

# **Engaging with Involuntary Service Users in Social Work**

## **Literature Review 1: Context and overview**

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This literature review has been produced as part of a research project on engagement with involuntary service users in local authority social work. It examines the historical, political and policy contexts of user engagement in Scottish social work. It then looks at different models of user engagement which underpin current policy and practice, and suggests some general principles for user engagement in social work. See [www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/esla](http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/esla) for further information about the project.

## Summary

- The impetus to involve users and carers more centrally in the development of social work services owes much to pressure from service users themselves, beginning with the disabled people's movement and the mental health survivors' movement. These movements have forced public, private and voluntary sector services to address user perspectives over the last 30 years or so.
- Service user engagement is not entirely user driven, but is also politically charged. The current popularity of service user engagement owes much to the New Labour agenda of public sector reform and modernisation.
- There are different strands of user engagement, which can best be understood in historical and political context. For example, in consumerist discourses, service users are seen as customers who exercise choice in accessing services, whereas in rights-based discourses, service users are seen as exercising their democratic rights by agitating for the services they want. It may be helpful for practitioners to tease out what assumptions might underlie particular models of user engagement.
- Some key principles for achieving user engagement in practice include:
  - building trusting long term relationships with clients
  - clear, honest, open communication, including: clarity about professionals' roles; clarity about what clients are being offered a choice in and what they are not; explanation of why and how views are being sought and the likely outcomes of this; and feedback about the outcomes.
  - offering support to help service users to express their views, including via independent advocates where appropriate

## **1. Introduction**

When considering social work with involuntary clients, engagement can be understood in different ways. At the most basic level, there is the engagement of the social worker with the client in the business of carrying out social work. Achieving this kind of ‘operational’ engagement is essential to being able to work with the client at all. Trotter’s (1999) text, for example, is primarily concerned with helping social workers to identify how to achieve this kind of engagement effectively.

There are also forms of engagement which in some way elicit the views of users about what they want from social services, with the aim of listening to and responding to these views. This participative engagement, often referred to as ‘service user involvement’ or ‘user participation’, is the primary focus of this review. In practice, it is likely that both forms of engagement will be intertwined. Effective operational engagement will be a necessary precursor to participative engagement. Asking involuntary clients what they want from social work is unlikely to be effective unless good working relationships are in place. Likewise, a degree of participative engagement is likely to be essential for effective operational engagement. Good working relationships with involuntary clients are likely to include taking some account of their views, beliefs and wishes. Hernandez et al. (2010) argue that user involvement is best integrated into everyday social care practices, rather than added on as something separate.

In order to understand the participative notion of engagement with service users, and its current popularity, it may help to examine its place in the history of social work.

## **2. The historical context**

“User involvement has turned out to be more difficult than was imagined, with many attempts regarded as tokenistic or ill thought out. Nevertheless, government has recognised that the involvement of users and community members is an essential component of the future of governance and service provision in the 21st century.” (Cooper et al, 2003, p.43-44)

While engagement between social workers and service users is presented in current policy discourse (Scottish Executive, 2006) to be self evidently ‘a good thing’, the reality of what this might actually mean is rather more complex and is bound up with changing and contested understandings of the role of the social worker (see Asquith et al, 2006; Cree and Davis, 2007). Historically, this has always been the case. Since its inception in the Victorian city, social work has operated in the contentious borderland between public and private life. This positioning exposes tensions between compulsory and voluntary interventions, between care and control functions and between paternalism and empowerment. Such tensions rarely exist as simple binaries; voluntary and statutory help, for instance, could both be equally controlling and in some ways equally punitive. Charitable works were not always motivated by straightforward altruism but could also derive from self-interest or moralism (Cree and Myers, 2008). The very messiness and ambiguity of social work makes it almost inevitable that questions of user involvement have turned out, as the quote above suggests, to be more difficult than imagined.

A brief consideration of social work history shows that concern for building relationships and sharing knowledge and skills was at the heart of the practice of the early social workers’ mission, whether working as ‘friendly visitors’, housing visitors or settlement workers. It was understood that social work could not be imposed on people without there being some kind of relationship at the core. The early social workers expressed this as coming as ‘a friend’, even when, as must be acknowledged, this ‘friendship’ was blatantly unequal and the relationship decidedly paternalistic (Payne, 2005, Cree and Myers 2008).

With the growth of Fabian ideas towards the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, social work began to take on more of a social edge (Ferguson, 2008). By and large, though, the profession’s emerging identity over the course of the 20th Century was built upon a casework paradigm, modelled on the medical professions. Such approaches cast the social worker primarily in an ‘expert’ role within their relationships with clients. Nevertheless, within Biestek’s (1961) classic exposition of the casework relationship there was an explicit recognition of client self-determination. In that sense listening to clients and taking into account their own preferences and motivations is hardly new.

