

# ***Fingers in the Till***

By Peter Bates

Keys to Power is a regular column which looks at practical ways of handing power back to the true owners - people who use services. It is worth noting that, whilst users have often asked for the keys that unlock opportunities in their own lives, service providers have focused on offering the keys to services. People ask for a decent place to live, but professionals offer them a chance to redecorate the day centre. People ask for a decent income, but professionals invite them to join interview panels where they decide on someone else's income. Because of these realities it is vital to keep a sense of due humility about the process of user involvement in day services - it is not a substitute for love, a pleasant home or money in your pocket. But it is something, and it is about justice, so we must continue the search for ways of sharing the keyholding. This issue looks at cash handling.

## **Fingers in the Till**

Every time that service users get involved in real responsibility and power, they are placed in a position of trust, and never more so than when it comes to managing the budget. As soon as it is suggested that users might order stock, receive payments, cash up, take money to the bank, and keep accounts, anxieties rise to the surface and knee-jerk reactions are common. Whilst cash handling properly demands tight controls to protect all participants, it is at heart an administrative matter of finding the best path between paternalism and naivety, just as with every other key to power. Let's break the problem up into some manageable units and see what solutions can be found to meet the auditor's criteria of accountability, honesty and openness.

**Handling petty cash** is a well established user activity in a number of workschemes for people with mental health problems. For example, at *St James' House*, users operate the cash till, and collect and deliver both cash and cheques to the bank. If a group of users own the money, elect cash handlers and operate under the common financial practice of involving a second person as a witness of transactions, there appear to be few problems. I have never heard of any difficulties with arrangements of this kind, so if you have, please let me know.

**Ordering stock** involves a range of communication and negotiation skills, as well as substantial responsibility. *Glencraft Rehabilitation Workshop* involve users as supervisors and some have access to the petty cash float to buy

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materials. They also communicate with companies and order stock by following the in-house policies.

**Signing cheques** is another powerful statement of ownership. In Nottingham, *SPAN* clients operate in workcrews and each crew opens its own bank or building society account. Users are elected by the group to be signatories for the account. Similarly, a number of users at *Many Hands* are cheque signatories. The usual scenario is delightfully reversed at *Corby Workbridge*, where the support staff may sign cheques but have a lower financial ceiling than the Chair and Vice Chair, one or both of whom will be service users. If the project is set within a large agency, rather than established as an independent enterprise, then there will be fewer opportunities to sign cheques, but correspondingly more stock requisitions. Does anyone know of a project where users are authorised to sign these order forms?

**Keeping records** can be complex and anxious work if the layout of accounts is obscure. However, when each account is given a clear title, record sheets are laid out in a standard and straightforward fashion, and extraneous data and abstract ratios and indicators are kept to a minimum, then the maximum number of people can learn how to read and understand the records.

Participation in decision-making over financial matters offers all the usual opportunities for tokenism. Giving users control of an 'entertainments' budget or allowing users to manage the cash generated by their holiday fundraising endeavours is a start, but is not the same as sharing every decision about every penny of every budget in the project. There is an exact parallel here (to recall issue one and the column on staff selection) with involving users in the recruitment panel for the user advocate, but for no other appointments in the agency. Instead of gripping onto the safe key as if it was a protective talisman, project staff could sit down with users and some colleagues from the finance and audit departments to devise a financial system that involves users and demonstrates accountability, probity and openness. Why not?

Peter Bates