Engaging with involuntary service users in social work

Key themes from the research

User engagement is currently a growing trend in public service policy, and social work is no exception to this. In Scotland, Changing Lives (Scottish Executive, 2006) states that social work services should be ‘personalised’ to meet the needs of service users, and that service users should “influence the design and planning of services and how they are delivered” (p.15). The idea of service user engagement may seem attractive. Taken at face value, it offers a way to make services more effective by tailoring them to the needs of service users. However, looking at the issue more closely, some challenges are apparent. This briefing presents an overview of research looking at engagement with involuntary service users of social work. It has been written by researchers in Social Work and the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at the University of Edinburgh.

Key points

- User engagement for involuntary service users raises a number of issues, including the political, economic and historical context of social work, and assumptions about service users’ ability and interest in engaging
- There are different models of user engagement. It may be useful for social workers to clarify their own position on user engagement, and their reasons for wanting to practice it
- User engagement needs to be balanced with social work authority and control
- Effective user engagement requires relationships between workers and clients in which trust and respect have been developed over the long term
- Communication, information and explanation are crucial for user engagement to succeed
- Involuntary service users may need support and encouragement to engage

Potential issues in user engagement

- The political, economic and historical contexts of social work are complex. User engagement is yet another policy initiative which places demands on a workforce which is already stretched to the limits of its capacity. How does involving users fit into the practical reality of local authority social work in 21st Century Scotland?
- The idea of user involvement implies a ‘user’ who is able to articulate clearly what he or she wants. It also assumes that users are willing to “be active partners in finding and developing solutions to problems” (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.15). This may not be the case with involuntary clients. What happens to user engagement when the user doesn’t want to engage?
- User engagement is not necessarily a new idea. Listening to what users have to say could be seen as a return to the traditional social work practice of building good relationships with clients (Beresford and Croft, 2001). Social workers may feel that creating and sustaining basic good relationships is often challenged and hindered by rapidly changing policies.
Most of what the research suggests as best practice in user engagement might be considered common sense, and may well already be practised by social workers. Yet even where this is the case, having an evidence base can be useful, if only to confirm, reinforce and extend the experiential knowledge of practitioners.

**What is user engagement?**

In social work, engagement with service users can be seen at two levels. First, there is the engagement of the social worker with the client in the business of carrying out social work. Second, there is a more consultative or participative understanding of engagement as the process of eliciting the views of users about what they want from social services, with the aim of listening to and responding to these views.

This second consultative sense of user engagement is the primary focus of this review, whilst recognising that, in practice, it is likely that both forms of engagement will be inter-related.

**Different models**

User engagement is not neutral. It can be seen in the context of wider social, political and economic trends. There are different ways of understanding and justifying user engagement. For example, we can contrast:

- **Consumerist models**, which construct social work users as consumers or customers of services within a capitalist market. Changing Lives says that “[a]s demanding consumers of goods and service, users of public services will increasingly expect the same variety, choice and flexibility that they expect from the business sector.” (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.20). This is problematic when applied to involuntary service users, whose ‘choices’ about accessing social work may be extremely constrained.

- **Rights-based models**, in which user engagement is seen a way of ensuring social justice by empowering people to make their voices heard. This model has been promoted primarily by service user groups campaigning for change (Postle and Beresford, 2007).

User engagement may also be framed using different terms: user involvement, stakeholder consultation, participation and so on, each of which has its own connotations and conceptual ‘baggage’. The very notions of users and clients are problematic, constructing recipients of social work in ways which may not reflect their experiences of these services (McLaughlin, 2009). Ironically, for some client groups, the term ‘user’ is understood to mean someone who uses illegal drugs (Cowden and Singh, 2007). This highlights the disparity between policies on user engagement and the everyday realities of the lives of social work clients.

User engagement is often criticised for being tokenistic and a ‘tick-box’ exercise. Many authors argue that, in practice, user engagement is often poorly executed, limited in its scope, dominated by a minority of articulate service users and driven by the desire of service managers to be seen to be consulting people, rather than by any genuine commitment to organisational change.

All of this suggests that it may be useful for social workers to clarify their own position on user engagement, in terms of their reasons for wanting to practice it (or not) and their view of what it involves (and what it does not). Being clear about this at the outset may help to avoid misunderstandings.

**Balancing user engagement with authority and control**

Changing Lives recognises that, in addition to engaging with users, “Social workers also have a role as agents of social control...they have statutory powers to act to protect individuals or communities” (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.27).

However, the research highlights that:

- **Choices can be offered to involuntary clients**, even if these choices are limited. Once a client has accepted that social work contact of some kind is unavoidable, he or she may be able to express views about what that contact should involve. Listening and responding to these views can help to build a good relationship with the client.

