

Social work education participation: Making it real

Conference report: 3 December 2009



Introduction

This is an exciting time for user and carer involvement in social work education. It is now mandatory for all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering the social work degree to 'consult with service users and carers to make sure their needs and opinions are reflected in the design and development of courses'. The GSCC provides small grants to support this activity and further funds are available for HEIs offering post qualifying programmes. This is an incredibly exciting and progressive policy development. We believe that the participation of users and carers has the power to transform the next generation of social workers.

The SCIE conference held on 3 December 2009 was both a celebration of work achieved and a consultation about work to come. Firstly, the event launched two important reports from SCIE:

- Report 28: Developing user involvement in social work education
- Report 29: Carers as partners in social work education

A summary of these reports and their key messages is available on the SCIE website: www.scie.org.uk/publications/ataglance/ataglance19.asp

Secondly, the event launched a new website to support user and carer participation in social work education: www.socialworkeducation.org.uk

Finally, the event explored with participants the idea of developing a national forum to oversee the development of service user and carer involvement in social work education. This report aims to present these ideas and options for further consultation in 2010, and establish the foundations for the new forum. The morning group discussions were devoted to examples from good practice of involving service users and carers in social work education. The afternoon workshops offered participants the opportunity to discuss different aspects of a potential new national forum.

Please note: quotations are taken from individual podcasts, videos, post-it notes and evaluation forms and do not necessarily come from the group/section in which they are placed.

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Summary of options

I Plenary Sessions

1. ‘Developing user involvement in social work education’– Fran Branfield, Shaping Our Lives

Report available from the SCIE website:

<http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/reports/report29.asp>)

Fran started by introducing conference participants to Shaping Our Lives, a user controlled organisation working with all service users across the board. Shaping Our Lives national user network is an independent user-controlled organisation, think tank and network. They started as a research and development project and became an independent organisation in 2002. With reference to the principle ‘Nothing about us without us’, Fran went on to give the background to the report and the key findings.

“For a long time service users have known that having a real say in training and education for professionals can make a big difference in how we are then treated by workers. When service users are involved in social work education and training social workers quickly see that we have a contribution to make and that we are capable people. They find out what we think and what we want, they meet us on equal terms. This really can change the culture of workers and the culture of organisations”

Despite considerable diversity in experience and the type of services used, there was a remarkable degree of consistency in what different service users and from different parts of the country said. Service users argued that it was important to increase the capacity of service users and user controlled organisations if user involvement was to develop well in social work education. By this, they meant that service users and their organisations need to be supported, funded and have the chance to develop skills if wide ranges of service users are to become involved. Secondly, service users felt strongly that some of the money for user involvement should go to service user controlled organisations and not just to universities.

Service user involvement in social work education is still patchy, although there are some significant areas of good practice. Some of these examples of good practice are related to overcoming the barriers to involvement, including such issues as access, attitudes and the reimbursement of expenses. Many participants believed that their involvement would act as a means of removing barriers, especially attitudinal barriers. Aside from improving the nature and delivery of social work practice, involvement means that both service users and social work students develop a deeper understanding of each other’s perspectives. In addition, participants felt that meeting with ‘real-life’ service users and disabled people

would challenge stereotypes for students and equip them to become better social workers.

2. ‘Carers as Partners (CaPs) in social work education’ – Imogen Taylor, Suzy Braye and Andy Cheng, University of Sussex

Report available from the SCIE website:

<http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/reports/report28.asp>)

This project was undertaken by a partnership between the University of Sussex and Carers UK, Crossroads Care and The Princess Royal Trust for Carers. The project involved gathering information and comments from carers through telephone interviews and focus groups. They looked at the activities carers were involved in, the processes for enabling carers to be involved, and for carers and service users to work together.

Whilst the project found some examples of good practice, like the first study, they also found patchiness. They found a common tendency to regard service users and carers as interchangeable for the purposes of involvement, and only a loose consensus about what it means to be a ‘carer’. On occasions where service users and carers worked together, this had led to tension where service users and carers had been involved without recognition of their different roles and perspectives.

The study suggests that HEIs still have much to do in exploring and uncovering the different perceptions and perspectives between carers and service users. The authors expressed concern about the need to support carers adequately where their involvement means giving personal testimony in front of a class of students. Training and support for carers needs to strike a balance between remaining true to that personal experience and the potential for over professionalisation. The authors recommended that HEIs improve their links and networks with local and national carers groups in order to enhance carer involvement. They found much enthusiasm for this and for sharing and widening knowledge and good practice.

