

# Supporting vulnerable people and homelessness.

## Focus Groups and Interviews - Engagement Report

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## Introduction

Homelessness can have a limiting effect on people's quality of life, their health and their life expectancy. As an example, rough sleepers have an average life expectancy which is approximately 30 years shorter than that of the general population.

Much of Richmond's response to vulnerable people affected by homelessness is outlined in its Housing Strategy 2013-17 and Homelessness Strategy 2012-2016. Some elements of the Homelessness Strategy are delivered locally under the 'Supporting People' theme. This includes; accommodation for former rough sleepers, refuges for women affected by domestic violence and support and accommodation for ex-offenders. Background information can be found here:

- [http://www.richmond.gov.uk/home/services/housing/housing\\_strategy\\_and\\_policy/housing\\_strategies.htm](http://www.richmond.gov.uk/home/services/housing/housing_strategy_and_policy/housing_strategies.htm)

## What was the purpose of the engagement?

In order to assist with a service review in this area, engagement was required with each of the three target groups mentioned; former rough sleepers, women affected by domestic violence and ex-offenders. The engagement supporting the service review in this area was focussed on identifying the outcomes that customers of these services wanted to achieve as a consequence of their relationship with their service provider.

## Why were outcomes focussed on?

Public services, such as those focussed on, exist to meet the aspirations and needs of the public who fund and/or may use them. They are a key stakeholder, however the public and in particular, those who use services have no opportunity to use their spending power to shape the marketplace that defines what is delivered<sup>†</sup>. Even where people who use public services are handed back some spending power via personal budgets, there is less flexibility and spontaneity for individual spending decisions than there is in a normal marketplace.

<sup>†</sup> For example the growth in the number of cafés in towns and cities is driven by customers choosing to spend money in cafés. They are potentially profitable and as a consequence of this multiple businesses invest resources to compete for customers on the basis of cost and service quality – A marketplace that maximises quality whilst driving down costs has therefore been created through customer spending power.

The lack of customer spending power in the market for public services has potential consequences for both customers of services and their commissioners, these include:

- A lack of guarantee built into the structure of the system that providers will develop services that best meet customer need and aspirations at the lowest cost.
- Greater difficulty in understanding whether services meet needs and aspirations.

In the past commissioning often focussed on commissioning activity and outputs that were seen as *likely* to deliver beneficial outcomes. The definition of those outcomes and of the type of work that is needed to support their attainment has not however been wholly in the hands of those who use services. That is not to say that there is a lack of research or work to try to ensure that services are relevant and quality is maintained whilst costs are minimised; however there is a clear advantage to focussing directly on the outcomes that

service users want. That focus on outcomes can help to compensate for the lack of the customer power which helps full marketplace environments to ensure that services meet needs. A focus on outcomes therefore supports a system that incorporates pressures to enhance service relevance and quality. One pressure which such systems create is through focus on monitoring outcomes. That focus makes it easier for service providers and commissioners to keep the overall impact of services on people's lives in mind. A focus on customer outcomes was therefore desirable because it could help to:

- Ensure that services remain relevant.
- Ensure that monitoring and service evaluation is appropriate.
- Support a more customer focussed marketplace for services.

It is worth emphasising that a focus on outcomes enhances the importance of knowing whether customers would like to be involved in monitoring and evaluating the services they use. That is because one of the best measures of whether outcomes are met is whether customers say they are! One discussion question was therefore targeted at understanding whether participants wanted to be involved in evaluating the services that they used.

Whilst outcomes are important, there will always be outputs that must be sought which result from national standards and requirements or agreed local priorities. Such constraints are just part of the environment that affects public services. In addition an understanding of activity and outputs is needed (not least by service providers) in order to understand how efficiently outcomes are delivered and therefore what resources are required.

There is a further reason for basing commissioning on engagement to discover what service users would like to achieve. Service users are sometimes relatively marginalised and less able to participate in larger scale democratic processes that shape local and national priorities. Democratising the processes at 'the sharp end' of making direct decisions about services can help to compensate for this. Service users from the particular services looked at were amongst those most likely to have been marginalised as they would have been homeless prior to the intervention of the services that the local authority commissioned.

## **How was the engagement carried out?**

An engagement exercise was co-designed by Richmond's Joint Commissioning Collaborative (JCC)<sup>†</sup> and Richmond Council for Voluntary Service (CVS)<sup>†</sup> between November and December 2014. It consisted of two focus groups (one for former rough sleepers and one for women affected by domestic violence housed in hostel accommodation) together with individual semi structured interviews (with ex-offenders). A total of 20 people participated overall, 7 in each of the two workshops and 6 in individual interviews. Resources for room booking, catering and some administration was provided by LBRuT whilst Richmond CVS provided resources for participant rewards and their administration as well as satisfaction monitoring and liaison with service providers and their customers. Questions prompts for the focus groups and interviews were formulated by Amina Begum (Commissioning Manager JCC and Bruno Meekings (Community involvement Coordinator RCVS) who also liaised with service users and carers to develop and test ideas. In addition Sarah Smithers, (Procurement Category Specialist LBRuT) provided advice.

