



**Fulfilling Lives**  
South East Partnership

# Service User Groups

Fulfilling Lives South East Service User  
Engagement Team



## ABOUT FULFILLING LIVES

Fulfilling Lives South East is led by BHT Sussex and supported by a number of voluntary and statutory sector partners. We provide intensive and tailored support to people with multiple and complex needs, helping the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach.

We also co-produce with people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages, to achieve positive changes in services and make them better connected and easier to access. The Fulfilling Lives South East Project started in 2014 and is funded until July 2022 by the National Lottery Community Fund, operating in Brighton and Hove, Eastbourne and Hastings.

### Acknowledgements

This guide has been created by the Service User Engagement Team and has been developed thanks to our experiences with Action Groups and volunteers with experience of multiple and complex needs.

### KEY

**TIP = Trauma informed practice**  
**MCN = Multiple and complex needs**  
**FLSE = Fulfilling Lives South East**

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# INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that service user involvement, collaboration and co-production are the most inclusive and effective ways to design and to deliver community services.

Each service or organisation will develop their own unique ways to achieve this, and there are multiple ways to go about it.

Getting together with a group of service users can build peer networks, create a sense of community, represent voices of those involved and contribute to our client's wellbeing.

**We have designed this guide to support colleagues to set up a service user group, and to help establish whether they are the best method for involvement and partnering with people experiencing multiple and complex needs.**

Service User groups are not the only way to collaborate. Here are other involvement options:

- **PEER SUPPORT GROUPS**
- **SERVICE USER LED ACTIVITIES**
- **POLICY REVIEW SERVICE USER GROUP**
- **TRAINING DELIVERED BY PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE**
- **SERVICE USERS FOCUS GROUPS TO CONSULT ON A NEW PROJECT**
- **VOLUNTEER REPRESENTATIVES AT DECISION MAKING FORUMS**
- **PEER RESEARCHERS THAT EVALUATE A SERVICE**
- **VOLUNTEER ROLES FOR SERVICE USERS**
- **FEEDBACK FORMS AFTER ACTIVITIES**
- **SERVICE USER SURVEYS**

# BEFORE SETTING UP: THINGS TO CONSIDER

## 1. Why consider a service user group?

Where is the idea coming from? Are service users requesting it or is setting up a service user group the only engagement activity that staff have considered?

There are a variety of ways in which service users can be involved, deciding on which is the best method to use depends on a number of factors. For instance, if the goal is to gather information regarding the quality of your service, specific focus groups or surveys could reach more people and would require less resources. If you want service users to take part in decision-making processes, it may be more useful to recruit a handful of service user representatives and support them to gather other users' views (also known as peer research).

## 2. What is the purpose, scope and decision making power?

Do you already know what you would like a service user group for? It's important to be explicit about the scope of the group and make this clear to its members. Some examples are:

- **Group that acts as a critical friend offering feedback and suggestions for service improvement to be passed on to management for final decision making.**
- **Group that works in partnership with managers (or other decision makers) to actively propose solutions to improve a specific aspect of a service, as well as planning and delivering ideas e.g. training for staff, creating information guides etc. (this is co-production).**

# BEFORE SETTING UP: THINGS TO CONSIDER

## 3. Would this work for your service users?

Services are usually aimed at supporting people in specific circumstances. The service users you work with may be in crisis and struggling with health and wellbeing needs, or they may be seeking development opportunities and employment. Factors such as these will influence the type of engagement activities that would work best, people's interests in being part of a group, and the resources and support required to set up and run the group.

## 4. Time and resources

A successful group is rewarding for service users and productive for the service. Resources such as staff time and expenditure are required to make this happen safely and successfully. There needs to be a named person who is responsible and accountable for the group together with individuals that are responsible for coordinating, facilitating, administrative support, supporting members, overseeing safeguarding and other complex tasks such as ensuring that the strategic direction of the group is in line with organisational policies and writing reports if necessary.

Members should be supported to deliver the group's purpose, developing the skills, knowledge and confidence necessary to contribute to the group meaningfully and in working towards their own development goals. Group facilitation and support for members must be person-centred and trauma-informed. Please refer to our ["Trauma Informed Practice in Co-Production"](#) and ["Trauma-Informed Guide to Social Research"](#) resources for more information.

**Once you have considered all factors, if a service user group is the best option you should go for it!**

**We can offer guidance based on our experiences with our Action Groups.**

# SETTING UP A GROUP: RECRUITMENT

Groups Theories tell us that we must keep two main factors in mind when working with groups:

1. Achieving the group's purpose
2. Maintaining relationships

The recruitment process is a chance to explore whether there will be a good fit between the purpose of the group and an individual skills, abilities, needs and wants.

Staff that provide support in services are a good resource to reach out to potential group members - they know where their clients are at, what their current situation is, and have insight into their interests and aspirations.

**Recruitment** could be done by **targeting specific individuals** that are known or considered to be a good fit for the group and that the group is appropriate for member interests and aspirations.

Another option is **advertising**. Adverts must include the purpose of the group, expectations of its members and incentives or rewards offered.

