Promoting the involvement of people with learning difficulties in staff recruitment

The ‘Learning to choose staff’ project aimed to promote and support the involvement of people with learning difficulties in staff recruitment. Drawing on evidence from a previous study, the project workers designed and evaluated a training and development programme for working with five different organisations providing services to people with learning difficulties in England. The project found:

The work with sites followed four main steps: bringing people together; reflecting on current practice; learning and planning; developing, supporting and evaluating initiatives. This four-step model was a helpful format for promoting user involvement in staff recruitment and enabled participants to make changes to their policy and practice.

By the end of the project, four of the five sites had developed detailed plans for initiatives to promote user involvement in staff recruitment, and three sites had implemented their plans at policy and/or practice level.

Project participants used a number of different strategies to promote, change and develop practice and policy relating to user involvement in choosing staff. These strategies fell into five categories: commitment and attitudes; working together; organising resources; developing skills and knowledge; evaluating the process.

The ways in which sites attended to these topic areas had an impact on the extent to which they managed to develop and implement initiatives for user involvement in recruitment. The most successful initiatives were developed at those sites which paid conscious attention to all five themes.

Generating and maintaining commitment was a fundamental foundation for developing initiatives to promote change and improve practice. When commitment was lost, challenged or eroded, even the best-planned initiatives were unable to flourish.

The researchers conclude that the findings of this work have wider relevance: projects that aim to increase participation in practice and policy by people who use services may benefit from paying attention to some of the issues faced, and strategies developed, by participants in this work.
Introduction and background
Previous research in this area has identified a number of factors that promote and inhibit effective user involvement in the recruitment process (see ‘Involving people with learning difficulties in staff recruitment’, Findings Ref: SC91, September 1996). A central issue is the importance of good training and support. The project team had already produced a resource pack about the recruitment process for trainers and supporters working with people with learning difficulties (Getting involved in choosing staff; see ‘How to get further information’ section). They were aware, however, that published documents are not always the most effective way to bring about changes in policy and practice.

The ‘Learning to choose staff’ project put research findings directly into the hands of people with learning difficulties and professionals. Between 1998 and 2000, the project team worked with five organisations in England, all of which were providing services to people with learning difficulties.

The four steps of the ‘Learning to choose staff’ project
The programme of work with each of the five sites followed a four-step format:

1. Bringing people together
2. Reflecting on current practice
3. Learning and planning
4. Developing, supporting and evaluating the initiatives.

Bringing people together
The first step involved bringing people together to discuss the scope and nature of the project and their involvement in it. The project team did this by setting up a series of introductory meetings and presentations at each site which focused on issues including: the benefits of user involvement in recruitment; the main stages of the recruitment process; participants’ expectations of the project and if/how these would be met; and a discussion of how the format of the training and development might be changed to fit any particular needs.

Reflecting on current practice
Participants at each of the five sites were supported to reflect on their current practice through a pre-training audit and goal-setting exercise. Interviews were conducted with professionals and people with learning difficulties, and enabled individuals and sites to look at their current practice and identify goals for their involvement in the project.

Learning and planning
This step involved organising and implementing a training programme and encouraging each site to draw up an action plan for developing its own initiatives. The training programme was presented to sites as a model for working together and for involving people with learning difficulties. Practitioners and people with learning difficulties learned about the recruitment process together, as well as about each other’s abilities, needs and perspectives. In this way, the project modelled good practice in user involvement through the actual format of the training itself.

The basic format of the training involved an initial three days’ training for people with learning difficulties and support staff together, followed by a day for managers and people with learning difficulties, and a further day for policy-makers and people with learning difficulties. The training days provided opportunities for participants to learn more about the recruitment process, and to work in partnership with each other to achieve effective user involvement. By the end of the training programme, each site had developed a detailed action plan for implementing the initiative within its own organisation.

Developing, supporting and evaluating initiatives
After the training, project participants took the initiatives forward within their own services, with some on-going support from the project team. The fourth step of the project was to conduct follow-up and evaluation work at each site via a series of follow-up meetings two to six months after the training, and final interviews six months to one year after the training. Interviews were held with people from each of the four stakeholder groups: people with learning difficulties, support staff, managers and policy-makers. Participants found that the final evaluation was a helpful way of reaffirming their commitment to the goals they had set themselves, emphasising an important link between the development and evaluation components of the project.

Strategies for promoting change and improving practice
By the end of their involvement in the project, four of the five sites had put further work into developing their plans for initiatives to promote user involvement in staff recruitment. Three sites had taken their plans forward at either policy or practice level.

Project participants developed a range of strategies for promoting user involvement in recruitment and changing their practice. These strategies fell within five main categories:

- commitment and attitudes;
- working together;
organising resources;
• developing skills and knowledge;
• evaluating the process.

The ways in which sites made use of these strategies for change had an impact on the extent to which participants managed to develop and implement initiatives. The most successful initiatives were developed at those sites which paid attention to all five themes and developed strategies to get the most value out of their involvement in the project. Generating and maintaining commitment and using evidence of success to change attitudes were fundamental. When commitment was lost, challenged or eroded, even the best-planned initiatives were unable to flourish.

Generating and maintaining commitment - threats and opportunities
Participants encountered the following threats to generating and maintaining commitment to the initiatives they set up:

• competing priorities, such as wider organisational change;
• lack of, or loss of, an active champion;
• lack of opportunities for putting learning into practice;
• difficulties in maintaining relationships between the four stakeholder groups, such as between support staff and managers, or between managers and policy-makers;
• uncertainty, or confusion, over the extent and nature of commitment to the initiative;
• no champions at policy level;
• resistance and lack of enthusiasm.