## Why were those engagement methods used?

The general (or high level outcomes) that people would like to achieve tend to be very similar irrespective of the services they receive. This is unsurprising because biological, psychological and cultural similarities between people outweigh individual differences. Outcomes people typically like to achieve include things such as; being independent with the ability to make choices, maintaining a range of relationships, or feeling safe and free from distress etc. Exactly what a general outcome might imply could however be very different for differently situated people. In addition the priority given to particular outcomes may vary, for example survivors of domestic violence and ex-offenders might have a different balance of priorities owing to their particular circumstances and histories.

Focus group and semi structured interview formats are well suited to exploring areas that have common themes but significant differences. In practice it was possible to use very similar core questions across all groups whilst still having the flexibility to explore differences in service experience and to differentiate between the more detailed outcomes that might be important for the different customer groups. A further advantage of focus groups and consecutive interviews is that they facilitate contrast between participant perspectives; this, in turn, makes it easier to identify priorities.

The rigidity of methods such as questionnaires would have been inappropriate for this exercise. They are suitable for gathering simple information or exploring responses to particular scenarios or clear proposals, but this exercise required more than that. In addition the timescale and number of participants would have prevented questionnaire piloting.

## What did the engagement reveal?

A range of information about the outcomes that customers would like to achieve became apparent from the focus groups and interviews. Most of the information is only relevant to the service review and will not be covered here. The response of participants to being asked about their willingness to be involved in evaluating the quality of the services they received is however directly relevant to this report.

Participants expressed enthusiasm for the prospect of being actively involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating service quality. One said *'it's the only way to do it really'* others stressed that their knowledge of what was delivered and what they wanted to achieve could help to ensure that focus was maintained on the areas where most could be achieved. The enthusiasm for being involved was similar regardless of participants' perception of the quality of the services they received. Some participants said how much they valued the opportunity that they had been given to get their perspective across and that this had not happened before. This was emphasised by participants' written feedback, for example one participant wrote that it was *'very positive and helpful'*; another wrote *'found very helpful'*.

Customer involvement in monitoring and evaluating service quality was seen as a necessary element in monitoring and evaluation but not a stand-alone solution. More than one participant emphasised this by saying that they expected commissioners to require that services provide a range of routine information that would assist them to better understand how well services were working.

A range of suggestions were made about how involvement in monitoring and evaluation might work. These involved differing levels of participation by the various stakeholders and could imply differing levels of support, but overall there was a clear willingness from customers for continued partnership in order to support service evaluation.

## How satisfied were participants?

A feedback questionnaire was used to gauge whether participants were provided with sufficient information to facilitate their involvement, whether the engagement was appropriately conducted and how satisfied they were overall. To achieve this set of three questions were used, the questions explored:

- Whether participants were provided with sufficient information to engage fully?
- Whether participants felt that they were able to engage fully?
- Whether participants would want to take part in similar future exercises? (as a proxy for overall satisfaction and any consequent motivating effect)

Each question had a four level response scale with endpoints of yes and no. For the purposes of calculating satisfaction each interval was treated as scoring 0.33 within a scale between 0 and 1 points.

A further question asked whether there was any other feedback the participant wanted to give. That question allowed a free text response.

Questionnaires were handed out at the end of each focus group or interview. No names or other personal information was sought on the questionnaires. Questionnaires were not handed back individually when completed by focus group participants, but were collected as a set once completed. Focus group participant responses were therefore anonymous.

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## Satisfaction Results

### Focus Group 1: Former Rough Sleepers

Facilitators: Amina Begum (Commissioning Manager JCC), Bruno Meekings (Community involvement Coordinator RCVS), Sarah Smithers, (Procurement Category Specialist LBRuT).

For both focus groups similar discussion prompts were used and discussion continued until participants and facilitators felt that the conversation had reached a natural conclusion.

The satisfaction feedback from the first focus group showed that participants felt adequately briefed and able to give their views as they gave the maximum possible rating to both the information that they were provided with and to the extent to which they were able to give their views. The response to the question '*Would you want to participate in similar events in future?*' was slightly more ambiguous as the overall response was 94% of the possible maximum. This may have been partly related to the fact that owing to pressure on room availability and the required timescale, the focus group took place in a room that was less than ideal in terms of size, acoustics and climate control. Best practice in private sector market research via focus groups uses dedicated or tightly specified facilities. The JCC does have access to rooms that are more suitable for focus groups, both in the Civic Centre and in York House and for the second focus group it was possible to secure a more appropriate room.