A third way could be via an **application process**; it may be important to know in advance that members have got the right experience, skills, attitudes and interests.

## BE MINDFUL OF

- People joining the group who have support needs that aren't being met by other services.
- People without the skills needed to contribute – is there enough support to help them develop these?
- People joining the group because they feel grateful towards the service but they are not that interested in the work.
- People joining the group without a clear idea of their role and the expectations which will be placed upon them.

# SETTING UP A GROUP: STARTING THE GROUP

Ideally, group members themselves will be able to lead as much as possible in shaping the group. The first stages should be dedicated to agreeing or reviewing the following:

## **1. The purpose of the group:**

What projects they are going to work on, what they want to achieve. Can this be decided by the group or is it already framed by the organisation's needs? In order to establish a trusting relationship, it is key to be transparent about this.

## **2. How the group will operate:**

How often they meet, how meetings are facilitated, by whom, who does the agendas, how are they circulated etc.

## **3. Managing power dynamics and decision making:**

Agree the group membership (is it made up of service users only or does it also include staff, volunteers and managers?). How are decisions made? Is there a quorum and votes; is there someone who could override decisions? What role does each member have on the group?

There could be a service user group that is supported and facilitated by staff (who are not members) who make suggestions but do not have decision-making power. There can also be a group (made up of both staff and service users) that works on a project where decisions are made collectively. The boundaries of decision-making power and influence that the service users can have must be made clear at the beginning of the process.

## **4. Individual members commitments:**

What is expected of members? Can the group function without all members attending all meetings? How are absences managed? Do members have to prepare in advance? What is needed of the members for the group to meet their objectives?

# SET UP: STARTING THE GROUP

## 5. What members can expect in return:

What does the organisation offer to enable members to perform? How are expenses managed? Are there any rewards for members? Deciding and managing rewards for service users taking part in the group is a controversial topic and needs to be discussed and agreed carefully. People who are in receipt of benefits are expected to declare any income, so if considering monetary rewards, organisations need to make sure they have up-to-date information from their local Job Centre.

### At Fulfilling Lives South East we opted for the following by way of reciprocity for our Action Group volunteers:

- Group members are registered as volunteers with our organisation and have access to staff training
- Each member has an assigned mentor that provides individualised support to perform within the role as well as guiding their development through an individual development plan
- Refreshments in meetings and travel reimbursements
- Regular team activities, like meals and outings
- For some activities volunteers are rewarded with a gift voucher

## 6. Support available:

What support is available for the service user to engage with the group and to fulfill their role; are there supervisions, mentoring, training and is there wellbeing support for group members? Support would also need to be considered for when a group member is not well and unable to meet the group expectations (See [FLSE Trauma Informed Practice in Co-Production guide](#)).

## 7. Values or a group agreement:

It is useful to agree a set of values that encompass the previous points. (See FLSE Co-Production Values on our website).

**Being thorough with planning and agreeing these first steps will have a positive impact on the future of the group.**



# FACILITATING, MAINTAINING AND MAKING THE GROUP SUCCESSFUL

The more co-production, collaboration, joint planning and decision making involved, the greater the chances of a successful group that meets its objectives and keeps members engaged.

Facilitating group meetings will vary depending on the factors mentioned above including what the purpose of the group is, it's scope, membership etc.

**In addition to literature and training available on group facilitation, based on our experience of facilitating Action Groups, these are some things that need to be considered:**

- **Check-ins and check-outs are useful to test how people are starting and leaving the meeting**
- **Manage personal disclosures and support group members (See FLSE TIP in Co-Production guide)**
- **Ensure equity in the participation: who needs more support and encouragement to speak up and participate, who needs to be supported to not to overtake in meetings**
- **Plan how to manage difficult and triggering conversations which might include 1-to-1 support or signposting to a specific service**
- **Keep the group on track referring to your values and the group's objectives. ([See FLSE Co-Production Values](#))**
- **Offer a mixture of activities such as reading and reviewing documents, sharing personal experiences, creating new leaflets, connecting with other service users etc. It is more likely that members will maintain their commitment and interest**
- **Keep learning and be willing to make changes as the group develops**

# FLSE VOLUNTEER TESTIMONIAL: FLSE ACTION GROUP

“Being a volunteer and part of the Action group has given me something to look forward to in the week. I get to meet new people who share similar experiences in life and within services. We get the opportunity to use our bad experience in a constructive way and hold many debatable conversations over a free lunch “when we were Covid free”. As I got to know the people in the group and meeting my mentor a couple of times before actually joining, made me feel comfortable and safe to share my lived experience.

The more Action groups I attended the more work I could be involved in. The work that I did undertake has made my confidence and self-esteem grow because not only does your lived experience story feel valued and listened to within the project, but also the services we work with. It also gave way for me to network and get to know the people who are working in the sector. Having a mentor has also meant that I can share if I’m struggling with a particular piece of work, but also share other things that I have going on in my life. For example, other volunteering roles or looking for up-skills. If my mentor knows of anywhere that could help me then I will be signposted supported and encouraged to be able to achieve what I never thought possible.”

K.J.