Occupational Therapists</u></b></p> <p>This would give the message to your umbrella organisation that service user involvement is something you believe in and are seriously committed to. Once again an occupational therapist with experience of mental ill-health might feel more comfortable in that situation than someone with no knowledge of the job. Again a second service user could shadow this representative.</p> <p>These two recommendations would give the opportunity for service users who are also practicing occupational therapists to begin to explore experiences of having a foot in both camps, a much needed exercise. These service users feel isolated and exclude themselves from user-led initiatives for fear of how their profession will view them and react. There are very particular sensitivities to be dealt with in this situation.</p>	<p>It was thought that the COT council is probably not the best place to begin to 'explore the experience of having a foot in both camps'.</p>
<p><b><u>AOTMH committee members representing specialist practices and interests should have a service user mentor</u></b></p> <p>This service user may go to committee meetings if they feel comfortable but can at least give user views on specialist issues.</p>	<p>This seems a workable notion in some areas, but less practical in others – eg in acute inpatients, the population is (hopefully) changing, in 'community' services it is feasible, but the issues are hugely varied among the individual clients and therefore the 'specialist' view is likely to be only one of many variable views. The principle however of sounding out relevant concerns with users is however supported and should be sought out wherever possible and appropriate and the offered views represented.</p>

<p><b><u>Redesign the aims of the AOTMH (as seen in your leaflet) to include service users in all clauses.</u></b></p> <p>This could be an exercise done at a study day with service users and occupational therapists. It could be an initiative to send occupational therapists back to base with to take to their service user groups for ideas.</p>	<p>AOTMH will consider a re-visit once the current COT SS review and consequent changes have been completed.</p>
<p><b><u>Service users should be invited to AOTMH conferences.</u></b></p> <p>Bearing in mind experiences of the OTPLD programmes should be carefully thought out to get a balance that suits everyone so members have a chance to network and enjoy being off base and being allowed 'protected time', and benefiting from the presence of service users. Meanwhile service users should feel equally welcome and not overwhelmed by professionals. If this step is going to be taken there must be a service user input from the very beginning of the planning.</p> <p>If service users are invited the content of all the programme must be accessible to them as well as to occupational therapists. Many possibilities could be explored to involve service users such as being meeters and greeters for both service users and members. They could help run the conference in many practical ways, do interviews of participants, video events, take photographs, explore how to evaluate the event from everyones point of view, make reports by writing, sketching, painting etc to inform other occupational therapists and other service users, groups, and organisations. This could be developed into a creative and ongoing network system. Time will</p>	<p>AOTMH is keen to continue benefiting from the valuable contribution of service users to its conferences and will note the suggestions that will help the conferences be welcoming and inclusive. A users perspective on this would be helpful throughout the planning stages.</p>

<p>have to be committed to exploring all the various kinds of support that service users will need in order to attend a big function, both emotional and practical. Bursaries could be set up to assist with finance for service user attendance.</p>	
<p><b><u>Service users being involved in workshops/facilitating workshops.</u></b></p> <p>Agendas and contents matter need to be negotiated with all parties at the outset. Information and communications need to be a high priority to ensure co-ordination at the event. Feedback to all concerned would need to be included. From the examples of good practice it is clear that there are already service users in a position to fulfil these tasks.</p>	<p>We will continue to invite service users to present at conference.</p>
<p><b><u>Service users addressing the conference</u></b></p> <p>Considerations as above. A very big step for a service user to take! They would need to be very well supported by the organisation. Get service users to look at all the possible issues. Be prepared to give training with the technology!</p>	
<p><b><u>Service user contribution to magazine, bi-monthly briefings and all communications (such as the advertisement for the annual conference.</u></b></p> <p>The magazine <i>Mental Health Occupational Therapy</i> holds great potential for including service user contributions in ever increasing amounts. It is clear that this is a way in which service users can communicate and work done on the ward and in user groups could be fed into the magazine. Perhaps a centre</p>	<p>The magazine in particular will emphasize that it seeks to hold the service user as central to what is said in the articles and thus how to do this in clinical practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We will re-visit the aims themselves, and if AOTMH were to change the aims, this would affect how the magazine interpreted them.</li> <li>• The magazine at present is for supporting and informing the membership on how to do</li> </ul>

pull-out with service user contributions could be included such that when a member received their copy, once they had read it they could remove the service user contributions for circulation on the unit and to user groups. This section could be photocopied and used to encourage others and need not just lie buried within the depths of a volume that only the professionals use. This could achieve several things, enhancing a service user's esteem by seeing their work in a professional magazine, increase a service user's skills, keep the service user involvement alive and secure within the organisation for all to see, be an opportunity to gather valuable information, ideas and contacts for networking nationally. This may lead, in time, if there is sufficient interest, to the possibility of editing articles for a wider audience.