<b>Focus Group 1: Former Rough Sleepers</b>	(n=7)
Q1 'Did you think the information given was sufficient to participate fully in discussion'. 100% said yes	
Q2 ' Did you feel you were able to give your views?' 100% said yes	
Q 3 'Would you want to participate in similar events in future?' †94% (83% said yes 17% said perhaps) One participant qualified their yes response by writing 'yes absolutely'	
<i>Overall satisfaction 98%††</i>	

† Scaled 'Yes, (1) Perhaps (0.66), Unlikely (0.33) No (0) -  $83\% \times 1 + (17\% \times 0.66) = 94\%$

†† The results from Q1, Q2 and Q3 when added give  $294\% / 3 = 98\%$

## Focus Group 2 Residents of Womens' Refuges

Facilitators: Amina Begum (Commissioning Manager JCC), Bruno Meekings (Community involvement Coordinator RCVS), Sarah Smithers, (Procurement Category Specialist LBRuT).

The only area in which satisfaction ratings from customers in the second focus group fell below 100% was in connection with the information provided to participants. One reason for this may have been that the focus group contained residents from two different refuges and the focus-group format allowed them to share information about differences in services features. This in turn made it possible for participants to think about aspects of service delivery and their consequences that would otherwise have been taken for granted. The consequence of this was that the engagement format and participant selection were partly responsible for ensuring participants had sufficient information to engage fully.

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It is always likely that much of the information that helps participants to give their views will come from other participants rather than facilitators. Indeed, the main purpose of a focus group is to provide an environment where participants themselves generate information through discussion. The key message from this is therefore that it is important to include as diverse a range of relevant customer experience in focus groups in order to allow participants to contrast and compare experience and through that identify priorities.

Other than a broader spectrum of service experience (as explained previously); the main differences between the arrangements for this focus group as compared with the first, were that this focus group was held in a more adequate venue and it was of slightly shorter duration. On both occasions however the duration of the focus group was flexible and continued until participants felt that discussion had come to a natural close. The shorter duration was not therefore likely to have influenced satisfaction. The room size and consequent better acoustics seem far more likely to have been a factor in the slightly higher willingness to participate in similar future events expressed by participants of this focus group as compared with the first. This suggests that it is important to select venues carefully in order to maximise the likelihood of future involvement.

### Focus Group 2: Residents of Womens' Refuges

(n=7)

Q1 'Did you think the information that you have been given by facilitators was sufficient to participate fully in discussion?'

94% (86% said Yes, 14% said almost enough)

Q2 ' Did you feel you were able to give your views?'

100% said yes

Q 3 'Would you want to participate in similar events in future?'

100% said yes

*Overall satisfaction 98%*

**Interviews with Ex-Offenders**

*Interviewers: Amina Begum,( Commissioning Manager) JCC; Bruno Meekings, (Community Involvement Coordinator RCVS)*

The overall satisfaction levels from the interviews were better than was achieved by either focus group. The satisfaction responses to individual questions were not however higher than was *achievable* via a focus group. In addition the key question, *‘Did you feel you were able to give your views?’* gained a 100% yes response across both focus groups and interviews.

In terms of the cost/benefits of interviews as compared with focus groups, interviews are more resource intensive, can present greater complexity in relation to staff safety and in addition deliver similar satisfaction levels. For some exercises they are essential however. They can enable participants to go into greater depth and they also provide an environment in which participants can say things that they would not choose to say at all in a group setting. In relation to this particular exercise interview participants did not want to attend a focus group and at least one participant could not have done so.

**Interviews with Ex-Offenders**

<b>Interviews with Ex-Offenders</b>	n=6
Q1 ‘Do you think the information that you were given was sufficient to allow you to participate fully in discussion?’ <i>100% said yes</i>	
Q2 ‘Did you feel you were able to give your views?’ <i>100% said yes</i>	
Q3 ‘Would you like to participate in similar events in future?’ <i>100% said yes</i>	
<i>Overall satisfaction 100%</i>	

There were benefits from carrying out interviews consecutively on the same day as it made developing areas of discussion further with questions that arose from earlier interviews straightforward. This of course could not fully compensate for an absence of discussion between participants; however the ability to build on earlier interviews combined with the ability to explore areas in greater depth helped to ensure that the interviews were as effective as the focus groups in generating knowledge and understanding.

