

ASeTTS and United Voices Reference Document

Background

In 2001 ASeTTS established a client advisory group, which was later renamed 'United Voices (UV)'. The group was born out of the recognition that ASeTTS needed to listen to the voices of their clients in order to improve their services. UV was modelled on similar groups within the mental health sector. Since its establishment, the membership and strength of UV has varied.

The *ASeTTS and United Voices Reference Document* is designed as a resource for ASeTTS staff. It explains, clarifies and recognises the membership, role and importance of UV for ASeTTS staff. This reference document is written from ASeTTS' perspective. UV has their own Terms of Reference (TORs) that outlines the role and governance of the group. UV alone has the authority to alter their TORs. This reference document should be read in conjunction with UV's TORs, which are saved in the same folder.

Also included is a framework for engagement between ASeTTS and UV to help guide ASeTTS staff. It is hoped that this framework will lead to an increase in the engagement and influence of UV in the life of ASeTTS.

Membership of United Voices

UV comprises up to 12 members. To be eligible for membership, an individual must have experienced ASeTTS' services personally, through a family member or their community. Membership is voluntary and members are not paid but are provided with a small allowance to cover travel expenses. Individuals volunteer to fill vacancies on UV as they arise. UV meets once per month for 1.5 hours. A representative from UV sits on the ASeTTS Board and has full voting rights.

Role of United Voices

UV plays an important and unique role within the life of ASeTTS. As a client advisory group, UV's primary role is to provide independent advice on ASeTTS' services from a client's perspective. UV provides advice to ASeTTS retrospectively, on past services, and prospectively, on potential services. The relationship between ASeTTS and UV is intended to be a partnership based on mutual respect and trust.

At times UV has been understood to be a client reference group and/or a client advisory group. ASeTTS prefers to understand UV to be a client advisory group. This role elevates the importance of the group to that of advisors, rather than just a point of reference for ASeTTS to liaise with clients.

UV is operationally internal within ASeTTS but the group maintains an independent voice. ASeTTS provides UV with secretarial, financial and material support to execute their role. As such UV is operationally part of ASeTTS however UV is not 'managed' by ASeTTS staff and does not 'report' to ASeTTS. To fulfil their function it is vital that UV members have an independent voice and feel safe to express their views without retribution.

UV members are not elected and therefore do not represent all ASeTTS clients. They provide *a* client perspective rather than *the* client perspective. This is because ASeTTS recognises the diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, situations and needs of the clients and communities it

serves. It would therefore be challenging and unfair to burden individuals with the weight of speaking for all ASeTTS clients or the communities from which they come. ASeTTS also receives client input from numerous other sources.

Importance of United Voices

It is widely recognised as good practice for mental health providers to have client reference groups or client advisory groups. A thriving UV plays an important and unique role in improving ASeTTS services and contributing to the practise of ASeTTS' values in the following ways:

Client Focus - UV's effective and continual input into ASeTTS' services and operations ensures ASeTTS remains client focused.

Inclusion - UV enables a client voice and perspective to be consistently heard and included within ASeTTS' decision making processes and at the board level.

Respect - the status of UV within ASeTTS and a UV representative on the board demonstrates the respect ASeTTS has for its clients and their opinions, skills and experience.

Accountability - UV plays an important role in ensuring ASeTTS is accountable to our clients. A UV representative on the ASeTTS Board ensures that there is client accountability at the highest level of organisational governance.

ASeTTS must make sure that these values are lived through implementation and discourse. ASeTTS has a responsibility to educate UV members about ASeTTS' values and promote their practice. As part of ASeTTS, UV also has a responsibility to practise ASeTTS' values.

Uniqueness

While ASeTTS seeks and receives client feedback through many avenues, UV is unique within the agency and therefore plays an important role in the life of ASeTTS.

First, in addition to providing retrospective advice, UV provides input into and advice on proposed activities that is not heard through ASeTTS other feedback mechanisms. Through other client feedback mechanisms, clients are asked to comment on their experiences and provide any suggestions for program improvement or additional activities. UV fulfils these functions but is unique because UV can provide additional advice at the design stage of potential programs, activities, policies, strategies and procedures. In doing so, UV provides advice both at the organisational level and the program/service level.

Second, while other client feedback mechanisms may be one off or program specific, UV is a permanent, long standing, official group that is incorporated into ASeTTS' structure. As a result, ASeTTS can incorporate UV into long term planning and rely on group input when appropriate. Feedback from UV also triangulates feedback sourced through other avenues to ensure quality evaluation.

