

# Common aims: a strategy to support service user involvement in social work education



SCIE's aim is to improve the experience of people who use social care services, by developing and promoting knowledge about good practice in social care. We pull together knowledge from diverse sources through working with a broad range of people and organisations. We share this knowledge freely, supporting those working in social care and empowering service users.

# Common aims: a strategy to support service user involvement in social work education

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## 1 What this paper is about

In this paper we propose a strategy to support the participation of service users and carers in social work education. We focus on how service user and carer organisations could take the lead in building their capacity for involvement in the undergraduate and postgraduate social work degree. We outline the successes in the first two years of the degree. We then identify the barriers to successful partnership working and suggest some ways forward.

We base our recommendations mainly on service users' thoughts, experiences and ideas about how to strengthen participation. In common with all the stakeholders in social work, we want to ensure that from the very start of their careers social workers fully understand the standards of practice that service users and carers expect and the outcomes they value.

The Department of Health commissioned the project and asked us to focus on participation in the undergraduate and postgraduate social work degree. However, the new framework for post-qualifying social work training requires systematic service user and carer involvement in all aspects of its programmes. All the issues raised in this paper are relevant to the broader area of training social workers throughout their careers. Therefore, our proposed strategy may be of interest to the wide range of organisations and individuals involved in social work education.

We invite feedback on the strategy from all the stakeholders in social work education.

## 2 Key messages

In social work education, more than in any other area, there are common aims between the individuals providing services, the teaching staff, the service users and students. We should use these common aims to develop the courses together.

*Service user at a consultation event*

1. Service users are very positive about the reforms in social work education. They go to considerable lengths to participate. They highly value their organisations' involvement in the undergraduate and postgraduate social work degree. They want to take on all the roles assigned to them in the national requirements for social work training.
2. The extent of involvement on the degree programmes varies. To date, service users have been most involved in selecting students and teaching sessions. They want to play a bigger part in programme management, developing course content, providing practice learning opportunities, assessing students and evaluating outcomes.
3. Service users' experiences at the universities also vary. They want to share their experiences and promote consistent policies and processes that are based on the principles of good practice in participation.
4. Service users identify common barriers to effective involvement:
  - I. Academics do not value service users' knowledge highly enough.
  - II. The culture in universities needs to change.
  - III. Access requirements are not fully met.
  - IV. Service user organisations lack capacity and infrastructure to involve service users fully.
  - V. There is a lack of training and support for service user trainers and their organisations.
  - VI. Payment policies, practices and the benefits system discourage involvement. Service users experience difficulties in securing proper payment for their contributions to training social workers. The benefits system can be inflexible and inconsistent in the way it operates, discouraging the participation of service users who are receiving benefits.

5. Service users have many ideas about the ways forward. Their ideas cover what the universities, service user and carer organisations and government could do to strengthen service user involvement in social work education. Above all, service users and their organisations want to work in constructive partnerships with all the stakeholders in social work education.

### 3 Recommendations

1. A national network of service user organisations in social work education should be developed:
  - The network would establish for the first time a national forum for service users in social work education. It would give service users a stronger voice in national, regional and local developments.
  - The network would provide opportunities to share experiences and develop the participation agenda. Members would be a resource for each other and for everyone else in the field.
2. The national grouping should give priority to engaging more diverse groups of service users and carers in qualifying training. This includes people from black and minority ethnic groups and smaller service user groups that are not widely and routinely included. Organisations with a track record in social work education would act as a resource for smaller, less experienced groups.
3. National user-controlled organisations should develop this initiative. They should take the lead in building their sector's capacity to train social workers. They need direct funding for this purpose. This funding should be separate from the funding that universities also need to sustain participation and meet the degree requirements. A national steering committee with strong regional inputs should be set up to develop the arrangements and work programme. The processes must be values-based, transparent and ensure accountability.
4. More training and support for service user trainers should be developed with service user organisations.
5. Government should address the benefits issues relating to public participation.

## 4 How the strategy was developed

Shaping our Lives led the development of this strategy with support from the Social Care Institute for Excellence. Shaping our Lives is an independent, national user-controlled organisation and network, working with a broad range of people who use health and care services.

First, we set up a service user reference group and a national reference group to identify the issues, debate them and agree a draft strategy. The national reference group members were from Shaping Our Lives, the General Social Care Council, the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee, the Practice Learning Taskforce, Skills for Care and the Social Care Institute for Excellence. The service users' group met in the morning and the other members joined them in the afternoon for three meetings. Members also did a lot of work between meetings to progress the strategy.

Second, Shaping Our Lives facilitated and organised five regional consultation days with service users who have an interest in and direct experience of involvement in social work education. We invited four regional service user-led organisations to use their own networks to identify service users for the consultations.

The events were held in the North East, North West, South West and West Midlands. 36 service users participated. All participants were paid and had their travel, expenses and support costs met. Participants were divided into groups made up of diverse service users in terms of the disabling barriers people experienced, the services they used and their age, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Each group discussed the same set of questions about how to improve social work education.

The participants had varying degrees of involvement with local universities and the social work degree. Their experience covered recruitment, design, direct training, service user forums, practice placements and student assessment.