At several sites, however, practitioners and people with learning difficulties were able to overcome these threats by developing and maintaining commitment in the following ways:

• the existence of active champions at policy and practice levels;
• identifying key people from each stakeholder group and developing new champions for the initiative;
• maintaining relationships between the four stakeholder groups;
• responding to organisational and attitudinal challenges;
• using evidence of success as a means to encourage and enthuse others;
• keeping the initiative alive;
• sharing information about the topic with others;
• keeping the views of people with learning difficulties at the forefront so that policy was led and informed by practice;
• documenting and reviewing practice and obstacles;
• revising plans, and wider practice, where necessary.

Wider implications of the project
‘Learning to choose staff’ aimed to implement and evaluate the process of improving practice in one specific area - user involvement in staff recruitment. However, the project’s messages have wider relevance. The methodology itself, and the strategies developed by participants could be used to inform a range of other work. Projects that aim to increase participation in practice and policy by people who use services may benefit from paying attention to some of the issues faced, and strategies developed, by participants.

The project team developed the following checklist of strategies for success in promoting change and improving practice.

Commitment and attitudes
• identify and/or develop champions and other key people to take the initiative forward and support them as appropriate;
• promote the role of people with learning difficulties as central to the success of the initiative;
• clarify the extent and nature of commitment;
• document, in writing, commitment to take part in the project, and to the underlying principles of the project;
• respond to different levels of commitment and challenge attitudes where necessary;
• use evidence of success to promote and maintain commitment.

Working together
• identify key individuals, or contacts, within each organisation;
• identify other participants from each of these groups: people with learning difficulties, policy-makers, managers, support staff;
• get agreement to take part from all participants;
• develop rapport and close working with key contacts;
• keep the perspective of people with learning difficulties at the forefront;
• establish and develop relationships between stakeholder groups;
• encourage practitioners and people with learning difficulties to work together;
• include people with learning difficulties in meetings to discuss the project and initiatives where possible;
• find ways of keeping the initiative alive.

Organising resources
• respond to the advice of key contacts and their working styles;
• plan and develop initiatives for taking forward user involvement in recruitment;
• set realistic and achievable goals including details of who will do what by when;
• provide support for those involved, especially people with learning difficulties;
• maintain flexibility;
• respond to challenges as they arise.

Developing skills and knowledge
• share information about the topic;
• recognise and value each other’s abilities, needs and perspectives;
• ensure shared understanding of concepts;
• learn about the benefits, theory and practice of the initiative (e.g. the recruitment process and how to involve people with learning difficulties in this);
• model good practice;
• keep learning up-to-date;
• provide opportunities for putting learning into practice.

Evaluating the process
• document on-going work and share this with others, including those ‘outside’ the initiative;
• reflect on current practice;
• reflect on obstacles and opportunities;
• evaluate progress against action plans/goals;
• revise plans if necessary;
• collect process and outcome data using a variety of methods (e.g. questionnaires, interviews, notes of meetings);
• agree a date to feed back outcomes to everyone.

About the project
The project was based at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol. The work with sites took place in England between October 1998 and May 2000. The five sites represented large, medium, and small providers of statutory, voluntary and private residential or day services to adults with learning difficulties.

A conference was held in September 2000 to which all participants were invited, with ninety people attending on the day. It was a chance for the project team to provide overall feedback on the outcomes of the work, and for participants to exchange information both within and between their respective organisations. In addition, the conference was a celebration of people’s hard work and involvement in the project, whatever the outcomes at that point. It was also intended to act as a spur to further action and development for those sites that had not yet implemented their plans.

How to get further information
The full report, Committed to change? Promoting the involvement of people with learning difficulties in staff recruitment by Ruth Townsley, Joyce Howarth, Mark Graham and Pete LeGrys, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 434 1, price £13.95). It is available from Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4YN, Tel: 01235 465500, Fax: 01235 465556, email: direct.orders@marston.co.uk. (Please add £2.75 p&p for first book and 50p per book thereafter.)

How to choose staff is an audio-tape and accompanying 12-page booklet for people with learning difficulties. The tape was produced by a group of people with learning difficulties who acted as advisers to the project team. It summarises the work of the project and the main messages for people with learning difficulties. This is also available from Marston Book Services (free to individual self-advocates and service user groups).

The resource pack – Getting involved in choosing staff - on which the training programme was based is available from Pavilion Publishing, The Ironworks, Cheapside, Brighton, BN1 4GD, Tel: 01273 623222 (price £55 (£35 to self-advocacy groups). A separate companion photo pack – Images for equality – was developed by the project team to facilitate discussion around stereotyping, assumption and prejudice. It is also available from Pavilion Publishing (price £39.95).

The following Findings look at related issues:
• Involving people with learning difficulties in staff recruitment, Sept 96 (Ref: 91)
• Implementing direct payments for people with learning difficulties, Mar 99 (Ref: 349)
• People with learning difficulties and their access to direct payments schemes, Jun 99 (Ref: 649)
• Adults with learning difficulties’ involvement in health care decision-making, Oct 99 (Ref: 029)
• Demonstrating control of decisions by adults with learning difficulties who have high support needs, Oct 01 (Ref: 021)

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