3. The SWEP Website – Pete Fleischmann and Keith Spink www.socialworkeducation.org.uk

Pete first introduced himself and his role at SCIE. For the last 5 years, he has led the Participation team, which is responsible for SCIE’s work around user and carer involvement. As an organisation, SCIE aims to put users and carers at the heart of everything they do. As many as one in 10 of SCIE staff have experience of disability or mental health issues, some of them in top jobs. He went on to introduce the main themes of the day and to launch the website with the help of his colleague.

“Today here in this hall we have a good news story to tell about social work education. In no other area of education has there been such an organised effort to involve users and carers. Although it is patchy and inconsistent across the country there is also some fantastic work going on. User and carer involvement in social work education is a government scheme that can make a real difference to how the next group of social workers learn about their jobs. It is about bridging the gap between what you can learn from a book and from the real world. It can be challenging to everyone involved but if users and carers did not have different views from professionals, there would be no point in involving them.

User and carer participation in the social work degree is a simple idea whose time has come. The most effective new ideas are simple ones. I was explaining to my daughter Rosa who is seven what I was doing today and why I could not take her to school as usual. I was surprised how she was able to understand the need for users and carers of social work services to have an impact on how social work is taught. She told me that it was important that Tracy Beaker should tell social work students how she felt and that this would help them to be kind to their future clients.

We have just heard about two major reports into how we can best support user and carer involvement in social work education. We are here to celebrate the completion of one phase of work about social work participation and to ask you for your views about how we should go forward in the next part of our work.

One of the key things about this work is that it has been carried out in collaboration - an alliance or partnership - of SCIE, Shaping our Lives and Sussex University. We are lucky enough to have an advisory group of very active, engaged, knowledgeable, and skilled and well connected users and carers. They have been central to the success of the project. Many advisory group members are here today taking active roles in the conference. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the members of the group who are much too numerous to mention by name. This group is going to carry on meeting to drive the next stage of our work.”

Keith Spink then introduced the website through, the use of PowerPoint slides to show the pages. The new website is open for everyone who is interested in improving social work education through participation. The aim of the website is to share good practice in participation; you can search the site in a variety of ways, and share information with others – e.g. news, events, documents, videos, and job vacancies. Soon there will also be discussion forums and email alerts and we want your ideas for developing it further.

The website is there: please use it!

Questions and comments from the morning sessions

- A member of People First asked if the website is to be accessible for people with learning difficulties.
 - The response was that it is as accessible as possible. People are encouraged to use it, make their contributions and to let us know if they have any difficulties.
- Is this the end of the work?
 - Pete Fleischmann explained that this is the end of one phase and the start of another - we hope to see the start of a national forum informed by everyone who is here today.
- The projects noted a low response rate overall from universities; what are we doing to address those who did not respond – how shall we get the message through to them?
 - With the vehicle we are hoping to develop – a web tool and national forum – and with participation enshrined in law, we hope to be able to look forwards now to sharing that good practice and improving our communications and feedback so that we are reaching further into the HEIs that need to hear from us.
 - Through Shaping Our Lives, we are also networking with service user organisations, and we would encourage service users to approach their local HEIs to get involved in social work education.
- In the University Of Birmingham Centre Of Excellence in Interdisciplinary Mental Health (CEIMH), we are looking to involve service users and carers across the board – not only in social work education. We would like to see this approach adopted more widely – although with the curricula remaining separate, it is difficult.
- A speaker from Scotland (who has been involved in teaching and lecturing) was interested in the tension between a knowledgeable and experienced disabled person who is accountable to the disability movement and knows about the issues, and the individual who is giving their story as a part of involvement in social work education.
- In a related comment, a speaker from Cardiff University talked about the dangers of ‘over-professionalisation’. He had been impressed with the emotional strength of people conveying their experiences but felt we need to proceed cautiously and carefully and remember our duty of care both to students and to service users and carers.

- The point was made that all Universities should feedback annually to the GSCC; hence, the GSCC needs to be involved in the work we do to ensure that all Universities and HEIs participate in this, as they should.

'It is nice to know how we are trying to educate the new generation of social workers. They need to know how we feel as parents and carers and service users and how they can help us to better our lives in the future.'

II Group discussions: Good practice examples

Workshop 1. 'Developing service user and carer participation.' - Peter Atkins, Angela Warren, Sean Bolton, Daphne Blanchflower

The workshop began with a presentation on developing the active and informed participation of people who use services and carers in the learning and development of the social care workforce in the South West region (SUCCESS). Informed participation is where knowledge and perspective converge. It is interactive, creative and productive. People can participate in student selection, direct teaching, sharing personal experience, offering personal case studies, course planning, producing resources and programme management.

