

# 15 THE VOICE OF SERVICE USERS AND CARERS

## Activity

In this activity we would like you to think about the how service users and carers are involved in different aspects of social work. For example, as recipients of services, as contributors to the design of services or as participants in research. As a starting point for the activity a short discussion of the background to service user and carer involvement is provided. This includes some information about different discourses of involvement which we believe are useful to consider.

### **The development of service user and carer involvement**

The history of involvement spans a 30- to 40-year time period with an initial emphasis on service-user involvement and the later addition of carer involvement.

Beresford and Croft (2004) highlight that involvement of service users was a feature of social work practice in the 1970s. At this stage they describe involvement as a 'participatory rhetoric' (p.61) and view the development as one aspect of social work's liberatory direction. The timing of this development would appear to be aligned with the development of service-user-led organisations which also began to emerge in the 1970s. Initially such organisations were formed by people with physical disabilities, but other social movements soon followed (Sapey, 2009). For example, the carers movement in the UK developed in the early-1980s (Warren, 2007) and the mental health service-users' movement in the UK began to grow in the mid-1980s (Pilgrim, 2009). These organisations sought to ensure that members were 'of' a particular group, rather than being comprised of individuals who simply spoke 'for' a particular group (Beresford, 2010). Consequently, the 'voice' of service users and carers over this period certainly became stronger; resulting for some in a fundamental need to question established practices.

There was a greater focus on what Beresford (2007, p. 26) describes as 'a new rhetoric of participation, partnership and empowerment' during the shift to consumer-led welfare models during the late 1980s and 1990s. Linked to this was the emergence of legislative provisions and policy guidance which required service-user and carer involvement; thereby cementing the need for this to take place. Within

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social work education such in-built provisions were not present until the revised social work degree programmes in 2003 (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and 2004 (Scotland). A key consideration here though across all sectors, is not just whether this involvement takes place as it should, but also whether this involvement is in fact effective (Ward and Rhodes, 2010).

### **Discourses on the current context of involvement**

If we take the perspective that there has been well over thirty years of social movement activity within service-user and carer groups – along with a growing embedded requirement to ensure involvement happens – a question can perhaps be posed as to which wider social, political and even economic aspects impact on the development of service-user and carer involvement? Gallagher and Smith (2010, p.7) suggest that there are four ‘different discourses’ about involvement. These are identified by the authors as: consumerist (service users and carers are seen as customers of social work who are able to make choices and to whom the market must respond appropriately); managerialist (service users and carers contribute to increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of services by providing input which drives improvement); neo-liberal governmental (service-user and carer involvement serves to provide a mechanism by which people feel able to express their views and through which agencies are able to ‘bring people along with them’ through processes of change) and lastly, ‘discourses of rights, citizenship and participation’ (p.8) (involvement as a strategy to achieve empowerment and to facilitate change). Gallagher and Smith (2010) conclude that the latter model is less likely to be viewed as ‘bureaucratic and tokenistic’ (p.8), given its closer alignment to a bottom-up approach.

Taking into consideration the above points undertake the following activity.

#### **Part A:**

Warren (2007) identifies five different forms of involvement for service users and carers. Consider each of these and develop a list of examples from your own knowledge and experience:

- Involvement in own use of services
- Involvement in strategic planning and service development [you may also wish to consider operational practice here i.e. service delivery]
- Involvement through the development of user-led services
- Involvement in research or service evaluation
- Involvement in training staff and student social workers

#### **Part B:**

Look over the list of examples you have drawn up and attempt to link these to the four discourses about involvement suggested by Gallagher and Smith (2010). Having done so consider what this tells you about the current position of service-user and carer involvement.

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### Part C:

Discuss your thoughts with other students and colleagues in practice. Where the opportunity presents itself it would also be a useful source of learning to discuss your views with service users and carers who are engaged in involvement activities.

### References

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