Dear Colleague,

**Service Users and Public Involvement**

You may be aware of some changes that the Department made with effect from 26 October 2009 with regard to those people who are consulted, or otherwise involved, by public bodies (including local authorities) over the way that those bodies design and deliver their services. The purpose of the involvement being to draw on the experiences of the individuals who use the services in question in order to improve them, and in particular, to make them more responsive to local needs. We have now defined this group of people in our regulations as ‘service users’.

We have changed the rules as far as service users are concerned in two particular respects.

Firstly, anyone who is paid for their service user involvement and then receives expenses on top of that, such as travel, accommodation or costs of personal assistants/carers to support them, will now have those expenses completely disregarded for benefit purposes.

Secondly, service users are no longer subject to the operation of our notional income rules. Previously if individuals were offered payment for involvement but decided instead to work unpaid or accept a lower amount (because the offered amount was higher than they are allowed without affecting benefits), they were treated as if they had accepted the full payment. The changes have removed this rule.

It is important to note these changes will only apply in situations where the service user consultation or involvement is taking place either because of a legal requirement or a legal enactment.

We believe that the new rules will be simple for both our customers and staff to understand and apply. However, to ensure that these improvements to the rules
operate effectively it would be helpful if you could consider standard use of the term 'service user' when you or your clients contact the Department. This will reduce the scope for any misunderstanding as to which activities customers are reporting and avoid the need in most cases for additional clarification.

We realise that the type and level of public involvement across the piece can be varied and we believe that the use of this standard term will facilitate the way that the new policy operates. This would also correspond to the way this aspect of public involvement is defined in our regulations and commonly referred to in external publications.

These improvements complement the rules already in place for any service user who volunteers to give feedback on their experiences of using a particular service and who is invited to suggest ideas for change and innovation or respond to a consultation. Their expenses can already be completely disregarded for benefit purposes.

Thank you for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Frank Spiers