Manchester People First

Ideas for better meetings

Introduction

Manchester People First's 'Join Us, Join In' project looked at how people with a learning disability took part in meetings.
We looked at things that could be done to make it easier for people to take part, understand what was going on and share their skills and experience.

We have a problem

Manchester People First was started in 1992 by a group of people who had a learning disability. They were fed up with services thinking they knew what was best for them, without asking them. This idea is summed up as "Nothing about me, without me".

Today, this idea is why we have:

• Co-production: Getting people who will use services to help design, test and run those services

• Individualisation: Services that are designed to fit the needs and wishes of an individual person

Many organisations agree with these ideas, but there can be problems with the way they do it. Often they will invite someone with a learning disability to come to their meetings. But:

1. They are surrounded by health and social care professionals, local authority officers who are all being paid to be there.

2. They will be asked to comment on reports, spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations they have just been given and cannot always understand.

3. Service providers will have set the agenda. What they think is important may be different from what the person with a learning disability thinks is important.

What can we do

• Tell people who run meetings some practical things they can do to make meetings better – Which is what this guide is about.
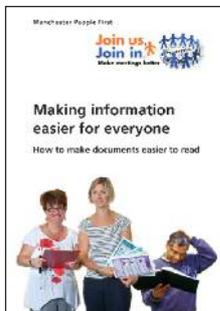
• Make information more accessible – We have produced a guide about how to do this for written information and put on training sessions for groups.

• Give people who have a learning disability support and training so they can take part in meetings – We ran a training workshop for our members. We can run this again for other groups.

The ideas in this guide came from looking at some of the meetings we put on ourselves, or our members went to.

As we said in our guide 'Making information easier for everyone', many of the things you can do to make things better for people with a learning disability, make things better for everyone else.

Most groups know about removing barriers for people with a physical impairment. People with a learning disability also benefit from removing these barriers. They may have a physical impairment as well.

What to do

Traditional meetings with all their agendas, minutes, resolutions and standing orders are not always the most friendly way to do things. So, ask yourself and the people who come to your meetings if there may be a better way of doing things.

• If you want to give people some information, is a newsletter better?

• If you want to get people's opinions, is a questionnaire better?

• If you need to choose what to do about an issue, is a workshop better?
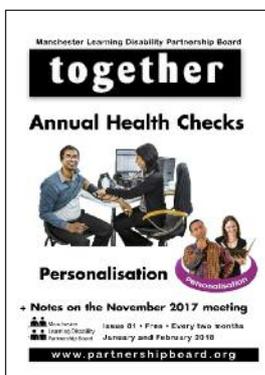
Meetings do not always have to be the same.

An outside group may want to come and tell you about their plans. You could say, "our next meeting will be a special road show event put on by…"

If the best way to do things is by having a traditional meeting, there are some things you could do to make it better and more user-friendly for people with a learning disability.

Telling people about meetings

We found people did not always know when and where meetings were being held. Or they forgot. Or they did not feel comfortable going. So, people did not take part.

Some simple 'reasonable adjustments' can be made to the way people are told about meetings and make it more likely they will get there.

Written notices of meetings

• Some people need to make arrangements with others to go to meetings, so plenty of notice may be needed. If possible give dates for the whole year, so they can be put in diaries.

• People need reminding, so notices still need to be sent nearer the date of each meeting

• Include day and date. "Next Thursday" is better for some people than "4 May"

• Include time of start and end, so people can sort out getting home

• Full address including postcode for sat-navs or to give to taxi drivers

• Give details about parking

• Contact number for use on day of meeting, in case of problems

• Maps and public transport details

• Remind people shortly before the meeting. Verbal reminders seem to work better.

Other ways of telling people a meeting is on

Written notices are probably the most reliable way of telling people, but what seems to work best is telling people face-to-face.

Meet up for meetings

Encourage people to meet up and go to the meeting together.
Meetings that have some social part are better attended.
Free lunches can be a good way to give people a break and a chance to chat and get to know everyone else, which makes them more likely to come again.

Electronic communication

For speed and cost, many groups are using email and texts to tell people about meetings. But not everyone uses the internet or texts.

Even if you do not have to follow the Accessible Information Standards, it is a good idea to ask people how they want to get information, then give it them in that way and check it really works for them.

Times for meetings

Many people will probably travel to meetings using public transport, so do not have early start times that mean people will have to travel in rush hour. Many people do not like traveling on public transport after dark.