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## Discussion

Feedback questionnaire results showed satisfaction levels were very high. Aggregating responses to each question across the whole exercise average satisfaction ratings varied between 98% and 100% for the individual measures explored with an overall average of 99%. Within individual exercises, in response to individual questions, satisfaction levels varied between 94% and 100%. The interview exercise was carried out after the two focus groups and achieved 100% satisfaction levels across all measures. It is equally possible that result of learning from the previous two exercises or that the more individual format led to the slightly improved satisfaction levels.

These are exceptionally high satisfaction levels for any form of engagement. Satisfaction levels were however only 5% higher than those seen in a slightly larger exercise earlier in the year that had focussed on carer priorities for local usage of the Better Care Fund.

<b>Supporting People</b>	n=20
Q1 'Do you think the information that you were given was sufficient to allow you to participate fully in discussion?' <i>†98% (94% said yes, 6% perhaps)</i>	
Q2 'Did you feel you were able to give your views?' <i>100% said yes</i>	
Q3 'Would you like to participate in similar events in future?' <i>98% (94% said yes, 6% said perhaps)</i>	
<i>Overall 99%</i>	<i>†rounding applied</i>

<b>Better Care Fund engagement</b>	n=31
Q1 'Do you think the information that you were given was sufficient to allow you to participate fully in discussion?' <i>89% (73% said yes, 23% perhaps, 3% no)</i>	
Q2 'Did you feel you were able to give your views?' <i>94% (83% said yes, 17% said perhaps)</i>	
Q3 'Would you like to participate in similar events in future?' <i>98% (93% said yes, 7% said perhaps)</i>	
<i>Overall 94%</i>	

In addition the potential reasons for differences in satisfaction ratings are logical. As an example only 89% was achieved in relation to the Better Care Fund (BCF) event and the amount of information provided to participants. This compared with the 94% rating across the focus groups and interviews in the current exercise; however participants needed to understand far less in order to participate fully than in the BCF Event. That event was also larger, (31 people plus facilitators as compared with focus groups of 7 or individual interviews). For that reason the amount of information delivered at the Better Care Fund Event was targeted at what an average participant might need to know. This could have reduced the satisfaction of both of those who would have wanted more information, and of those who could have benefitted from a slower pace.

Similarly the size of the Better Care Fund event could have affected the ability of some people to get their views across. This may have been reflected in the higher score that participants gave in the focus groups and interviews in relation to the extent to which they were able to express their views (98% as compared with 94%)

One difference between the two audiences that might have had a very small effect is that those involved the Better Care Fund event represented an audience with mixed experience of the match between their aspirations for the outcomes of engagement and what it was possible to commission as a result of engagement, i.e. there had been some notable commissioning successes previously, but there were also areas where carers would have liked to have already seen further development.

The current audience on the other hand had experienced no commissioning focussed engagement previously. As a result of this there was an absence of potential for uncertainty about the outcome of engagement to influence participants' feedback.

From the participant feedback and comparison with the Better Care Fund engagement feedback it appears likely that the planning and execution of the exercise was the most significant factor in its success in engagement terms, but that there may have been slight additive effects from the smaller scale and from participant optimism about the potential for their engagement generating positive outcomes.

Overall the information and priorities highlighted by participants seemed likely to be translatable into service and commissioning priorities and through that help to ensure that well regarded and effective services continue to be available to people like those who participated in this engagement exercise.

One area that customers will have a particular interest in is the extent to which they are involved in the future planning, monitoring and evaluation the services they use. Richmond has a good record of involving people who use local services as well as carers in service planning and procurement. That involvement can readily accommodate a shift towards a focus on outcomes. The implication of the wide range of types and sizes of services delivered locally mean however that a variety of approaches towards involving customers in monitoring and evaluation services may be required. The precise shape and form that involvement might take for these customers has yet to be established, but it is clear from this exercise that customers of these services would welcome that involvement.

## Thanks

Thanks are due to Joint Commissioning Collaborative staff who supported the exercise. Thanks are also due to the individual staff of Look Ahead Care and Support, Refuge and Spear who supported the recruitment and participation of their customers.

Most of all thanks are due to all of the people who gave up their time to take part in the focus groups and interviews or to help develop questions.

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<sup>†</sup> Richmond's *Joint Commissioning Collaborative* (JCC) is a joint staffing structure set up by Richmond CCG and LBRuT that includes commissioners of both adult and children's services who work to a common aim of delivering a collaborative approach to commissioning health and social care for local residents.

<sup>†</sup> *Richmond Council for Voluntary Service* (RCVS) is a charity that aims to strengthen the local community through working with a range of organisations and individuals.