

The Practitioners Forum - A Proposal

1. Purpose of the Practitioners' Forum

- 1.1 The Forums would give a regular opportunity for practitioners to stand back from the day-to-day pressures of their work, and reflect on its issues and implications.
- 1.2 The Forums would give practitioners a chance to address the work's emotional impact on them, to learn from it and work through it.
- 1.3 Longer term, once the Forum members have grown used to working together, they could extend their role to become bodies that managers would wish consult with in the planning and monitoring of local services.
- 1.4 The role of the Forums would thus be, through reflection and mutual support, to enhance practitioners' sense of self-value and increase their involvement as partners and stakeholders in how care services operate. From the manager's point of view they would offer a ground level perspective on local conditions and policies.

2. Reasons for the Practitioner's Forum

- 2.1 The work of social care at all levels leaves little time for thought or reflection. The quality of the work must benefit from regular opportunities for shared reflection for those who want to use them.
- 2.2 Changes to structures and organisations in recent years have been many and rapid and had to be imposed top-down. This can leave the ground level practitioner feeling de-skilled, disconnected and disempowered. A formalised system of real listening to the ground level perspective would help practitioners recover a sense of their own expertise and its importance to the success of Community Care. This in turn would help their work with service users . Workers who themselves feel empowered will find it easier to help empower service users.

3. Implementation

- 3.1 A Practitioner's Forum should start in the place where workers find it easiest to gather and to talk easily, ie in their own bases. This suggests that in a given Department or locality there may be a number of practitioner groupings. At a later stage these could come together for one-off meetings with managers (twice annually ?), or could send representatives to a centralised group.
- 3.2 The Forums should of course include only those people who want to join and who subscribe to the group's purposes. They would probably stay quite small. Between four and eight per group would seem about right.
- 3.3 To a degree, the developmental process should be flexible and responsive to local conditions. Initially the Forums may be multi-disciplinary or single-discipline ; they may be multi-specialism or single specialism, they may focus on organisation or locality. It would depend on local conditions, histories and opportunities, and on whatever is already happening on the ground.
- 3.4 How the groups move towards the looked-for end-result should be self-directed, probably with outside facilitation, at least initially. By definition, the development process must not be externally prescribed or controlled.
- 3.5 However, terms of reference must be clear and overtly stated from the outset, and agreed by all concerned. And the end-result of the Forum process, however arrived at, would be a structure and/or process which enables practitioners to consult closer with senior managers and contribute more directly to the way a care organisation delivers its services.