- **It is important for social workers to be clear, honest and upfront about what elements of the service the clients are being offered choice about, and also what elements are not negotiable.**

The research suggests that in some circumstances, giving users a degree of control over decisions will be highly effective, whereas in other situations it will be necessary for social workers to take control. This does not mean disregarding the wishes of users, but it may mean acting against them: “there is a point in social work practice whereby the social worker is expected to act on their own professional assessment of the situation, informed by agency policy, legal mandates and research, irrespective of what the service user’s choices or views are” (McLaughlin, 2009, p.1109).

**Developing long-term relationships between workers and clients**

User engagement cannot be expected to happen immediately, or be introduced suddenly at a late stage in a social work relationship. It requires relationships in which trust and respect have been developed between workers and clients. Changing
Lives emphasises the centrality of these relationships to effective social working, but leaves many unanswered questions about how relationship building is to be supported.

Cooper et al (2003) argue that developing trust takes time, and requires continuity: “Families cannot decide how far they can trust the social services if they see a different worker every time” (p.32). Changing Lives emphasises the importance for service users of “a reliable, consistent relationship with a single worker whom they trust” (Scottish Executive, 2006, p.37), but does not explain how this is to be achieved. In practice, the high staff turnover in many social work departments presents a significant challenge to continuity.

The research suggests that it is important to initiate user engagement in the early stages of social work relationships. This can be achieved by taking a collaborative approach to the client’s problem: working with their definition of the problem, developing modest, achievable goals which are the client’s rather than the worker’s, and identifying strategies with the client to achieve these goals (Trotter, 1999).

Cooper et al. (2003) go even further to suggest that user engagement can be improved by services shifting towards preventative working. They argue that trust and respect will be easier to build if relationships are begun on a voluntary basis. If services only act when crises occur, involuntary imposition is then more likely, and this presents an immediate obstacle to developing trust. Preventative working is another recurring theme in Changing Lives, but clearly it has resource implications which are not easily resolved in the current economic climate.

Developing trusting, respectful relationships with involuntary clients is likely to be extremely challenging. Research suggests that where trust and respect have not developed for whatever reasons, user engagement may require independent advocacy or mediation services. This moves away from blaming someone for shortcomings in the relationship (either the client or the social worker or both), focusing instead on pro-active solutions.

**Communication, information and explanation**

Research repeatedly highlights the importance of social workers explaining clearly to clients what they are going to do and why at every stage of social work intervention. This is all the more important when actions are planned which go against the expressed wishes of clients, and about which clients may feel angry and resentful. In such situations, trust and respect are unlikely to develop without honest, clear communication on the part of the social worker.

Such communication may be challenging, however, particularly with clients who are hostile to social work involvement. Forrester et al (2008) highlight the importance of social workers remaining empathic when raising difficult issues with such clients. They suggest that counselling skills training may be helpful in dealing with such situations.

Communication is also important in more formalised user engagement activities. MacLaughlin et al. (2004) point out that to participate in any kind of consultation effectively, a service user “has to have some sense of what consultation is, some idea of who is consulting with you, why they are doing this, what is in it for them and what is in it for you” (p.162).

Research suggests that it is particularly important to be clear about the limits of user engagement, explaining what users are being offered control over, but also what they are not, ensuring that their expectations are realistic. It may be helpful to inform users about other forums for engagement. For example, if a user wants to affect national policies, social workers in local authorities are unlikely to be able to help with this directly, but could put the client in contact with a relevant national organisation (Hodge, 2005).

For the process of user engagement to work in the long-term, users also need to be provided with the results of consultation processes, and given an opportunity to monitor ensuing changes, commenting on the impacts (MacLaughlin et al., 2004).

**Support and encouragement to engage**

Unsurprisingly, research suggest that clients are likely to feel better able to contribute to decision-making processes if they have been prepared, informed and are supported through the process. For example, studies show that children can be enabled to take part in case conferences, but that this requires: preparation before meetings by social workers or advocates who are positive about the contribution that children can make; support during the conference, skilful chairing and a respectful attitude amongst conference members; and an opportunity immediately afterwards for children to discuss their feelings and the decisions made (Schofield and Thoburn, 1996).

Several researchers suggest that social workers may be able to support user engagement by acting as advocates, or by helping service users to access independent advocacy (Postle and Beresford, 2007) or mediation services (Cooper et al., 2003). Support is particularly crucial where clients have something negative or difficult to express, and an independent advocate can be useful in such situations, particularly where the client is hostile towards social workers. User engagement also benefits from users being given a choice about the means and the extent of their participation in decision-making.
References


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The review is not intended to be exhaustive, and it does not explore the differences between working with particular groups (e.g. children, parents, people with disabilities). These are addressed in a more comprehensive review available to download from the project website: www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/esla