Consultation Paper: Service User/Consumer Involvement and Social Work

1 For a discussion of the meaning of these terms, see the following section on 'What user involvement/consumer involvement means'.

The goals and values of social work

Social work is centrally concerned with supporting the rights, empowerment, self-determination and development of people. It works with them as individuals, family groups and communities to achieve this. It is committed to values of equality, human rights, social justice and democracy.

The development of service user/consumer led organisations

In recent years a major development has been taking place internationally which offers social work an opportunity to advance its internationally agreed goals, values and principles. It has been taking place in both traditional industrialised societies and the majority world, with local variations in the nature, degree and pace with which it has happened from country to country. This development is the emergence of movements and organisations of service users themselves.

The shared goals of social work and service user/consumer movements

The best known and most visible example of a movement and organisation of service users is the international disabled people’s movement, which developed the phrase, ‘Nothing about us without us’. However, such movements and organisations have been developed by a very wide range of social work service users. This includes also mental health service users/survivors, older people, people with learning difficulties, people with experience of poverty, people living with HIV/AIDS, young people who have been looked after in state care and people who have had drug and related problems. Service users have come together in their own organisations and networks, to secure their human and civil rights and increase their say and involvement over their lives and services that may affect them. This coincides closely with and helps advance the goals and concerns of social work working with them, as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers. These are defined to include:

- promoting social change and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being and promote social inclusion;
- Seeing principles of human rights and social justice as fundamental;
- Enabling all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction, focusing on problem solving and change;
Being based on humanitarian and democratic ideals, with values prioritising respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people.

All these goals and values are made more possible for social work with the active engagement of service users/consumers. Their organisations and movements highlight both the importance and feasibility of doing this. The emergence of service user /consumer driven organisations and movements provides a basis for these individuals to be more actively engaged in the social work process and its aims. It then becomes more possible for social workers to more truly work ‘with’ service users/consumers in partnership, rather than doing things ‘to’ them. This coincides with the IFSW definition of social work which refers to liberation and alleviating material hardship ‘in solidarity’ with people who are disadvantaged. The aims of service user movements to bring about social change and support the empowerment of service users/consumers strongly reinforce key social work goals. This provides a valuable basis for building alliances between social work and service user/consumer led organisations and movements to strengthen both.

Consumer/User involvement is thus a core concern of service user organisations and movements and also helps to make real the participatory values and commitments of international social work. Through service users/consumer involvement, social work can more effectively achieve its goals and values.

**What user involvement/consumer involvement means**

There is no one meaning for service user / consumer involvement. It can have different meanings for different groups, at different times and in different countries. In some cases there is talk rather of self-help, advocacy and mutual aid organisations and movements, rather than service user ones. Terms like partnership, engagement and participation may be used rather than user involvement. Such user involvement, described in a variety of ways, can mean a wide range of things. It may mean:

Consulting with and listening to what service users/consumers have to say;

Developing links with service user/consumer groups and organisations

Involving service users/consumers in social work and other social policy organisations so these are better informed by them

Service users/consumers individually and collectively having more say over their lives and in services that they use.

Involving service users/consumers in ‘co-producing’ social work as a joint activity.

All of these meanings can be helpful. Getting involved in service user/consumer organisations can help people solve the problems they face. It can enable them to gain new skills, greater self-confidence and a better understanding of themselves. In this way it can offer a form of self-help that links with the positive goals of social work. Service users/consumers have placed an emphasis on the development of social approaches to understand and meet their rights and needs, like the ‘social model of disability’. This also reflects and reinforces the social and holistic approach of international social work. While such involvement is
often particularly developed in more community-based and community-orientated social work approaches, it can also be very helpful in work with individuals and families.

**Ethical issues for involvement**

Service user/consumer involvement can raise many ethical issues. While many people greatly value the opportunity to be more actively involved in what happens to them, at both an individual personal level and sometimes at a broader collective level, this should always be a choice they have, rather than something that they may feel is required of them. It is also important for people to feel that if they express their views, these will not have any negative effects for them, if for example, they criticise the service they have received. Where people’s views are sought, it is important that they are told what has happened as a result of this. Feedback is always greatly valued. Perhaps most important, it is essential that everyone can have the chance to get involved on as equal terms as possible. To make this possible will mean that many service users/consumers will need support. For instance, people with communication impairments, will need support to communicate effectively; people with physical impairments will need good physical access and support and groups from cultural and ethnic minorities are likely to need support to get involved in ways that are familiar and positive for them.

**Focuses for service user/consumer involvement**

In different countries and to different degrees, consumers/service user involvement has also evolved and been helpful in a range of particular areas. These include:

- Service User/Consumer involvement in social work education and training
- Service User/Consumer involvement in developing social work policy and provision
- Service User/Consumer involvement in improving quality
- Service User/Consumer involvement in research and evaluation

Alongside social work practitioners, service users/consumers have thus been able to add to the evidence-base of social work through developing 'user knowledge' which helps in understanding what can work best in social work and what service users find most helpful.
Questions open for discussion in order to build the Agenda for the Conference

Supporting user/consumer involvement and to play a more active role in social work practice and policy is a complex issue which can raise many questions. There is now internationally much experience and evidence to help in answering such questions. Some of the key questions that are regularly raised and concern social workers include:

- How can social work and social workers support the development of service user/consumer driven organisations and work in the most helpful ways?
- Do social workers need to develop new skills to work in partnership with service users, consumers and self-help groups and are they consistent with the established professional skills and qualities of social workers?
- Service users/consumers are very diverse. How can social work and social workers make it possible for as wide a range as possible of service users/consumers to get involved to reflect diversity and their diverse views and experience?
- Social work sometimes has had to restrict the rights of one group to safeguard those of another. User involvement has been developed even where this has happened. How can it most helpfully be employed in such circumstances?
- How can social work most helpfully build alliances with service users/consumers for the future, at local, national and international levels?
- Where there are competing interests? How should social work and social workers negotiate to ensure that the rights and needs of the consumer/service users expressed through their involvement are as far as possible taken into account in service delivery and program development?

Such questions provide a helpful basis for taking forward discussion on service users, user involvement and social work which recognises local differences and different understandings.

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