Making it Real
Birmingham City Council’s story

The scene was set for Birmingham City Council to be an ideal candidate to pilot Making it Real a year ago when it established a Service User-led Quality Board to look at quality assurance in services. Made up of 12 service users and carers, the board’s initial piece of work was to look at minimum standards for first assessments, including whether the social worker arrived on time, treated clients respectfully during the assessment, and informed them what would happen next.

As a result, social workers now leave a questionnaire with clients at the end of the assessment which gives them the opportunity to express whether they were satisfied with the service they received.

“This gives people a voice,” says Melanie Gray, Performance Management Officer in the council’s Adults and Communities Directorate. “It is a way of directly capturing from users and carers how good they think the quality of that interaction has been. It costs nothing to treat people with dignity and respect, to not use jargon, and listen to what they want.”

And that links perfectly with the ethos of Making it Real (MiR). So, when staff from Think Local Act Personal were invited to attend a Service User-led Quality Board meeting in February 2012, it is no surprise that the board voted to sign the council up as a MiR pilot site.

Pat Thomas, co-Chair of the board, says: “It is important to work with the council to make services more effective and highlight good or bad practice. The only people who can say how it feels at the sharp end are those who use the service. We don’t want professionals deciding things that affect our lives, we want to be part of the decision-making process and Making it Real is a good way of being able to do that.”

The other co-Chair, Janis Deakin, agrees: “I want to be involved in making decisions, rather than being told what I’m having and Making it Real gives us that chance. Social care was very tokenistic when I became disabled in the 1980s. Over the years that barrier has been broken down. Now, I hope, we are part of a group that has a qualification – and that is knowing and understanding what disability is and what the needs are.”

The following month the proposal was approved by the Directorate Management Team and the Cabinet Member for Adults and Communities. By May they were firmly ensconced in the project, running MiR workshops to decide on the three top priorities the council would focus on and working on the accompanying action plans.
“We decided to run the workshops as awaydays rather than shoehorning them into normal business days so that everyone had the space to think about ideas,” explains Melanie. To include as many different perspectives as possible, awaydays involved the Service User-led Quality Board, staff from the citizen engagement and performance management teams, as well as health staff and commissioning staff.

When it came to choosing three priorities from the 26 ‘I’ statements they decided it would help to theme the day and so a topical Olympics one was chosen, hanging large pieces of paper on the wall with lanes, a starting block and a finishing line to work out where they were with each one:

- Still in the dressing room? – Not really done anything.
- On the starting blocks? – Thinking about what we might do.
- Started but not got very far? – Started but still a long way to go.
- Halfway there? – Going well, but still quite a lot to do.
- Nearly there? – Lots of work has been done and starting to see improvements.
- Crossed the finishing line? – Citizens, service users and carers say it is a good service with good outcomes.

“We broke each statement down into terms that people understood so they could relate their experiences. We ended up with a roomful of Post-it notes! Then we did a shortlist of the ‘I’ statements that everyone thought we were fairly near the beginning with and voted for three,” says Melanie.

The Olympics theme was a winner with the board, says Janis. “It was so important to get that presentation right so that everybody understood Making it Real. Using the Olympics theme was fantastic because it made the process so easy.”

The priorities they chose were:

- Information and advice: “I have access to easy-to-understand information about care and support which is consistent, accurate, accessible and up to date.”
- Active and supportive communities: “I have access to a range of support that helps me to live the life I want and remain a contributing member of my community.”
- Workforce – my support staff: “I have access to a pool of people, advice on how to employ them and the opportunity to get advice from my peers.”

“These are quite big statements, so the challenge now is to make it meaningful to the people we are working with,” adds Melanie.

More workshops to determine the action plans for each priority followed. “This time instead of an Olympics theme, we viewed it as a journey. So we discussed what we would need to do and who we would need to involve, to get from where we are now to where we want to be.

“We made a list and tried not to get hung up on thinking ‘that would be great but we can’t do it because of …’ Instead, rather than think about the negatives we encouraged people to
think about what the best support and opportunities would look like.”

The action plans are not yet complete, says Melanie: “The timescale has been fairly tight but we are trying to have a balance between keeping the momentum going and also respecting that the Service User-led Quality Board members are volunteers in this work and have caring commitments and lives of their own.

“One of our challenges is that we are a very large organisation so it may take us slightly longer than a smaller organisation to achieve change and that will depend on how effective we are at co-producing things.”

However, Melanie found that becoming a pilot site itself wasn’t difficult: “It was easy to register and make our declaration. We were very pleased to see that there was an easy-read guide which we used with board members with learning disabilities.”

For Birmingham, the decision to sign up to Making it Real made perfect sense: “There is more emphasis now on the qualitative feedback from service users and carers stemming from the Department of Health’s adult social care outcomes framework and the personalisation agenda,” says Melanie. “This is why we liked the emphasis on co-production in Making it Real, because it means you need all the stakeholders round the table and the group is challenged with trying to achieve change. It underpins the outcomes framework and also complements our own directorate business plan. All the goals for Making it Real and involving real people is what our directorate is driving at, so they have a common thread to enable people to be independent and have choice and control.”

There is plenty of enthusiasm for MiR at the council and the aim is to keep action plans practical and manageable, so that “we aim high but have realistic steps so we can see how we are getting on”.

Pat says: “I will be more than happy if we get one of the priorities right in six months’ time. It is a way forward and we have to think of it as a learning curve. I would like to think that I can influence the future as to how care is given and that we treat people with dignity and respect no matter what the disability.”

The vision for Making it Real, adds Janis, is for future generations of service users to have a better and more equal service with more choice and to “knock down red tape and bring in more flexibility”.

Both are happy with the three chosen priorities and feel that the board has been very involved in proceedings and that its input has been valued.

As Melanie (pictured below) says, “We all agree that we don’t want it to be a paper exercise, we want real change.”

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