

# CHiP practitioner article

## Service user involvement in homelessness

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# Shelter

## Service user involvement in homelessness

*'The objectives of increasing homeless people's control and extending their choices, and achieving the effective participation of people affected by homelessness in the development of future policy, practice and service delivery should be widely promoted and given practical effect in all activities directed at tackling homelessness'*

Absolutely! Who could possibly disagree with this statement from the Homelessness Task Force? Let's be honest, who would dare? We are now arguably in a place in homelessness, social care, health care and housing generally where 'Service User Involvement' is something that everybody would agree is important. How good is that?! But what does it all really mean?

I am the Coordinator for a new team working in Glasgow Homelessness Network to promote Service User Involvement. Glasgow Homelessness Network (<http://www.gcsh.org.uk/homepage.html>) is the umbrella body for voluntary sector organisations operating in the homelessness field. The specific impetus for the team has in part been to ensure that homeless people are involved in the process of service reconfiguration while the recommendations of the Glasgow Street Homelessness Review Team are implemented. This report particularly recommended the closure of the large city council run hostels for homeless people.

This article is aimed mostly at planners, project managers or operational staff who are initiating Service User Involvement. There are some good examples in Scotland of service user led initiatives, but I am keen to consider the implications of the Task Force statement for workers in particular, as it gives a clear message to people responsible for planning and working in homelessness in Scotland.

Our experience in the seven months since the team has been in place has confirmed many of the things I have always thought about Service User Involvement – it can be invigorating, exciting, surprising, humbling, fun and inspirational. However, it can also sometimes seem frustrating, slow paced, soul destroying, tokenistic, ill thought out and harmful to the people involved.

The 'trouble' with Service User Involvement is that it is a remarkably simple concept, but its apparent simplicity is also a key to its complexity. So what is Service User Involvement?

We define Service User Involvement as *'the involvement of service users in the management, design and delivery of services'*. This definition emphasises that involvement should encompass the full range of people's experiences – not just the things that workers or planners think are important – and operates at various levels of involvement: giving people information is a start, but involvement can develop into service users planning work themselves or delivering services. For example,

principles of Service User Involvement are absolutely applicable to operational tasks such as making and taking referrals, doing assessments and forming care plans – a ‘person-centred approach’.

The notion of a ‘hierarchy of involvement’ is well reflected in Arnstein’s ladder of participation<sup>1</sup>, which presented a view of involvement (subsequently adapted by Hart<sup>2</sup> and Groundswell) that is still useful, in that it recognises some of the challenges associated with accepting a principled approach to involvement. Specifically, if one accepts a fundamental premise that service users have a *right* to be involved, it is difficult to argue against the notion that applying boundaries to that involvement constitutes a dereliction of principle. In other words, if homeless people can be consulted about what a leaflet should look like, why can they not also be involved in planning the development of new services or recruiting staff?

Our Service User Involvement Team agrees that the following principles in relation to Service User Involvement are crucial. All service users have the right to:

- be involved at a level that they feel is appropriate to them and their circumstances at the time;
- choose not to be involved and to change their minds if things change for them;
- the appropriate support to become involved and sustain, develop or withdraw their participation, as they choose;
- expect respect for their contribution.

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<sup>1</sup> SR Arnstein, 'A Ladder of Participation', American Institute of Planners Journal 35(4), 1969.

<sup>2</sup> R Hart, 'Children's Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship', UNICEF/International Child Development Centre, 1992.

## So how do you involve service users practically?

At this stage in the development of our team, we are using a simple planning model that involves us asking some important questions. This is a model that we can run through with organisations or planners who are keen to promote Service User Involvement. The planning matrix allows providers or groups to consider some of the key practical issues related to making involvement a good experience for service users.

The matrix simply asks:

- **What do you want to involve service users in?** A consultation, event, planning group, peer research, staff training? Something very generally of interest to a broad range of homeless people or something very specific to a particular service?
- **Why do you want to involve service users?** You want to tell people something; you want to know what they think about something? You want them to help you plan a piece of work? You have to!
- **Who do you want to involve?** Current or ex-users of a service; specific groups, such as children, women, people with a dual diagnosis; or people with a geographical connection?
- **When do you want to do it?** What are your timescales? Do you need to start or finish this work by a certain date? Remember to allow time to plan and for feedback, and identify a next step.
- **Where do you want to do it?** Think of locations – virtual and physical - and accessible venues.
- **How are you going to do it?** How are you going to get answers for the questions above? How are you going to plan for the work? How are you going to recruit service users? Have you thought about what service users might get out of the work? Do you have a budget? Who is going to do the work? Do you have enough expertise in your work place? Do you need other expertise, knowledge or skills? How are you going to advertise the work to service users? What method(s) of involvement are you going to use? How are you going to write up the piece of work? Who needs to see the outcomes? How are you going to feed back to service users? Who is going to take forward the outcomes?

