

Case study

Service user involvement has helped Steph Hares move on in her recovery.

I started receiving support from secondary mental health services in 2010. I had no idea that six years later I would be working for one of the services that supported me.

I initially got involved with service user feedback in 2014 when I was coming to the end of two and a half years of therapy. I didn't know what was next for me but I was asked if I was interested in going along to a new service user and carer reference group for the Complex Psychological Interventions (CPI) Service for something to do. So, incredibly nervous, I rocked up to a room full of strangers for the first meeting. This was the start of my involvement as a service user representative for Bristol Mental Health (BMH).

At this point I lacked self-confidence and found attending meetings incredibly nerve racking but slowly, as I met more faces and got to grips with what service user involvement meant, my confidence grew. It took an awful lot longer to get my head around the new set up of BMH and how everything worked.

After a few months I started attending CPI senior management meetings to closely link the reference group with the service. Two-way feedback is so important for productive service user involvement.

As well as representing the CPI service, I started to get involved in other areas too. For example, I have sat on interview panels to interview candidates for different roles across BMH and attended various project groups. All of this involvement rapidly increased my skill set and improved my confidence. My most memorable involvement has been co-delivering training around discharging people from the Crisis Service. This training is now being rolled out across the Assessment and Recovery Service.

Around mid-2015 I was approached by a member of staff to see if I would like to apply to join the BMH Service User and Carer Council (SUCC) as a representative for Community Mental Health

Services. This was a huge step forward for me as I was not only representing the reference group's voice, but those of service users across four services. I also got involved in service user representation for the Women's Crisis House - a service that has helped me through incredibly tough times in the past.

Alongside service user involvement I have been working part time at Windmill Hill City Farm, a small charity which is part of the BMH system. The farm supports people in the community who may have mental health issues, learning disabilities or addiction issues. Although I love this work and still do it today, I was at a point in early 2016 where I wanted to start looking for more permanent work. As mental health has been such a huge part of my adult life it made sense for me to look for support roles in this area. After a few interviews, that were certainly informed by my interview panel experience, I managed to land myself a part time job with Second Step as a mental health crisis worker, working with the Crisis Service central team at Brookland Hall. I have no doubt that I wouldn't have been offered the position had it not been for my experience as a service user representative and the knowledge base I'd developed around BMH. So this is where I am now - seven months into my new job and thoroughly enjoying the new experience and challenges that go along with it.

I can honestly say that service user involvement empowered me to learn so many new skills and increase my self-confidence. There is no doubt that BMH values service user and carer input and I would like BMH to be an example of how co-production, when done well, can improve services, not only for service users but for staff as well. I hope involvement for other service users can be as life changing for them as it has been for me.