Fine examples of magazines produced by service users exist already and those involved could be consulted as to how to make the *Mental Health Occupational Therapy* magazine as a whole a publication that would be of interest to both members and service users. Perhaps service users could design the cover. Service users could be employed in the production of it by editing. The printer could be approached to employ a service user in the production of the magazine or there may be a user group who could take on the whole job, thereby creating real jobs on a permanent basis, maybe on the lines of a 'social firm'.

The possibility of involving service users in the production of bi-monthly briefings should be explored. All advertisements for events, information etc should use service users skills wherever possible in art-work or text and production.

occupational therapy.

- The magazine could introduce having say one article per issue commented on and critiqued by service user/s. This would require service users who are academic as well as service users. This could be done as comment pages like is found in various other journals.
- Champions for regular contributions such as Jan Holloway – we will invite their perspective not just because they are a service user.
- No to a pull out section.
- The way the articles come across – that the service users are central to the article is to be continued.
- March 2005 issue included approaching service users for comments about the last 30/40 years of service provision.
- The magazine is also about raising the awareness of occupational therapy – making this magazine more available to service user groups such as the Sainsbury centre, MIND, Rethink and the Depression Alliance (we will put them onto the distribution list) (and it could be reciprocal where the editorial board received a copy of their publications).

<p>Where these ideas are explored the AOTMH could look at support needed to ensure that work leads to a qualification (eg NVQ) for the service user.</p>	
<p><b><u>Service users becoming involved in study days.</u></b></p> <p>With the right support this is possible especially as members have given so many examples of good practice there is almost too much to choose from. Study days, with the right topic on the agenda, would be a good introduction to the AOTMH for interested service users, one step removed from their own base or user group and a chance to meet other people interested service user involvement, professionals and service users.</p>	<p>The AOTMH welcomes the insights, and real life experience service users bring to the conferences, study days, and the magazine, and value learning directly from people living, surviving and thriving in spite of mental health problems. The contributions of people who have to cope with mental health difficulties, or stigma associated to living with mental illness, and who maybe can comment on the value (or otherwise) of the therapy they experienced, enriches our discussions and debates. The association does however have to retain its professional-centred focus in so much as that is what it is for – it is an <i>Association of Occupational Therapists</i> – that is, it exists to support, enable, stimulate and enhance members’ professional practice as occupational therapists working in mental health. It places the therapists’ development needs centrally as it is through sharing best practice, disseminating ideas, information and research and provoking debate among its members that it hopes to improve occupational therapy practice. Service users have a key role in this process, but the events and publication are not in themselves targeted to meet service-user need. AOTMH recognises however that in order to usefully engage service users to assist occupational therapists in improving services, we have to make our events sufficiently accessible and of mutual interest.</p>
<p><b><u>Service users becoming involved in professional development</u></b></p> <p>As above</p>	

**Explore all ways of using the internet as a means of communication within the organisation. Develop a web-page/site to which service users, user-groups and members can contribute and use.**

This could be used as a possible means of communication for any AOTMH member, service user and user-group networks that may emerge. Use it to gather references for good reading material and the first recommendations could be.

Sarah King's report was suitably provocative and stimulating, and led to many issues being considered and debated by the committee and the issues raised will continue to be aired at future events. While the AOTMH will continue to keep its members as the centre focus (so that its members can successfully put the service user at the centre of their work) there are clearly ways in which occupational therapists in mental health can make more active links with service users and their organisations to maximise our potential for collaboration and partnership in the job of improving mental health services for the future. We will endeavour to have inclusive language and to encourage the development of habits of using such language. Consultation will be the main method of our engaging with service users. This will largely be done by developing links with relevant organisations.