Preparation for participation takes the form of a four day course, two hour induction session and series of training opportunities. A free one day conference sharing the work of SUCCESS and promoting good practice in service user & carer involvement in social work education included workshops on direct payments & individual budgets, valuing people's involvement, and social care work experience with service users as supervisors.

The role of the development worker was discussed. (Full or part-time, based at university in conjunction with third sector partner). What should a development worker do?

- a road show to let workers and service users and carers know what is involved.
- refer to people who use services as "people".
- create links to promote general awareness.
- develop a service user/carers "steering group" with lecturer input.
- distinguish between carers and care workers.
- involve a diverse range of people from many backgrounds and experiences.

Workshop 2. 'Meaningful service user and carer involvement in practice learning opportunities/placements using the Hub and Spoke model.' - June Sadd

Hub and Spoke model:

Of the General Social Care Council's eight areas for service user, and carer involvement in social work programmes, service user and carer involvement in practice learning and placements is possibly the most under-developed area; it is not as well developed as their involvement in the academic programmes. Training is essential before service users and carers become involved in practice learning and placements.

Power:

Power is present in all social work practice and can be used positively or negatively. Service user and carer involvement plays an important role in redressing existing power imbalances. It is not just about telling personal stories, it is about sharing power. When you hold power, it is difficult to give it up or share it. The Cycle of Oppression Model describes misuse of power by individuals and systems.

Values:

Values should be at the heart of practice – good social work practice is underpinned by social work values. There is a concern that the values are being sidelined with the emphasis on evidencing task-focused competencies.

Management of Placements:

Someone in the organisation needs to be a qualified practice teacher (educator / assessor) in order to supervise the student. The people who receive a service from the organisation can also be involved in the management of the placement. There is money attached to student placements to cover supervision time and for service users and carers to be trained to supervise students. Service users and carers could be involved in the selection for placements, and in drawing up the Practice Learning Agreement (contract) - which is usually, drawn up by the student, the practice teacher, the practice supervisor and often with the tutor.

Teaching / Learning Provision in Placement:

Service users and carers have been involved in teaching and helping students to learn in universities for some time. This could be expanded to placements.

Supervision:

Supervision is a close relationship which requires respect and for people to be aware of their own prejudices. Service users and carers could be involved in some supervision sessions. For example, it is particularly useful for students to discuss their value base with service users.

Assessment & Quality Assurance:

Creative ways can be found to involve service users and carers in assessment – e.g. reading portfolios and taking part in assessment processes after receiving training. They can also be involved in monitoring and evaluating the practice learning opportunities offered in the placement. Following on from their involvement in quality assurance, service users and carers can be involved in

improving the practice learning opportunities as part of a quality improvement cycle.

Dignity:

“We learn when we respect the dignity of the people that they cannot be denied the elementary right to participate fully in the solutions to their own problems.”

From “Rules for Radicals” by Saul D. Alinsky, 1971, Vintage Books, a division of Random House/New York, 1973

Workshop 3. ‘Working in collaboration – A day with 60 social work students and 12 service users and carers.’ - Jill Scholl

The workshop presented for discussion a learning day designed to help social work students continue their development as ‘well rounded’ and qualified workers.

- Service users and carers rather than tutors led all sessions, so the experience of sharing between these groups was greatly strengthened.
- Service users and carers were impressed by the enthusiasm and thoughtful discussion from students.
- Opportunity for discussion in smaller groups enabled students to raise issues more freely and to mirror a real practice situation.
- Valuable opportunity for students and social workers to ask questions before a crisis point and for service users to talk without being seen as ‘victims’.
- It was felt that the day went some way to breaking down barriers and power imbalances.
- This felt like an affirmative process: students felt that social workers had much to contribute and their ideas had real value.

Workshop 4. ‘Involving seldom heard groups in social work education and training.’ - Sinclair Coward

The terminology has changed from ‘hard to reach groups’. The group agreed that ‘seldom heard groups’ is more appropriate and less stigmatising. The absence of commitment to the *values* of participation can lead to further marginalisation of seldom heard groups (SHGs). SCIE has identified certain groups as being ‘seldom heard’; black people, people with stigmatised illness, young people, homeless people with addictions and people with dementia. However, any service user or carer can be ‘Seldom heard’ within their particular locality; it is an issue for all of us.

Why do organisations fail to engage with certain groups?

- an absence of young people involved in projects
- funding
- fear of Social Services
- assumptions
- discrimination
- lack of resources.

How can we change this?

- Send social workers out into the community to identify SHGs
- Investigate whether young people in the area are interested, and how to engage them
- By treating people as individuals, and looking at individual cases rather than generalising
- Universities scoping their communities to identify the range of service user and carer organisations. In addition, plan how to involve them in training social workers.