Third, in addition to providing a client perspective, UV provides advice without the pressures, bias and limitation that often overshadow decision making processes, such as funding and staffing pressures. UV is therefore able to challenge and curb commonly held assumptions about what is and what is not possible and necessary.

Fourth, the UV representative on ASeTTS' Board is the only direct vehicle for a client's perspective at the organisation's highest level of governance. The UV representative has full voting rights and therefore elevates the power of clients within the organisational structure.

Fifth, UV is a formal means through which members can and should feel empowered to raise issues they have heard from their own networks that relate to ASeTTS. ASeTTS is less likely to receive this information from clients directly. UV members can also help identify whether these issues either relate to a small number of clients or are widespread concerns.

Framework for engagement between ASeTTS and United Voices

ASeTTS has developed a framework through which staff can understand and shape their engagement with UV. Implementation of this framework is to be addressed in the *United Voices Engagement Strategy*.

The Three iii's – Input, Involvement and Investment

Input

UV's input into the life of ASeTTS - its services, policies, strategies and procedures - is central to fulfilling its desired role as a client advisory group. 'Input' may incorporate advice, feedback or suggestions. UV input provides a client perspective and a culturally sensitive perspective that is important for improving ASeTTS services. UV input should be encouraged however ASeTTS staff and management should be conscious not to overburden UV members.

Processes to develop major organisational documents such as strategies, relevant submissions and position papers should incorporate UV input and advice at the earliest appropriate time. UV should be informed of the limitations to their input such as funding, staffing and time restrictions from the outset. Sufficient time should also be given to UV to review, consider and provide input.

UV can also input where a culturally sensitive client perspective would be beneficial for the design or review of an ASeTTS service. ASeTTS' staff should inform their manager if they would like to request UV's input. Managers will then compile these requests. UV will then be made aware of all the opportunities for input, their limitations and ASeTTS' priorities. UV has the right to choose which opportunities they would like to have input into but needs to be proactive in their selection. To be truly independent, UV also has the right to suggest opportunities for their input as they see fit. If UV members become aware of issues relating to ASeTTS, such as complaints, ASeTTS expects them to raise these at UV meetings. UV members should be supported and empowered to do so.

All UV input should be articulated, documented and considered by ASeTTS management. To ensure UV is listened to, if their advice is not acted on, an explanation of why not should be provided to UV.

ASeTTS' input into UV is limited. The ASeTTS Community Development Coordinator provides secretariat support for UV. However, UV has the right to hold a meeting without any ASeTTS staff present. Limited ASeTTS input into UV ensures their independence and freedom from bias.

Involvement

UV's involvement in ASeTTS activities enables them to more fully understand ASeTTS and its services. UV members can also add great value to ASeTTS events and programs. UV members have a richness of cultural and linguistic knowledge and experience that can add to ASeTTS'

knowledge and work with clients. UV involvement in ASeTTS' activities should be encouraged and opportunities should be made available when possible. These opportunities should be voluntary for UV members as they have busy lives with many work, social and family commitments. In principle, where ASeTTS would like UV involvement, UV members should have their expenses reimbursed. However this will be reviewed on a case by case basis.

ASeTTS has limited involvement in UV activities. However, it is important for ASeTTS to have a good understanding of who UV are and what they do. All staff should visit a UV meeting as part of their induction, preferably in small groups so as not to impose too much on UV meetings. Apart from this, ASeTTS staff attend UV meetings only when necessary to present ideas or documents. However, it is beneficial to have ASeTTS senior management attend UV meetings occasionally. By doing so, ASeTTS will affirm the importance of UV.

Investment

While it is recognised that UV members bring a wealth of skills and experience to the group, some members may have limited experience in advisory groups. ASeTTS should therefore invest in cultivating an engaged and informed UV. ASeTTS invests in the learning, development and mentoring of UV members and provides access to opportunities such as ASeTTS training. Furthermore, ASeTTS invests in increasing UV's knowledge of the organisation, its purpose and activities. Such investments benefit both UV members and ASeTTS. UV members benefit from increased knowledge and skills while ASeTTS benefits from their improved input into the life of ASeTTS. However, it is important to remember that UV members are volunteering their time and attendance should not be mandatory.

UV members are also investing their time and energy into ASeTTS. Reasons for this investment are individual to each member however it is important for ASeTTS to acknowledge and respect their investment.