We have used the planning matrix ourselves and it is very useful in helping to clarify ideas and establish priorities. At this stage, I should say that organisations or workers who are looking to involve service users should choose an approach that suits their service users but that also recognises the capacity and culture of the organisation. If there is no history of Service User Involvement within an organisation, it will be

important to get the pace right to eliminate the risk of active or (sometimes more dangerously) passive resistance!

## Some top tips!

The following is a list of practical and ethical questions, tips or suggestions (in no particular order) that may guide you on your involvement journey!

- In planning to involve service users, are you responding to what service users want, or are you initiating the process? In which case, how are you going to 'recruit' service users?
- Is it your role to respond to an initiative from service users? What impact might it have on your job?
- Are other staff in your organisation 'on side'? If not, you might need to do some staff training. Other workers can sometimes be suspicious of Service User Involvement because they feel that people will be overly negative or because they feel they haven't been consulted or involved themselves.
- It is particularly important that your management team is supportive of your work – or at least makes the right noises! Service User Involvement should result in cultural change so it is important that your managers or Board of Directors have realised this and planned for it, particularly with other staff.
- Resources and skills – you might be keen but there is a fair chance that you will need some help, either staff training, handbooks or other people.
- Money! Common expenses include service user's travelling expenses, hospitality (including lunch, teas and coffees), training, childcare facilities/costs, venue hire and publication costs.
- Venue for meetings etc – is it reasonably central? Is it accessible to people with a disability? Is it welcoming? Are the staff welcoming and does it look as if you could relax in it?)
- Being clear and upfront – one of the biggest clichés about Service User Involvement is when people say, 'but you don't want to raise their expectations'. So, it is really important to be clear at the outset about what is open for discussion and how decisions about where to go next will be made.
- Develop support for your work – 'key champions' (especially if they can make things happen for you) are absolutely essential.
- The importance of renewal – supporting service users to move on from the work is essential. It can be very damaging in the longer term for the work and the individual if service users 'get stuck'. Renewal of staff involvement is essential too. Much laudable Service User Involvement work flounders when key members of staff leave, so staff training and organisational policies with operational teeth, are essential.

## Service User Involvement with homeless people

The above sections are hopefully useful in terms of an introduction to Service User Involvement. However, it is important to note that there are some specific challenges for providers working within homelessness in terms of Service User Involvement.

Specifically, there is less of an established culture of participation than in other areas such as mental health, carers, older people or learning disability. Also, how do you engage with people whose lives are often 'chaotic' or who have no fixed contact address? I'm not sure we've cracked that one yet!

A couple of things that are important though are to look at involving people who have been homeless (who often have an invaluable perspective) and to be flexible in your approach. It is important to think about what would draw service users into involvement activity; for example, you might want to consider offering leisure activities or alternative therapies in tandem with focus groups. Developing good relationships with service users before engaging in more 'heavy duty' service user involvement is crucial, and fun, in particular, is indispensable!

### Summary

So in summary, how do we give practical effect to the effective participation of homeless people? For our team, it starts with how you view homeless people. If you view homeless people as passive recipients of services, then you will struggle with the practical application of the principles of Service User Involvement. However, I genuinely believe that most people who work in homelessness believe that homeless people have both the right and the capacity to be involved.

Where we can struggle is the practical effect bit – 'there's no time, we don't have the money, there's nobody to do it, nothing will change anyway and we can't get service users interested'. On occasion, providers, planners and workers cop out of involvement and regurgitate the hallowed excuses but it is important to note that capacity, time, money and expertise are genuine issues. Accordingly, three priorities in terms of making involvement really work are:

- statements and policies to reflect the principled approach of service providers to Service User Involvement
- backed up by practical support (money in particular) to be given to homelessness projects at an operational level to engage service users and,
- genuine engagement at strategic planning level (the Scottish Executive, the Care Commission, Communities Scotland, Local Authorities and Health Boards) with homeless people at a local and national level. It is counter productive to develop the capacity of people affected by homelessness and the organisations and

workers who support them, but invest no time, energy or money in ensuring that key decision making bodies are receptive and involved in the process.

Best of luck!

## Further information

If you would like to contact Jo for more information about her work, please email [chip@shelter.org.uk](mailto:chip@shelter.org.uk) in the first instance.