Success Stories:

Mellow was founded in 2000. It is part of East London NHS Foundation Trust, which provides mental health services to the City of London and the east London boroughs of Hackney, Tower Hamlets, and Newham. Much of Mellow's work has been about exploring ways to restore a sense of community belonging and cultural identity to African and Caribbean mental health service users. Mellow has helped Brian, a recovering mental health patient, to engage with people and provided training for the next steps of his recovery.

What Next?

This is an ongoing problem, requiring new creative innovative strategies to engage with a wide range of users and carers. The question of participation needs to be constantly reviewed asking how can we reach more service users and carers and what is meaningful participation?

The key value agreed upon by the group was that providing the opportunity for seldom heard groups to participate is essential and is not discretionary.

Workshop 5. 'Overcoming barriers to involvement.' - Dorothy Carter

The workshop began by discussing barriers to involvement for service users and for carers. There were many common barriers, as well as a few unique or more significant ones for each individual. Common barriers included benefits, commitments (e.g. work, school), disempowerment, partnerships (where user and carer have interchanging roles), bureaucracy, jargon, lack of knowledge, tokenism and assumptions. For carers, there was an additional issue of perhaps not seeing themselves as a 'carer' and of the potential need for respite care if they want to be involved in an activity. Service users might (arguably) experience more disempowerment as a result of their disability/illness/etc.

Solutions included:

- Benefits and payment: Providing access to good advice (e.g. CAB), clarity about payment's and process.
- Jargon, etc; Use of plain English, support with understanding.
- Partnerships: Support, advice and information, two-way debriefing, safety for all parties in the involvement activity.
- Commitments awareness leading to good planning, timekeeping and flexibility.
- Tokenism, assumptions: Training, confidence building, equality training, assertiveness, presentation skills, challenging tokenism, listening, mutual respect and following things up properly with feedback.

Workshop 6. 'Engaging students in participation.' - John MacDonough

Q) What do students really think about user/carers participation?

Q) How can we increase student participation in this area?

(The objectives being: improved practice, confidence, competent and able social workers)

- attitude of students – potential barrier to involvement
- provide online ways of interacting safely
- emphasis on social workers needing to protect their mental health needs
- social workers cannot talk to young people – do not respond as they would when talking to a professional

- resistance from academics to genuine service user involvement
- emphasis on how the course is taught
- how can we get the message across?
- buddy scheme talked about – service user mentor and professional mentor for students (at Christchurch University)
- teaching students – work life – have to adapt to the workplace
- from the outset, ingrain the importance of involvement.

Workshop 7. 'Networking across disciplines and the Higher Education Academy – reaching out from SWEF' - Hilary Burgess

Some initiatives:

DUCIE – Developers of User and Carer Involvement in Education (support, networking and campaigning, production of guidelines for setting up posts in universities)

Ian Light Award – for people in development roles to work with others in similar roles, participate in exchanges, share and develop practice.

PEPIN – Professional Education Public Involvement Network - a forerunner of the SWEF website, set up across HE to provide resources on user involvement and encourage networking.

What are the issues around working across different professions (other than social work)?

Students all need the same things from service users and carers – they want to understand what it is really like to be a service user or carer and an opportunity to talk about what people would like from a nurse, a doctor, etc.

A lot of people wear different hats. FOCUS recruits specifically to meet learning objectives and finds that many service users can do a number of different things. It is good for the service users to have different experiences as well, including working in more than one university and on more than one course. The CAIRN of mental health also tailors perspectives to different audiences.

There are important issues for service user and carer participation in the multi-disciplinary teams across nursing and social work. Interprofessional learning is now a 'must-do', as is involving users and carers in social work education, and these two areas need to be linked. However, confidentiality is a serious issue across professions.

Who needs to be more aware of service user and carer perspectives?

The list includes gatekeepers (GPs, receptionists in HEIs as well as practice); pharmacists; occupational therapists; police; doctors; nurses; paramedics and ambulance teams; other non-statutory agencies.

- despite training, practitioners may get into bad habits
- without good leadership in agencies, attitudes will not change
- there is a need for preparation and awareness raising about mental health, wellbeing, disability, and other abilities among students as well as educators
- small organisations may have resource issues, which make networking difficult
- there is still real difficulty with HEIs sharing ideas and resources
- HR people in HEIs and other organisations are poorly informed and need educating with respect to DDA requirements so that they can then also help to inform other employees, students, etc
- we need to think of ways that make good use of people's time so that education and training can be most effective.

Feedback:

'A lot of the questions I had in mind are being answered.'

