

Ten top tips to encourage and support participation

This list has been compiled from our work exploring service user involvement for services and activities that help vulnerable people with offending backgrounds.

Tip 1: Make it easy - ways in and ways out

Keep things simple and easy for people to participate in activities. We have found that activities and sessions that people can attend as and when they feel able work well for people. Popular practical activities such as walking and talking groups and arts and craft projects, where you can still ask about the service and how things are and participate in something active.

“Every day is different - not planned work”

Tip 2: Keep it simple

A popular way we have come across is a suggestion box on the coffee table where everyone sits and chats. It takes hardly any time to jot an idea or suggestion down, and put it in the suggestion box. It's quick and easy, you don't have to attend a meeting and you don't have to speak up in front of other people either. The box can then be emptied out and read out every few weeks and plans made to put the ideas and suggestions into action.

“Information can lead to participation”

Tip 3: Choice and opportunities

We all like different things. Offering a range of opportunities and different choices helps vulnerable people to make decisions in a safe environment. For example, at TWG, as part of the White Ribbon Campaign we organised a display about the impact of domestic violence and encourage people to sign a pledge against violence towards women as part of the white ribbon campaign. Women choose how they wanted to participate, such as creating and designing the display, blowing up balloons, moving the display around talking to people on the day, asking for the pledge book to be signed.

“TWG - choice is part of the process”

Tip 4: Try things out - not everything works

We don't always know if new ideas and suggestions are going to work. Not everything is going to work and that is OK. Often the only way is to try them out and see. We generally learn more when things don't go quite as we expected than when it all works well. So be brave and give it a go.

Tip 5: Use activities and events

Holding service user meetings can be very useful but for many people they can be too formal, boring and intimidating. Another approach is to talk to people, while they are doing other more practical things. We found people are more likely to chat whilst gardening, taking photographs, sewing and walking.

“When the women are actively involved - PARTICIPATING - they contribute good ideas”

Tip 6: Make it fun

The more enjoyable and fun activities are the more likely it is that people will come along to things. We all like different things so having a range of options helps. Ideas that came from the suggestion box are

- Pamper days
- Film shows
- Karaoke
- Halloween fancy dress
- Christmas party
- Easter hat decorating competition

“Group experience but without added stigma!”

Tip 7: Have a framework and structure

This is the formal bit. A framework for participation is important because this is how you fit all the suggestions, views on the services and opinions into the system and it enables you to act on the comments. It is also a way making sure ideas don't get lost.

When you ask for peoples' opinions on the service you need to be clear about what things you can change, what things are compulsory or have to stay the same and who makes the final decisions. A framework showing how it all fits together helps everyone and makes it work better.

Tip 8: Resources

Resources are things like money or a budget to spend on activities, equipment, rooms and space. It can also mean staff and partner organisations who may be able to help you or share resources.

Tip 9: Budget

“Staff needs money/ resources support and time”

A budget just for participation type activities will support the things you want to do. It may include items that support and encourage people to participate such as tea and biscuits, travel expenses, childcare costs, room hire, and equipment for activities.

Tip 10: Time and support

Having time allocated to participation within workloads helps staff to prioritise participation activities in a busy work environment. For some people this can be a new way of doing things and they may need support to make changes and do things differently. Seeing the impact of increased participation for individuals and to the service can help.

“Roles can be problematic”

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