Everybody involved in the consultation events was a service user, including the regional facilitators and report writers.

Shaping our Lives has prepared an overview report, *User Involvement In Social Work Education: Report of regional consultations with service users to develop a strategy to support the participation of service users in social work education* (Branfield, 2007). The report draws together the findings from the consultations and includes many quotations of service users' views. It notes the remarkable consistency and agreement across groups about ways to support effective participation and improve social work education. The findings from this report have greatly influenced our recommendations. It is published separately by Shaping Our Lives and should be read in conjunction with this paper.

## 5 Why we need a strategy

1. The work of national organisations shows that many universities and their service user and carer partners have made a good start at working together. But progress is patchy and uneven across England. If participation is to be sustained, it is essential that user-controlled organisations have the capacity and resources to make effective contributions. At present, universities mainly decide how participation is organised, leading to a lot of variation in who is involved, how, and at what level.
2. There is convergence of opinion about the benefits of involvement. University teachers, service providers, students, service users and carers are positive about it and want it to continue and expand.
3. Many service user and carer organisations are already involved and the demand is increasing. Over 70 universities are offering undergraduate and postgraduate qualifying training, with student intakes ranging from about 25 to 200 per year.
4. Many other public bodies want service user and carer involvement. Organisations willingly cooperate but find their full costs are rarely met.
5. Many national, regional and local organisations have roles in taking forward the participation agenda. It is a development exercise and involves a lot of people working together in new ways. An overall strategy could add value to everyone's contribution and make it easier to tackle common issues.

## 6 Summary of service users' views and recommendations

In this report we focus on service users' views of user involvement in social work education. Shaping Our Lives has written a full report (Branfield, 2007) on the findings from the regional consultations days, which is published separately. At the consultation days, service users considered the benefits of involvement in the degree, identified common barriers to effective involvement and suggested ways forward for universities, government and user-controlled organisations. As their recommendations are integral to the strategy, we summarise them here.

The service users who participated were from an extremely diverse range of people in terms of the services they used, the disabling barriers they experienced and their age, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. There is a remarkable degree of consistency and agreement in the comments from different service users and those from different parts of the country.

### **Service users highly value involvement in social work education**

- The benefits of this involvement are numerous. From day one, students can learn from experts by experience without any intermediaries. They can hear what it is like to be at the receiving end, have their assumptions challenged, learn to see people as people not just as problems and bridge the gap between theory and practice.
- Most people were pleased about the recent progress towards involvement. However, the process of involvement could be frustrating and changes were needed. Service users in social work education want more opportunities to exchange ideas, learn from each other and work together to improve practice.

### **Barriers to successful and meaningful involvement**

#### **Academics do not attach high enough value to service users' knowledge**

- Some people with experience of teaching social workers had been systematically involved and valued the structured arrangement. But more commonly, service users had been asked to contribute occasional sessions on disability awareness and discrimination, often at short notice.
- People felt that lecturers were not confident that service user trainers could teach their students. They seemed to rate knowledge from books more highly than knowledge from experts with experience.

### **The culture in universities needs to change**

- The culture in universities is not very conducive to new ways of working.
- When the university as a whole does not embrace a culture of service user involvement, participation and diversity, its staff may be slow to move from tick box, superficial involvement to active, meaningful involvement.
- University systems and structures are rigid and can prevent involvement.
- Some staff put up professional barriers. Their knowledge and approaches are not always up to date. They may restrict involvement to the service users they find least challenging.

### **Access requirements are not fully met**

- Service users' access requirements are all too often unmet. Access is understood only in terms of flat access for wheelchair users. Physical barriers such as heavy fire doors, entrance systems or inappropriate seating are not recognised as barriers. Much more work is required on accessibility, including alternative formats and ways of talking to each other. The practical, attitudinal and organisational barriers that service users experience on a daily basis are underestimated. Better access is fundamental to the promotion of participation.
- The disablist attitudes of some students and staff are a prohibitive barrier. Some students are disrespectful in service users' sessions.

### **Service user organisations lack capacity and infrastructure**

- Many service user organisations do not have the capacity or the infrastructure to be effectively and meaningfully involved in the social work degree, even though they want to take part. Some are very small and some do not know about all the opportunities for involvement in the degree. Most lack secure ongoing funding.
- The commonest barrier by far is that many service user organisations are led by funding rather than their own agenda and priorities.
- Service user organisations are fully stretched. Without adequate human resources and time, they cannot properly develop sound inputs for the degree.
- The time frames of service user organisations and social work courses, including student placements, may not fit neatly.

## **There is lack of training and support for service user trainers and their organisations**

- Training for service user trainers is a major area for expansion. Most people want training so that they can make the best possible contribution to students' learning experiences. They want opportunities for developing training and related skills so that they can be articulate and confident in their contact with staff and students. They also want training, resources and time to develop the content and quality of what they offer collectively.
- Some people want training and support to gain a recognised qualification and accreditation for their contributions. Others want to gain more experience or have opportunities for increasing their professional skills. Service user organisations want to develop and deliver training for themselves and others.
- Service users also need more preparation time, briefing, support and constructive feedback.