'Compassionate, kind, caring, great, very friendly, the friendliest conference I have ever been to.'

'It would have been nice to have more time for discussion in the workshops.'

III Options for a national forum

Introduction by Peter Beresford

This is a lovely occasion and such a fantastic mix of people. Today is about two things. It is about where we have got to, that is a major achievement, and there has been a celebration this morning about the new evidence we have put together connecting involvement with service users and involvement with carers. Secondly, from here on in I think the rest of the time is about where we move.

For a long time what service users have been saying is, that the key way to improve the support and services, and the practice they receive, is to change its culture. The key way to change the culture is for service users to be involved in social work and other professional and occupational learning and education so that people will learn to practice better.

So, we are at a kind of fulcrum point, a point of change where we can build on all we have achieved but move on to better things. We have established the social work education participation website, and we have produced these two reports and a summary to go with them. Now what we want to do is to move on from this. The biggest obstacle there has been around user and carer involvement in social work education, has been that whilst there have been unbelievably good things going on you cannot safely and reliably know that is what you will experience as a student, working in a college or as a service user after people have qualified as there is so much patchiness everywhere.

The words that come to mind to challenge that are to be really systematic, comprehensive, and strategic about moving forward - that is what this whole project has been about. It has been about being strategic, trying to get everything good and better for everybody everywhere. However, what is special and unique about it, it has been service user and carer led and I was also thinking as I was listening to the terrific music; we have music here and that tells me, this must be a user and carer led event.

What we are moving on to is setting up some means of taking this initiative forward in a good way through a national forum – which will have a role in making sure things are accountable, clear and democratic and that things can really work to the better of everyone everywhere, with service users and carers at the front. Nevertheless, the other thing I want to stress both about today and about taking forward this idea of a forum is that it is not about being exclusive; it is about being inclusive in every possible sense. All the stakeholders who are part of professional practice of social work and of related activities and professions should be represented; educators, students, carers, service users, practitioners and managers.

Therefore, it is about being strategic but there are things we have realised are desperately important here. All the issues of equality that we need to take account of to ensure that the wide diversity of service users are included and represented, around age, gender, sexuality, race, class, culture, and disability. In addition, there are other dimensions of other expressions of diversity: people who live in residential services as well as at home, people who are homeless, people who may communicate differently, people who may be parents. People may be travellers, people who may not have the rights of citizenship as asylum seekers, people in the town and country.

It has to be a forum that meaningfully involves all the stakeholders, a forum that can connect with all the different kinds of service users there are and the diversity of the different groups. How will we make it possible to reach out and involve people but at the same time make practical decisions, have meaningful decisions and so on? How can we make it effective as a body that will make decisions and be accountable. We have a big job of trying to set up a forum, which can reflect that diversity of viewpoint, the different stakeholders, but at the same time be workable. That is difficult to crack. It is important to spend a bit of time addressing that today.

Two last things. One: it is not fixed – by which I mean, no decisions have been made; we want to hear your views today and in the future.

The other thing is a personal thing. This is a very unusual occasion for me as my two different lives are coming together. There are people I work with at college, but also people I know well and have worked with and done things with as service users. Thanks ever so much.

I think the real embodiment of our aspiration is that, more and more, we can break down the barriers and we can be with each other as workers, service users, and carers.

The national forum: options and issues

This section lays out some of the options and issues discussed in relation to the development of a new national forum. These are based both on the discussions that took place on 3 December 2009 – in seven workshops – and on similar discussions that took place at an event in November 2009 called Authenticity to Action. Participants were invited to contribute their views in a number of different ways during the former event. In developing the following options and suggestions, the author has drawn upon all of these sources (below), and has endeavoured to capture all of the ideas expressed:

- notes from SWEP Workshops
- notes from Authenticity to Action event

- pod casts at SWEPE event (15)
- evaluation forms
- post-it notes.

Where the author has made her own suggestions, these are denoted by initials in brackets: [AF]. The themes broadly follow the seven SWEPE workshops – with the one addition of ‘Aims and objectives’. The questions given to the workshops were as follows (reproduced here under their relevant section).

- What values should the national forum have?
- Ideas on the shape, structures of a national forum?
- Ideas on the membership of a national forum?
- How can we ensure that participation in social work education involves seldom heard groups?
- How can users and carers work effectively together in the field of social work education whilst maintaining the integrity of their perspectives?
- How could the SWEPE website and the national forum work together?
- What outputs should the national forum aim for?

Where comments made in one group were more relevant to another, they are used to inform the latter, i.e. placed under the relevant subject heading. As will become clear, there was a degree of consensus around some issues and an acknowledgement of the dilemmas surrounding others. In summary, however, the majority of participants were enthusiastic and supportive of the formation of a national forum, even if to some people it looked to be ambitious and challenging.