What is often regarded as the high point in Scottish social work came in the years following the publication of the 1964 Kilbrandon Report (HMSO, 1964). Produced during the period of post WW2 welfare consensus, Kilbrandon reflected a prevailing spirit of optimism, the belief that social problems could be eliminated or at least substantially ameliorated through welfare interventions. Kilbrandon proposed interventions which were primarily educational or social educational, reflecting faith in an ideal of education 'in its widest sense' as a medium for social change. However, Kilbrandon's proposals for social education departments were overtaken by an emerging social work lobby, arguing that aspirations for cradle to grave welfare services could not be accommodated within education services and required the creation of new stand-alone social work departments. These ideas were set out in the White Paper Social Work and the Community (1966), which in turn led to the enactment of the 1968, Social Work (Scotland) Act. This saw the emergence of state sponsored and generically organised social work departments.

The 1968 Act was a progressive piece of legislation in its own right, placing a duty upon social workers to promote social welfare. The years following the 1968 Act also saw the rekindling of more radical ideas (Ferguson, 2008). These questioned the role of social workers as agents of the state and sought to link a structural analysis of clients' problems to an ethical imperative to challenge these. In this vision, the relationship between social worker and client was conceived of more as an alliance rather than an expert-client one. Alongside this radical social work strand ran another thread of community social work, which, again, involved a shift away from individual provision towards a community development focus.

The influence of radical and community social work initiatives were short-lived. The emergence of New Right social and economic ideologies over the course of the late 70s and 80s drew the social work role sharply back towards a focus on individuals. Once again, the primary focus was one of 'policing' the poor and dangerous classes to protect the public, rather than providing a welfare service to social work clients (Barry, 2000). A nod in the direction of a more emancipatory legacy persisted through the 1990s through expectations imposed by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) that social workers practise in an anti-

discriminatory way. This, in reality, generally got stuck at a declaratory level and rarely achieved any structural change (Wilson and Beresford, 2000).

With the election of the New Labour government in 1997, 'modernisation' became the watchword for social work and the public services more generally. Central to the modernisation agenda was a conception of 'governance'. This was argued to be concerned with efficient, accountable public services, partnership across and between different agencies and professionals, and between professionals and users of public services. The governance agenda also claimed, as a key policy objective, to represent the voices of users and carers over professionals. It has heralded an era of 'hands-on' government, evident in a proliferation of new laws, especially around issues of protection and vulnerability. These developments have led to more legally circumscribed ways of engaging between social workers and clients.

These trends bring us to the present day situation, in which the dominant terminology has shifted away from the use of 'client' towards that of 'service user'. This is indicative of a movement away from more paternalistic, professional-as-expert models. Instead, the recipients of social work are increasingly seen as 'customers', exercising choice in accessing public services, whilst service providers are increasingly required to be responsive to the requirements of service users. This understanding of reform and modernisation is not confined to social work but can be seen throughout the public sector. It is particularly problematic in social work, where service recipients often do not fit easily into the consumer choice model. This is most obviously the case particularly where social services are provided involuntarily.

### **3. Understanding user engagement**

“Choice is a highly politicised notion. In particular, in the discourse of health and social care in the UK, choice is a way of generating effective competition, of stimulating variety, an expression of consumer rights, the fragmentation into two tier (and more) provision, and [is] only really meaningful to those with purchasing power. However, the idea of choice needs to be reclaimed, because the ability to make choices and have these

acted upon is central to positive social working.” (Doel and Best, 2008, p.37)

As the quote from Doel and Best suggests, user engagement is anything but neutral; it is best understood in the context of wider political and economic trends. There are different discourses of user engagement which may overlap but are not necessarily compatible. It may be helpful to distinguish between:

- Consumerist discourses, which construct social work users as consumers or customers of services within a capitalist market (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2006). This is particularly problematic in the context of work with involuntary service users, who may have no choice about whether or not they receive social work services.
- Managerialist or technical-rational discourses, which construct user engagement as a means of modernising and improving services, making them more effective and efficient at performing their allotted function. In the words of Simmons and Birchall (2005) “[p]articipation is...claimed to have practical value for the performance of key public services by shaping better-informed decisions and ensuring that limited resources are used to meet service users’ priorities” (p.261). Related to this are discourses which use the notion of user involvement to attack public sector professionals, questioning their perceived power and calling them to greater accountability.
- Neo-liberal governmental discourses, which construct user engagement as a way of ensuring that individuals feel listened to, believe that their views are being taken or board, and are therefore more amenable to government policies. Cooper et al (2003) argue that “user participation gives an initiative validity with its intended recipients, many of whom are suspicious of government and its attempts at social engineering.” (p.43) Similarly, Simmons and Birchall (2005) suggest that “[w]here participation is successful in improving communication and building trust, it is claimed to help reduce conflict and discord, and smooth the process of policy implementation...it has been argued that participatory initiatives play a role in legitimizing a public sector in which trust in government is low.” (p.261-262)

- Discourses of rights, citizenship and participation which construct user engagement as a way of ensuring social justice by empowering people to make their voices heard. These discourses have been mobilised primarily by service user groups from various constituencies (e.g. disabled people, mental health service users) campaigning for change through activities such as self-organisation, direct action, demonstrating and lobbying (Beresford, 2000; Beresford and Croft, 2001; Hodge, 2005; Postle and Beresford, 2007). Beresford and Croft (2001) claim that “While the consumerist involvement offered by managerialist related approaches to social work and social services has led to very little if any, transfer of power and decision making, the same is not true of service user movements and organisations....These movements have been associated with major changes in legislation, policy, culture, theory and provision” (p.62) The terms of such discourses have in some instances been taken up by governments, in which context they often become mixed with neo-liberal, technical-rational and consumerist discourses, leading to inconsistencies and contradictions (ibid., p.64).

As the Beresford and Croft quote suggests, consumerist, managerialist and neo-liberal approaches to user involvement are often criticised by those who subscribe to the rights-based model. User involvement that is instigated from the ‘top down’, by social work professionals rather than by service users themselves, is often seen as bureaucratic and tokenistic: “we need to adopt a critical stance...to ensure service user involvement remains honest and does not degenerate into a tick-box exercise.” (McLaughlin, 2009)

User engagement may also be framed using different terms: user involvement, stakeholder consultation, participation and so on, each of which has its own history, connotations and conceptual ‘baggage’. Indeed, 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 (Cree and Davis, 2007; McLaughlin, 2009).

User engagement is especially problematic in the context of work with involuntary clients. Such clients, if consulted about their views, might well express the wish that social workers leave them alone. However, participation is never absolute.



Realistically, in any participative context, there will be some elements over which participants are able to exercise power, and some elements over which they are not. Beresford and Croft (2001) note the potential conflict between social control and participation, but also emphasise that the actual practice of participation may be more consonant with traditional social work skills of listening and relationship building:

“participation is likely...to raise fundamental questions about the maintenance of social work’s social control role and its continuing involvement in the restriction of people’s civil and human rights...Conceiving of social work...as a joint and collaborative activity between service users and workers, rather than as a narrowly constructed solitary expert practice, would in some significant ways represent a departure from the status quo, but it would also embrace values and skills which have traditionally reflected all that is best in social work practice.”  
(Beresford and Croft, 2001, p.309)

#### **4. Putting user engagement into practice**

Beresford and Croft (2001) report on a national debate from 1998 involving service users and social workers. They summarise what participants in the debate thought should be the priorities for social work. Their work did not focus on involuntary clients, but is useful as a starting point for thinking about how to promote user involvement, as many of the priorities relate to this theme. They included: social models based on civil and human rights; the concept of support not care; recognition of different perspectives and balances of power, for example between social workers and service users; recognition of individual differences rather than essentialising categorizations of service users (e.g. disabled, black, etc); the belief that everyone is capable of expressing their views and preferences; a conception of social work as an activity which fosters collective action as well as providing individualised support; providing support early rather than allowing situations to deteriorate before support is provided.

Likewise, McLaughlin et al (2004) do not focus on involuntary clients specifically, but their comments on some of the most basic issues in consultation with service users

are worth noting. They point out that, to participate in consultation, a client “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) They note that “Those wishing to consult must first know the community they wish to consult and what they wish to consult about. This may seem obvious...but such an approach is not always evident.” (ibid.) They go on to emphasise the importance of taking full account of the communication needs of those to be consulted. They also suggest that, if consultation is to be empowering, those who are consulted need to be provided with the results of the consultation process, and given an opportunity to monitor ensuing changes, providing critique and comment on impacts. The central theme here is the importance of ongoing communication and dialogue over the long term. The importance of participation as a long term process is emphasised again in McLaughlin et al. (2007).

