

The Front Door Key

In the last edition this column was introduced. Keys were suggested as an image of power in organisations, power which is being handed over to service users in some organisations. The problem is often as simple as innovation fatigue. It takes such a lot of effort to create a safe system in which, for example, users participate in staff selection (last edition's topic), that a project which achieves this has sometimes run out of energy to take the next step. This is why this column is needed. The aim is to exchange ideas about projects which have made progress in handing over a key, so that others can borrow and adapt without expending too much energy. Over time, and as practice develops, and ideas are exchanged, each area will need to be updated and improved.

The topic for this edition is....

The Front Door Key

Some buildings, such as day centres, can be found from time to time to be occupied by users whilst they are unattended by staff. A common response to this is fear combined with explanations about poor staffing levels or the very brief absence of workers. Only staff are authorised to hold the front door key, users do not know how to work the burglar alarm, and insurance companies are quoted as prohibiting unstaffed building occupation.

But just how real are these anxieties? For example, staff may be anxious that keys will be taken away and then abused by people who have left the project. Discharged users may return to the building and behave dishonestly, dangerously or maliciously. As well as questioning the underlying image of users embodied by these fears, a simple solution may be to install an electronic keypad instead of a mechanical key. That way, the code may be changed from time to time as occasion requires.

Three years ago, Corby Workbridge operated with a Council of Management, which had a voting majority of users. The Council authorised selected users to serve as keyholders, and they could enter the building out of hours. If they did so, they were obliged to report it to a member of the Council at the next convenient opportunity. The responsibility for keyholding was separated from supervision, which was undertaken by another person. Similarly, Islington MIND trained their users in the use of fire and intruder alarms, a practice which was covered by their buildings insurance.

In Nottingham a small step has been taken towards handing over the front door key. A day centre has been let on a Thursday evening to a local community group. In setting up that agreement, a dozen or more arrangements have been set in place to cover accidental damage, fuel costs, failure to close windows (triggering the burglar alarm and calling out the engineer) and so on. These are very real issues for a project which has not shared its premises before and it also provides a useful step on the way to user

empowerment. Once the system for sharing the building with an independent group is established, it is a fairly small step for a user group to constitute itself as a local community group and make its own evening booking.

These matters are very simple and obvious to projects where users are already holding the front door key, but the cultural impact should not be under-estimated. Power relationships subtly change; funding bodies begin to actively trust user groups and a sense of ownership of the project is strengthened. Anyone who has gone next door to watered the houseplants when the neighbours are on holiday knows that the front door key is a powerful statement of trust.

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