‘We want recognition that some of us are brimming with ideas and would like the chance to express them with like-minded people.’

1. Aims and objectives

Several groups felt the need for clear aims and objectives to be established before other things could be decided upon, particularly, for example, outputs and outcomes. Clarifying the remit for the national forum should therefore be the first task.

Some suggested aims are as follows:

- to raise the profile of service user and carer involvement
- to have an inclusive voice
- to make a difference
- influence – should be the main purpose of the national forum – influencing social work education, government and policy makers about the role and value of service user and carer involvement
- to raise the profile and status of social work with the public
- to be a centre of excellence for social work training and to establish a two way process of information gathering and influence
- to encourage and link with similar initiatives in the training of students in medical, nursing and other related professions

‘Some [HEIs] are just ticking boxes, but not really embedding user and carer voices in the programme right across the board. We need to have some way of moving that forward a lot quicker than its going.’

‘[The forum] needs to operate as a unifying central forum of all relevant activity – need to articulate its aims/mission statements. Also be inclusive, go beyond internet.’

2. Values: What values should the national forum have?

There was agreement about the importance of some core values, and discussion about others. Having a strong value base was considered important; the Skills for Care pledge were mentioned. The values that emerged as of primary importance were as follows:

- **Inclusivity:**
Of primary importance was the need to ensure inclusivity, and inevitably other values or principles were closely linked to this one. Celebrating the inclusion of everyone.
- **Equality of access:**
(To membership, to meetings, to information and resources) another essential core value.
 - One of the means for enabling equality of access is through a fair and open payments policy (below). Another is through the judicious use of technology and the website.

- **Clarity regarding; payment policy: ensuring equal access for all:**
Equal treatment, using the document 'Reward and Recognition'. Including travel time to meeting. To make possible a 'level playing field'. To include respite care for carers.
- **Openness & honesty:**
Particularly to include notes of meetings and how decisions are made – potentially using the website.
- **Respect:**
As a core value to enable inclusivity and equality to take place.
- **Participation:**
As a right for all – to include seldom heard groups.
- **Independent Living values:**
The four key Independent Living values of freedom, dignity, choice, and control may unite and resolve some of the conflict between service users and carers.

In addition to these core values, some discussion took place around the following as potential values or principles:

- **Professionalism:**
There was some debate about professionalism as a value, with some people favouring instead the idea of 'recognising the expertise of everyone' – or, the more familiar phrase 'experts by experience'. [The risk of 'over-professionalisation' was raised in the plenary session earlier].
- **Constructive debate:**
Some people felt it important to emphasise constructive debate in the national forum (i.e. focused on improvement/improving things for the future rather than on complaining about the way things are).
- **Campaigning:**
A question was posed about whether the national forum should have a campaigning role – e.g. in raising awareness about involving service users and carers, and about the profile of social work in the eyes of the public.
- **Sound educational principles:**
Were mentioned in one group (and may be transferable from other groups or organisations).

'It's about service users using their knowledge to inform the education of social workers... It's not about them telling their tragic tale; it's about using their unique perspective alongside the academics.'

3. Structure

What are your ideas on the shape, structures of a national forum?

- **Regional representation:**

There was considerable agreement about the need for a structure that will enable local and regional involvement in order to ensure local relevance, for more people to become involved, and to counter the barriers of distance and travel. The national forum should not solely be based in the south and needs to be able to reflect local developments and needs. The value of building on local groups and networks was mentioned. Exactly what form this should take was not clear, but it might involve a series of regional groups or 'hubs'. Suggestions included:

- local groups with an 'umbrella' or central hub to which people would be elected or recruited – see below
- start with the 81 HEIs teaching social work: networks built around these
- an entirely fresh regional structure, looking at the service users and carers currently involved in social work education and where they are based
- starting with known active groups of service users and carers – to build on their expertise and knowledge – adding new groups to this where gaps emerge
- a number of existing models were mentioned: e.g. MHHE, Patient Voices model – working locally and strengthening local ties but influencing nationally.

- **Representation:**

Another area of agreement (and debate) was the need for specific groups of people and themes to be fully represented within the structure; issues such as the inclusion of seldom heard groups, children and young people, and others, gave cause for concern. Whilst one of the ways of resolving this is through accessibility (see below), the structure itself may need to allow these issues to be represented.