Trotter (1999) reviews research on working with involuntary clients, rather than participative engagement with them. Nevertheless, his findings are relevant in this context. He takes an implicitly positivistic stance, basing his recommendations on research evidence, which he argues suggests three key principles for effective social work with involuntary clients:

- Clarifying roles: explaining clearly to the client the purpose of intervention, the social worker’s dual role as helper and social controller, and discussing issues such as the use of authority and confidentiality.
- Reinforcing and modelling ‘pro-social’ values: through actions such as support and care for others, and interactions which are based in values of fairness and equality, and as such are free of behaviours considered anti-social, such as sexism, racism and violence. This involves praising and rewarding behaviours considered pro-social and challenging behaviours considered anti-social.
- Collaborative problem solving: involving working with the client’s 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.

Each of these principles is arguably applicable to participative engagement with involuntary clients. Clarifying roles is likely to be useful in order to make it clear to the client which areas of activity they have some control over and choice in (the helping role), and which areas they do not (the social control role). The actions required for participative engagement, such as asking clients about their wishes and views, listening to their answers and discussing their concerns, are examples of pro-social modelling. Finally, collaborative problem solving is inherently participative, involving dialogue and opportunities for the client to express his or her wishes about what the goals should be.

Trotter lists a range of approaches for which there is some evidence of effectiveness in certain contexts. These include workers' using empathy, humour, optimism, self-disclosure; careful case planning and management; and working with families. He also reviews approaches which, according to the research, do not work. These include:

- Approaches based on blame, judgment and punishment.
- Interventions which focus on the relationship alone without including problem-solving or pro-social dimensions.
- Interventions based on workers' goals rather than client or collaboratively agreed roles.
- Uncertainty of either clients or workers about the purpose of interventions and the role of the social worker.
- Negative attitudes, such as a pessimistic view of the client's capacity to change, a focus on what clients are doing wrong and reluctance to reward positive behaviours
- Focus on viewing the client as an individual rather than in the wider social and familial context

Doel and Best (2008) present stories of social work users' positive experiences. Though their work does not focus specifically on involuntary service users, some of their findings are of relevance here. In particular, they note that effective social work entails a fluid, dynamic use of power and control. In some circumstances, ceding control over decisions to users can be highly effective, whereas in other situations it

may be necessary for social workers to take control. This does not mean disregarding the wishes of users, but it may mean acting against them:

“a naïve interpretation of control is that it is good for service users and bad for social workers and that ‘empowerment’ is somehow the complete relinquishment of power by social workers to service users. We hope that this stark and two-dimensional view of control has disappeared, not least because social workers have powers which they cannot disown, and service users know this.” (Doel and Best, 2008, p.36)

Similarly, McLaughlin (2009) argues that the term ‘service user’ is problematic, since “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.” (p.1109) Yet Doel and Best (2008) argue that offering users choice is not necessarily meaningless where social work involvement is involuntary. They insist that even those who would not choose to have contact with social workers are able to express views about what they would like that contact to involve, once they have accepted that contact of some kind is unavoidable.

Hernandez et al. (2010) carried out research to develop a practice model of how everyday participation can be achieved with ‘seldom heard’ users of social work services. Their research looked at good practice in work with people with dementia, people with communication impairments, homeless young people with drug addition problems, and black and minority ethnic young people. Based on their findings, they argue that for participation to take place with these groups, the necessary practical conditions are:

- Staff sensitivity to users’ circumstances and access needs, including allowing the space and time for users to work at their own pace, and staff working to ensure everyday communication with users
- Organisational support for the inclusion of seldom heard users, including practical support (e.g. food, travel money), advocacy and in some cases financial rewards for users giving their time to express their views

- Staff response to feedback, including criticisms. This could include forums, complaints boxes, making time for regular informal conversations, and also creative techniques such as drama. Having a clear, pro-active policy on complaints and how these are to be dealt with by staff also appeared to encourage user participation.

Within the culture of the organisations, factors which facilitated everyday participation were:

- Service users feeling valued
- Service users having the confidence to get involved, and to discuss their views and criticise services
- Belief that participation is central to responsive policy and practice
- A climate in which everyone expects, promotes and supports participation

A number of authors suggest that social workers may be able to support user engagement by acting as advocates, or by helping service users to access advocacy. Postle and Beresford (2007) review work in this area, arguing that advocacy does not necessarily involve conflicts of interest, and emphasising that where these exist, “the social worker’s role is to try to protect the service users interests” (p.154). However, Healy and Darlington (2009) suggest that the legal powers held by statutory social workers may inspire mistrust amongst service users, thereby undermining user involvement. In such cases, voluntary sector services may be better placed to carry out participatory work with social work clients.

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