

An Equality and Diversity Strategy for AdvoCard Draft for Consultation

Introduction

Throughout the fourteen years that AdvoCard has been established, our project has sought to provide advocacy in a welcoming way to a wide representation of mental health service users in Edinburgh. To do this, we have relied upon a varied workforce of volunteers and staff who have come forward to carry out our work.

At this point in our development, we assume that legal responsibilities for equality and diversity issues of public authorities (such as councils and health boards) will continue to increase and filter down to us. We also assume that the population of Edinburgh will continue to grow and diversify in response to developments within the European Union and with increased global mobility. We are clear that there is a need to step up and structure our equalities work and we are committed to that process through implementing our first Equality and Diversity Strategy.

AdvoCard continually strives to uphold its legal responsibilities for equal opportunities in employment and in the promotion of equality and diversity throughout our service. We assert our commitment to eliminate prejudice and discrimination from our work and to challenge it in others.

Our very existence is based on a deep concern for equality for all people who use mental health services. The right of access to independent advocacy enshrined in the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 ensures that in the provision of an advocacy service “vulnerable people are heard and that social inclusion is promoted.” (Code of Practice vol.1, p. 106)

Likewise, our mission statement underlines the position that through our service we are aiming for a “community in which each individual’s needs are met and where people have greater influence over the services they use.”

To do this fairly and equitably we are committed to:

- Improve our service to reach as many people as possible with the resources we have available
- review and amend our policies and practices regularly in the interest of all people living in Edinburgh.

The resources of our project are directed towards only one section of people with mental health issues in Edinburgh, those people living in the community. We are committed to continue to work in partnership with other members of the Edinburgh Mental Health Network to provide independent advocacy to all, as and when it is needed in Edinburgh.

We want to continue to deliver as flexible and appropriate a response as is possible to the service users who approach our project for advocacy. At the same time we will also direct our efforts to reach out towards those people in Edinburgh who are not yet using our advocacy service but who could benefit from it.

Strategic Direction

One of the main directions of AdvoCard for the next three years will be to implement this initial Equality and Diversity Strategy. We will be strengthening our general approach to providing independent advocacy for all mental health service users living in the community in Edinburgh by:

- setting up the infrastructure for thorough monitoring of our equality and diversity strategy and then planning and progressing the service based on the results of our monitoring
- training staff and volunteers in the use of the new systems and monitoring the effectiveness of that training
- increasing the diversity of the organisation and taking steps to develop the provision of service to under-represented communities and individuals.

In this way, we are laying the foundations for the ongoing improvement of our service in line with our ideals.

AdvoCard is moving in this direction in a time of financial constraint. We are committed to using the resources given through our Service Level Agreement (contract) with City of Edinburgh Council to ensure that our equality and diversity strategy continuously influences and improves our advocacy service. To further our work on equality and diversity, we may attempt to seek additional sources of funding. Whether we are successful with additional funding or not, we pledge that our equality and diversity strategy will have prominent influence on the advocacy work we carry out.

Aims and Objectives

1. Monitor information about equality and diversity:

- by devising a system that enables gathering of information about service users, paid workers, volunteers and committee members regarding the part of Edinburgh they live in and the six equalities strands (i.e. age, disability, gender, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation)
- to establish a baseline for comparison with research on Edinburgh's population
- to facilitate ongoing assessment of AdvoCard's performance in relation to equality and diversity (six-monthly reporting)

2. Training to support implementation of the strategy:

- by offering training to AdvoCard staff (e.g. ways of linking to equalities groups; cultural competency; development days)
- by designing and delivering training tailored to encourage interest and involvement within groups who are under-represented in AdvoCard (especially for volunteers, so that they are sufficiently aware to be able to provide advocacy; and for management committee members, so that they can carry out their legal duties as employers)

3. Implement and develop the strategy:

- by exploring opportunities to research equalities issues (e.g. securing funding through business sponsorship and educational trusts to finance a worker to carry out this work; collaborating with university research; employing interviewers to provide independent feedback and evaluation on equality and diversity)
- by identifying three paid workers to take responsibility for groups focussed on equalities strands as well as reaching isolated parts of Edinburgh, with the Project Manager holding overall responsibility for coordination and overseeing equalities work
- by ensuring equality and diversity information is acted upon by all of AdvoCard (e.g. working group to meet at least six-monthly to review progress and amend policy and procedures; feedback to staff meetings monthly and management committee at least six-monthly)

4. Increase diversity:

- by establishing meaningful contact with a diverse range of organisations offering services to equalities groups by holding and attending meetings and open days where groups are invited to exchange information with AdvoCard (e.g. clarifying ways of working with service users; how to improve accessibility; promoting the diversity of staff in the organisation; awareness of mental health issues; participating in health fairs and community events like the Mela, encouraging AdvoCard representatives from equalities groups to contribute to stalls; linking with people who are recognised within an equalities strand as being able to draw others from that community to our work; liaising with mental health user groups to get the views of their members)
- by adapting our working environment, so that AdvoCard's premises are more accessible (e.g. physical accessibility; office welcoming to all groups; flexible use of office and other appropriate work environments)
- by increasing the accessibility of materials publicising AdvoCard's services (e.g. using recommended font sizes and easy layouts; increasing diversity of website images; having basic information translated into several community languages and making these available to add to leaflets and the website, with a view to engaging with service users with the help of interpreters)
- by extending recruitment (e.g. approaching equalities groups for volunteers and committee members; extending the range of places for recruitment advertising; using other organisations' mailing lists)

5. Work more proactively with groups who are currently under-represented:

- by identifying the extent to which groups are represented within AdvoCard, through monitoring information and allocating greater resources to address least visible equalities groups, while also working on maintaining existing diversity (e.g. worker responsible for race equality might target more efforts towards recently arrived east European groups of users, as they are less represented than those from BME communities that have been longer established)