Suggestion [AF]: different groups, regions, or hubs may take on different specialisms or areas of responsibility – e.g. by client group, expertise, or activity:

- disability, mental health, children and families, etc

- service users, carers, students, practitioners, teachers and lecturers
- equality and diversity, accessibility, training, communications.
- **Issues and dilemmas to consider within any structure:**
 - Strong two-way links between local/regional groups and the centre or 'umbrella'.
 - Elections to places on the central hub or national forum vs. having transparent recruitment procedures.
 - The need for a 'democratic' and inclusive structure vs. the danger of becoming overly bureaucratic and unable to respond quickly when necessary. There is a need to be able to act or make decisions quickly within a widespread and inclusive structure.
 - The risk of becoming too big and bureaucratic would also be to lose its radical routes, dampen innovation – (perhaps) pointing to the importance of some independence given to local 'hubs'.

4. Membership

What are your ideas on the membership of a national forum?

There was little doubt that the national forum should be service user and carer-led. There was discussion about the immense diversity of people who could be and need to be included, and the challenge that achieving this measure of inclusivity represents.

- **Representation:** Issues of 'representation' have been discussed above in relation to structure. The structure and its membership are closely linked; hence:
 - Would there be an elected core group – and if so, how would the membership of this core group be defined and decided? (cf. Mindlink National Advisory Panel – National Mind[AF]).
 - One option put forward was to have a trade union model with members as subscribers.
- **General membership** to include:
 - service users and carers who are already involved in social work education

- individuals as well as organisations and groups
- direct recruitment of black and minority ethnic service users and carers
- influential people who can assist the national forum to bring about change e.g. GSCC, SCIE
- academic & student reps, to work in partnership
- important to go beyond (but not exclude) the 'usual suspects'
- student, employer, social work practitioner involvement, /membership.

'[The conference] has been stimulating and providing a boost of ideas on ways to embed user and carer involvement in social work education.'

5. Involving seldom heard groups

How can we ensure that participation in social work education involves seldom heard groups?

Commensurate with the core value of 'inclusivity' (see below) participants were keen to emphasise the importance of including seldom heard groups and individuals. Some ways of doing this were discussed, including different ways of communicating. It was suggested that the National Forum needs to be established alongside the employment of these methods (rather than waiting until all accessibility issues are resolved before proceeding).

- range of approaches for communication and involvement, in order to maximise inclusion of all
- the morning workshop (4) agreed upon a key value: that participation of seldom heard groups is a right; it is an entitlement and is not discretionary
- regional structure with good feedback from central to local groups – should also maximise inclusion
 - possibly give one regional group the responsibility for this issue
- participation needs to be constantly reviewed: asking how can we reach more service users and carers and what is meaningful participation?
- employ a development work to go out into the community and engage with seldom heard groups

- important to celebrate successes – and demonstrate what is possible
- lobbying role – to highlight the issues of seldom heard groups
- keep in mind the barriers facing people who are subject to statutory intervention – e.g. children and young people, and to find ways of hearing their voices
- perhaps establish a working group on ensuring that we hear from seldom heard groups.

6. Maintaining the integrity of user and carer perspectives

How can users and carers work effectively together in the field of social work education whilst maintaining the integrity of their perspectives?

Some participants felt that service users and carers could be more powerful when they work together or unite around particular issues. Options proposed to improve the conditions for working together included:

- **Terminology:**
The importance of getting the terminology right; for example, remembering that we are all people, and being clear about definitions where we use them.
- **Communication:**
Better communication will help bridge the gaps between service users and carers and to develop mutual understanding. Sometimes it may be important to ensure sufficient time and space for this to take place.
- **Hearing from seldom heard groups:**
Is an important part of getting this right?
- **Independent living principles:**
An emphasis on the four key values of freedom, dignity, choice, and control may unite and resolve some of the conflict between users and carers.
- **Support:**
Several people expressed concern about the vulnerability of both carers and service users when they involve themselves in this kind of work; sensitivity, training, and support are needed to ensure that people are able to do so.

‘We have a group where both users and carers work together, and the conflict that that generates can promote some really useful stuff.’

7. Integrating the SWEP website and the national forum

How could the SWEP website and the national forum work together?

'The website is fantastic'

- **Integration:**

It was recommended that the website and forum be highly integrated. That the website be the tool of the forum, but that they should operate as one. Additional points were for:

- website compilers to be members of the national forum
- minutes of meetings to be on website.

- **Accessibility:**

The website needs to be easy to read and accessible for all groups to be included in the national forum - careful use of colour and layout, design and text.

- **Regional integration:**

Integration also between regional initiatives and national forum – relates to the structure of the national forum.

- **Web-users and non-users:**

Important to recognise that some people will not be regular users of the web. Variation in web use can be related to a number of factors, such as age, disability, poverty, and geography.

