

The Clubhouse Newsletter: Its Importance and Purpose

by Tom Steeples

The newsletter is the public face of a clubhouse. It is a regular, quantifiable, concrete entity that shows members, colleagues, politicians, funders and friends of the clubhouse all that is going on. Just as the other clubhouse functions meet the varying needs of the clubhouse community--food services the nutritional needs, member services the benefits and advocacy issues, TEP the working and financial needs of members--the newsletter addresses our and our colleagues' information needs.

The clubhouse model is relatively new in the UK, the very first clubhouse having started here only five years ago. One of our main aims, therefore, was to inform and educate. As one of our founding members said many months ago, "There is a clubhouse express train that is gathering momentum in South London." We have had the important mission of keeping our members and funders abreast of what we were doing. As all clubhouse functions develop out of a need, so did our newsletter. As the newsletter was the first major function we embraced as a new clubhouse community, the birth of our newsletter was also the birth of our work ordered day.

The significance of the newsletter can be clearly seen by the way it galvanizes the whole house when it is time for printing. Everyone takes a part in its production: the army of typists, the cut and pasters, the printers, the collators, staplers, folders, and address-label-sticker-downers. The result is a very real, very meaningful piece of work, which has been described as the most competent clubhouse newsletter many colleagues and supporters have seen.

Our newsletter has several regular articles that are designed to be informative, letting the membership know what has happened or is going to happen. The "diary" gives a day-by-day breakdown of appointments, meetings, and visitors for that particular week. All clubhouses have a host of regular meetings. We have found that constant exposure in the newsletter has inspired greater interest in many of these meetings, and that participation has consequently increased. The newsletter intrigues colleagues, politicians, and funders, who are then keen to find out more about what we do.

Each week one particular standard is looked at in detail, with a brief discussion about what it means and how it is implemented. Though initially written by a partnership of members and staff, the discussion about standards is now increasingly the mantle of a couple of members who have gained the confidence to write articles. They have also



Clubhouse International

Creating Community: Changing the World of Mental Health

now gained a strong sense of ownership of their clubhouse, and a belief in the clubhouse standards.

Minutes of all clubhouse meetings are given, including the house meeting, the policy meeting and the finance meeting. This ensures that even those unable to attend all the meetings can follow developments, and be aware of what is happening, and why and when. We also regularly review external meetings and presentations in which any of us has been involved, with those from the clubhouse who have participated in these events writing the articles. Whenever someone from the house meets with our auspice agency, or goes on a TEP development visit, for example, an article is written about it. Prior to coming to this conference, all four delegates from Mosaic Clubhouse were invited to share their expectations of the trip with the clubhouse through newsletter articles.

Because a clubhouse is such a vibrant community, and events seem to happen with such startling rapidity, frequent publication is necessary, be it daily or weekly. We need to let our communities know about us and what we do. At Mosaic Clubhouse we have a weekly newsletter, though when we eventually move to our own space there will be a serious need for a daily bulletin.

As with all clubhouse work, we need to show the general world at large that individuals with long term mental health problems are quite capable of producing quality products, and that we do not compromise the standards that we set ourselves. The proof reading, spell checking, and laying out of the newsletter, therefore, are all extremely important. The newsletter is the face of the clubhouse, and as such needs to be error free, regular, and interesting. Our work should be as professionally done as any other form of newsletter.

Initially, members and staff worked in partnership in writing articles. As time has progressed, though, a greater number of members are submitting articles as sole authors. Gaining self-confidence and experience has helped a lot. One of the many effects of a long term mental health problem is that self-esteem and confidence can hit rock bottom. By working in partnership within the clubhouse, though, members' self-images begin to blossom, and this is reflected in an increased interest in what goes into the newsletter. The strong partnerships within the clubhouse provide encouragement for self-expression and greater input into all activities within the house, including the newsletter.

Mosaic Clubhouse News has a distribution of over 320 per week. We post our newsletter to nine countries on four continents, to our active and absent members, funders and potential funders, colleagues in the UK and abroad, TEP employers and friends of the clubhouse. The decision to send out our newsletter to so many varied people and locations was taken to ensure that the profile of our house was high and that



Clubhouse International

Creating Community: Changing the World of Mental Health

we effectively networked with other organisations and interested parties. TEP is a new concept in the UK; a programme with internationally recognised standards is new for many; and the idea of members and staff working in partnership is also new. It has been important for us to clearly explain and present who we are, and the most effective way we have found to this has been through the clubhouse newsletter.

The very frequency with which we publish, the increasing length of the newsletter, and the ever expanding distribution list, has led to a few challenges-- not least that of cost. Paper printing and posting all cost money, and we only have a finite amount in the budget for this. But we didn't want to dilute or shorten what we were producing. We brainstormed to find a solution, and we came up with one: advertising. What better way to defray the cost than receiving sponsorship? We approached several local firms, TEP employers and Board members to ask for support, and the result has been brilliant! We have three regular advertisers now, which are European Business News (a TEP employer), Greenhill Jenner (an architectural firm with links with our Board), and a local printer. We will also receive an ad from a group of solicitors who are helping us in our drive to charitable status. I am certain that we would never have been able to obtain these commitments from these companies if we hadn't been producing a newsletter of substance and quality.

Unfortunately, we are currently in the position of having to have a waiting list of potential members, as we are in temporary space awaiting the renovation of our building. The newsletter allows us to maintain contact with these waiting members, as well as telling them about the clubhouse and its work and opportunities.

Networking within the clubhouse community is also important. Our newsletter goes to all the UK clubhouses as well as others in the international community. When we have connected with people from places where there is not yet a clubhouse, we also send them the newsletter. We already have these kinds of contacts in places as widespread as Ireland, Austria and Turkey. We believe that as members of the worldwide community of clubhouses, it is our responsibility to promote the model, ensuring its acceptance within the world of mental health services as a valid alternative to other more proscribed and medically modeled services. The newsletter works on so many different levels, meeting the needs of the local clubhouse community as well as those of the wider world of mental health.

The newsletter is also a medium that enables and empowers members to address issues and topics pertinent to them, and in a manner in which they can experience true ownership. Before we started our newsletter, there had been no real vehicle of expression for people with long term mental health problems who live in our area. Surely it is impudent and disrespectful to dilute their comments and articles with jokes and quizzes. To maintain a high quality paper, we strenuously avoid interspersing



Clubhouse International

Creating Community: Changing the World of Mental Health

articles with banalities. Surely, these would only dilute the impact of our newsletter, and compromise how others perceive us. For these reasons we clearly maintain the `news' content of our newsletter, and publish a bi-annual literary magazine for other works.

As the newsletter evolves we have discovered that all challenges can be met, from equipment needs to costs. Mosaic Clubhouse News started on a typewriter and a twelve year old photocopier (called Betsy). Now we use a computer and printing machine; the next stage for our ever developing newsletter will be the Internet. The only limit to its development is that of inertia.

Janette Winterson, an author, said once that stagnation and lack of ideas equals death. The clubhouse thrives on motivation, creativity, unwavering commitment, and discovering and developing members' skills. The newsletter thrives on these same principles. We are excited and eager to watch as the Mosaic Clubhouse News continues to evolve and grow and change.

Tom Steeples is on the staff of Mosaic Clubhouse in London, England.