

“Right, Said Fred”

By Peter Bates

Introduction

“As soon as I moved into my new house, I wanted to paint something, to put my signature on the walls, to make it my own”. Most of us feel a bit like this, and we like to stake our claim on a house, take some ownership, get a sense of power over our space. When we can't do this we are guests in someone else's property, obliged forever to mind our language and keep our shoes off the furniture. Lots of mental health projects believe in empowering users and they believe that the people who live in the hostel, attend the day centre or work in the employment project have a right to a stake in the place. But who picks up the paintbrush and who drills holes in the walls for new shelving? Finding a path through the rolls of wallpaper, the regulations and the responsibilities leads to empowerment - it is one of the keys to power.

When the piano needs shifting or we have to take the wall out, who rolls up their sleeves and sets to work? Are contractors appointed, do staff come to work in their jeans, or are service users involved? When one employment project moved to new premises, staff and users spent weeks talking about the best decor for each room. Lots of meetings took place and pattern books and colour swatches were studied endlessly. The aim was more than a new wash of emulsion - it was all about personal expression and creativity, mediated through negotiation and consideration for others. The fact that a decision was made by users and then, quickly, the outcome was visible on the walls, was immediate visual evidence that users were being listened to, that their opinions mattered. In this example the users decided what would look best, and then painters came in with their equipment.

Choosing wallpaper and paint provided a small amount of user involvement and ownership of the space. The next step involves actually rolling your sleeves up and working on the building. This is where the complexities begin! Participants at another workscheme are expected to be busy with their own duties, rather than becoming involved in building maintenance. They argue that an office worker on the High Street would not be expected to start painting, and the same argument could well be presented in places where an active therapeutic agenda is being followed. Why should people suspend their attendance at an anxiety management session, for example, in order to push furniture about? But it does happen in some places where the project is so poorly funded that fundraising for survival eclipses the intended purpose. Obtaining help in coping with life's difficulties is forgotten as the group focus on planning for the jumble sale.

In contrast to these reasons for keeping away from the building maintenance, some people want to be involved, and enjoy the sense of teamwork and achievement that is gained from creating a new colour scheme or simply tidying up a neglected space. This may be especially the case for people who live in hostels or in someone else's home, where they have few opportunities for letting out the interior decorator that is hidden inside them.

Despite appearances, practical work around a project may be a scarce and precious commodity. For example, the agency that runs the project might employ staff to maintain the building and grounds. If they hold on to this work, rather than hand it on to service users, then those staff retain their jobs, which might be at risk otherwise. On a more subtle note, trades staff may have an investment in keeping do-it-yourself out, in order to keep standards up, impress powerful visitors, or retain their monopoly on repairs and maintenance tasks.

If this precious commodity is invested in service users instead, then there is the potential for an increased sense of ownership and loyalty to the project, and the chance for users to acquire skills in a safe environment. This latter point is especially important for people who have been denied opportunities to develop home maintenance skills by well-meaning carers. As we watch projects take up the opportunities for users to improve their building space, practice their skills, and perhaps gain National Vocational Qualifications through this experience, so we watch the seesaw tip again into risk. National Qualifications may be very helpful, especially if independent assessors can visit the site and formally recognise the competencies that have been demonstrated in the emotional safety of the project, but users are not in the business of providing cheap labour.

So how might a workscheme or a day facility make progress? Possible action includes:

- everyone in the project to discuss the different kinds of work that is carried out on site and sort it out into 'membership jobs', that everyone does, and 'extra jobs' that carry extra responsibilities and privileges. For example, washing up the tea cups might be a membership job that everyone would be expected to help with, while driving the project vehicle would require very specific approval.
- a meeting with the people who have traditionally been responsible for managing the building to agree which tasks can be undertaken and which are forbidden. Just as a landlord or the Planning Department of the local authority forbids certain building alterations, there are limits to the range of things which the project might attempt. The outcome of this meeting might include the loss of cherished priorities for some people, as the pristine

magnolia is hidden behind layers of acrylic paint.

- negotiation with the local representatives of trades councils to obtain union support for the process.
- discussions with the Benefits Agency and other employment projects to find ways of making payment to individuals who carry out 'extra jobs'. Once payment methods have been identified, there might then be discussions with everyone involved in the project to find out if payments would create an unpopular elite, and whether people would want the project to spend money in this way.
- provision of proper equipment, well defined work practices, accredited training in health and safety, and qualified supervision for people who carry out the practical tasks.
- The whole activity to be underpinned by sufficient insurance, as discussed in a previous *Keys to Power* column.

Since the days when our forebears used natural dyes to turn their cave walls into an art gallery, humankind has aspired to interior decoration. Let's use this *Key to Power* to unlock both creativity and a sense of ownership of the spaces we occupy.