## **Payment policies, practices and the benefits system discourage involvement**

- Service users and their organisations often experience difficulties in securing payment for their contributions to social work education. Policies and procedures can be inflexible and are inconsistent across universities.
- Individuals and organisations should be properly paid for their time, knowledge and expertise, in accordance with the principles of good practice in participation. All expenses, support, access and travel costs should be met.
- Service user trainers should have easy access to sound advice and support about payment and benefits issues.
- The benefits system is the biggest barrier to involvement, including involvement in the social work degree. The system can be inflexible and inconsistent in the way it operates. This discourages people from accepting invitations to participate in training social workers because they are worried about negative effects on their benefits.
- Government should take responsibility for tackling the benefits issues so that the full range of service user groups can participate. More flexibility is required so that people can gain the experiences and skills to become employable.
- Universities must have money from the top to meet the costs of the involvement in the degree that government requires. They should also tap into all available funding.

## Service users' ideas on how to improve involvement in social work education

Service users showed a high degree of responsibility and commitment to the courses and students. They were positive about participating as equal partners in all aspects of the design and delivery of social work education. They also had clear ideas about what universities, government and service user organisations could do to increase the effectiveness of involvement, backing them up with specific, practical suggestions.

### What universities could do

1. Address issues of equality.
2. Address issues of access, in its widest definition.
3. Develop stronger links with their local community.
4. Employ more service users on their staff.
5. Enrol more service user students.
6. Train staff and service users.

### What government could do

1. Allocate secure funding to service user organisations.
2. Review welfare benefits in relation to service user involvement.
3. Close all segregated schools.
4. Enforce positive representation of service users in the media.
5. Promote social work and social workers in a more positive light.

### What service user organisations could do

1. Network more widely with other service user organisations and publicise themselves better.
2. Develop their own training, support and mentoring for service user trainers.
3. Coordinate service user involvement and training in social work education through a national user-controlled organisation.

## 7 Conclusions

The national reference group and the participants at the consultation events independently arrived at similar conclusions about ways to build the capacity for effective involvement for service users and carers in social work education.

The national reference group also discussed how to take forward the strategy if money becomes available for this purpose. We outlined their recommendations at the beginning of this paper and return to them in this conclusion.

1. User-controlled organisations should take the lead in developing their capacity to participate as equal partners in social work education. Other approaches give them less control and choice. They need direct funding for this purpose. They recognise that universities and practice placement providers also face capacity issues and need resources to sustain participation and meet the degree requirements.
2. A national network of service users in social work education should be set up. The national grouping would give service users more equal standing with other stakeholders in social work training. The aim of the network would be to share experiences and promote good practice. Its methods might include setting up a website, running events and providing advice for people and organisations new to training social workers.
3. Priority should be given to engaging more diverse groups of service users from different backgrounds in the social work degree. Well-established organisations would link up with and act as a resource for smaller groups that want to participate.
4. The initiative to build the capacity should be:
  - led by a national user-controlled organisation with a remit to secure input from each region
  - based on a clear set of values and principles
  - clear about its purposes
  - based on clear arrangements for the allocation of funding
  - open and fair in its processes
  - accountable to well-established organisations.

Finally, in all the capacity-building activities, we must keep a sharp focus on the main purpose of involving service users and carers. This is to ensure that the new generation of social workers understands the outcomes from social care that people want and the standards of practice they expect, and that social workers are skilled and confident in working with service users and carers towards achieving them.

## Other publications available from SCIE

### **Resource guide 2: Involving service users and carers in social work education**

By Enid Levin

This resource guide focuses on how service users, carers and providers of social work education and training can work together on the social work degree. The guide is for all those involved in the degree – from programme heads to administrators – but is especially aimed at those responsible for educating and training social workers.

### **Position paper 05: Working together: Carer participation in England, Wales and Northern Ireland**

By Alan Roulstone, Val Hudson, Jeremy Kearney and Ailsa Martin, with Jon Warren  
The position paper is intended to help social services providers to work better with carers to develop social care services. The paper aims to identify what is happening in the social care sector with the involvement of carers and the impact participation has had on service improvement.

### **Report 8: Contributing on equal terms: service user involvement and the benefits system**

By Michael Turner and Peter Beresford

The report is intended for (and was requested by) the Government, but will also be interesting for service users who take part in involvement and service providers who work with service users. This report seeks to uncover the difficulties and fears people experience in being paid for their contribution to services and those of the organisations who pay them. By revealing the issues and seeking to have them addressed, it will help in laying the foundations for proper and principled user involvement.

For further information on any of these publications please refer to  
[www.scie.org.uk/publications/index.asp](http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/index.asp)

## Common aims: a strategy to support service user involvement in social work education

SCIE is committed to, and has a strong belief in, good practice being founded in good training and education.

This paper outlines a project commissioned by the Department of Health. Focusing on how service user and care organisations can develop their involvement in the undergraduate and post graduate social work degree and drawing on successes of the first two years. The paper then goes on to identify existing barriers to successful partnership and possible ways forward.

This publication is available in an alternative format upon request.

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