Venues

• Should have independent barrier free access, accessible toilets etc. If there are access issues, tell people before the meeting, work on ways around the issue.

• Be near public transport stops.

• Be easy to find – have a photograph of the building

• Have disabled parking

• If the venue is inside a bigger building, have someone at the door who can show people to the room the meeting is being held in. People may not like asking directions, or be able to follow a map

Take the meeting to the people

Instead of you getting people to come to the meeting, if people already meet together such as at a club, can you go there?

When groups came to People First's office, our members felt like it was 'theirs', not 'someone else's'. They felt more confident about taking part and attendances were higher as they came to our offices anyway.

At the meeting
Welcomes and introductions

All meetings should have welcomes and introductions.
The welcome could include a short explanation of who the group is and what the meeting is for. This could be written and included on agendas and notices sent out before the meetings. This information is also good for visiting speakers.
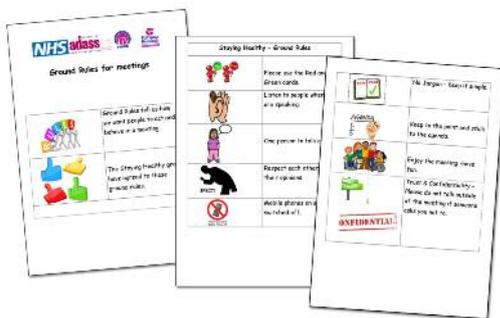
If there are ground rules, it is useful to go over them at each meeting, or send them out with the notices and agendas. People should introduce themselves or be introduced, so people at the meeting know their:

• Name

• Job or role, if they have one. It may not be clear from their job title what they do, so explain.

• Who they are from – They may have to explain what the organisation is

• Why they are at the meeting. What are they going to do? Why?

• What do they want the meeting to do?

If people are introducing themselves they may forget to do some of this, So, for people giving presentations, these details can be written on the agenda and should be in the Minutes of the meeting.

Before the meeting photographs of the speakers and perhaps a few personal details, such as their hobbies could be sent out to help put people at ease and help to remind people after the meeting.

Agendas

We found that agendas could be used to make the meeting a lot more understandable. It helps everyone stick to the point and reminds people what is coming up. They can be even more useful.

Each agenda item should be introduced with a clear explanation about why the item is being talked about, and what the meeting is expected to do about it.

Times

Have approximate times for how long each item will last.
It can help people know how long they will have to concentrate for, or take a break etc.

Presentations

Many meetings include PowerPoint presentations and written reports and documents. These should be done in a way that makes them as accessible as possible. Groups inviting speakers should tell them this when they invite them and if possible have the presentations and reports in advance.

As well as a PowerPoint presentation, can a summary leaflet be given to people at the meeting or a short description be given on the agenda?

Pre-meetings

Some meetings have pre-meetings, where some items on the agenda can be gone through in more detail and explained in a way that is understandable. Pre-meetings can be used to:

• Go through documents, having jargon explained

• Help people balance the pros and cons of an issue

• Work out what the consequences of choices will be

• Ask questions or get extra information

• Help speaker present at the right level for the meeting

• Help meetings run more smoothly, by not having to stop to explain things

If a pre-meeting is not possible, give people information in enough time to prepare.

Supporters

Some people may need a supporter to come to meetings with them. This could be paid staff, or a friend. If people do not have formal support, organisers could see if pairing people with others in a 'buddy system' could help.

Minutes

Some groups call these 'Notes' as 'Minutes' may sound like they are to do with how long a meeting lasts.

These should as far as possible be accessible and available in alternative formats such as an audio version. People may need them before the meeting, or there should be a way they are gone through.


One group lists all the Actions agreed at the last meeting on the back page of the notes. This makes it easier for people to see what they have to do before the next meeting.
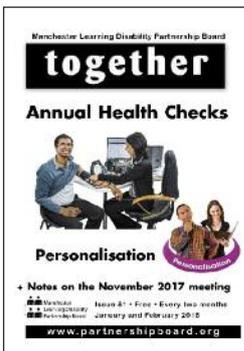
Another group does their minutes in a newsletter format, so they are more likely to be read by people who do not go to the meetings.

Accessible information by Manchester People First

Manchester People First have a project called Just Info.
We make documents easier to understand.

We have worked with organisations
including councils, universities, the NHS
police, and voluntary sector groups.

If you want to know more, or want
a quote for some work, please get
in touch.

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