- **Creative use of media:**

To take account of communication, expression, inclusion (not solely the traditional issues of access); suggestions included:

- music performance
- use of local radio, hospital radio, internet radio
- community TV
- local theatre
- art groups and other creative activities.

- **Interactive and immediate use of the website:**

Complete transparency of decisions given on web, chat room on web feeds into the national forum, and ...

- **Speed of feedback:**

This is important for making and keeping the activities and initiatives of the work relevant to participants, (especially those who are attempting to get involved from the relative professional isolation of their own lives)

8. Outputs of national forum

What outputs should the national forum aim for?

This workshop struggled to construct outputs without the existence of terms of reference, aims, and objectives. Hence, one of their suggestions was for the national forum to be an organisation that is inclusive with terms of reference that is inclusive, reaches out, and channels the knowledge and information into education and practice.

Suggestions for outputs (some of which may be better described as national forum activities) include the following:

- course(s) for service users and carers: open /distant learning
- capacity building to be inbuilt
- (the national forum to be) a centre of excellence for social work training and to provide a two way process for information gathering and influence
- (the national forum to be) a resource of ideas and practices
- clear guidance on how to recruit, support, train, and employ service users and carers in a HEI setting
 - perhaps a manual of guidelines – not strict and rigid but open and full of suggestions
- protocols/guidelines covering communication, support, training, payments, and the effect on benefits
- strong leadership that would ensure compassion and humanity, valuing, and understanding human beings and their diverse abilities and contributions
- long-term funding, partnerships with others to achieve this
- ‘template’ idea (for involvement?) – to overcome the patchiness, to be subsumed into good open/distant and e-learning models
- (perhaps link with GSCC) to achieve a system for monitoring of what is going on across HEIs and therefore work towards achieving greater consistency.

Final comments and questions

Comments and questions were put to the panel consisting of Don Brand, Peter Beresford, Andy Cheng, and Fran Branfield.

- It would be helpful to all of us to have an association for user and carer educators so we can come together, support each other, and take strength from one another.
 - Andy Cheng mentioned DUCIE – the development of users and carers in education – which plays a role similar to that mentioned.
- An important role for carers is to help educate social work students in the importance of looking after themselves and developing strategies to protect their own mental health. This would help establish that we all share a common humanity; we are not a separate species.
- A role for the national forum could be to project positive images of social work, how much good practice is going on, and how to elevate the whole. Everybody at some stage will come across social workers whether it is to help them or help their neighbours, which in turn helps them. We are part of a whole society.
 - Peter Beresford agreed that one of the things that this forum can help do is making more visible what good social work is and help there be more good social work.
- The forum will need to build strong and effective links across the UK, with equivalent groups in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.
- Important to consider issues concerning the participation of children and young people and parents of children in the care system; the participation of these groups raises slightly different issues about participation.
 - To clarify: our funding at the moment comes from the Department of Health which covers England – although we are keen to make links with similar groups across the UK and some have been invited here today. Similarly, the funding is from the adult department, so does not cover children and young people – but we do not want to exclude them and there may be opportunities in the future for bringing in funding from that side.
- There is still much to be done in making the involvement of service users and carers **more consistent** across all HEIs; I think there is a real need for integration in terms of finding better ways to ensure that the input and interface of the service users are properly hard-wired into the education system for social workers.

‘It’s something about trying to involve those [HEIs] that are seldom heard – not just publicising it to those of us that are already involved and committed to it’.

Brief Summary of Options

The following is a summary of the key options and issues proposed for the national forum.

- **Being inclusive:**
Perhaps the strongest theme of the day was the need for the national forum to include all people involved in the education of social workers, and people of all backgrounds and disabilities.
- **Being accessible:**
To achieve inclusivity, the forum will need to be accessible, using (for example) a range of methods for communication and meeting, and equitable arrangements for payments.
- **Hearing the voices of seldom heard groups:**
Important both as a part of being inclusive and to demonstrate good practice.
- **Being regional and local as well as national:**
Having strong links with local groups and networks or a structure that establishes these was seen as very important to the new forum.
- **Being able to respond quickly:**
Within the constraints of a national structure.
- **Using the benefits of technology:**
- The website and the forum to act as one, in order to communicate transparently and immediately with members and others.
- **Promoting consistency:**
The forum needs to address the patchiness in user and carer involvement across HEIs.
- **Promoting social work:**
The forum could have a role in promoting positive images of social work as well as promoting good practice in the involvement of service users and carers.

‘Things look rosy for the future of social work education and the role of service users and carers in it.’

‘Thank you for involving me. It has been great. I feel I’ve been able to make a difference.’

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