

LEARNING POINT 31

service user involvement as an essential part of developing employability services: the *EQUAL* Access Development Partnership

- willing to trust service users;
- prepared to learn from others and draw on a range of approaches; and
- build on what's already there.

What next?

Future developments could include:

- building SUI into policy and learn from the insights gained in this EQUAL Access Development Partnership;
- funding partners using SUI to assess the collective needs of local projects and services; and
- individual services and programmes being designed and refined using SUI processes, and building SUI into the contracting process.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information about any of the issues mentioned in this learning point, please contact:

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Scottish Poverty Information Unit:
www.povertyinformation.org

Scottish Drugs Forum: www.sdf.org.uk

Other formats

You can request this publication in large print, Braille or on audio cassette, and we can provide translations into other languages. Please contact Janette Campbell on 0131 479 5162 or email translations@communitiescotland.gsi.gov.uk

The Scottish Centre for Regeneration is part of Communities Scotland, the Scottish Government's housing and regeneration agency.



What are learning points?

Learning points share what people have learned from their experience in regeneration – from people working or talking together, or from research into issues and evaluation of what is happening. Learning points can help people and organisations to improve their practice through identifying what works and what doesn't.

What is this learning point about?

People with health and other problems can have difficulty finding work. To help them, a range of health, social care and employment agencies need to work closely together. Providing the

right service at the right time can help people in these circumstances make progress towards and into work.

This learning point is about the work of the EQUAL Access Development Partnership, which brings together policymakers, practitioners and academics with a common interest in the job market and social inclusion.

It records a variety of ways of involving service users with long-term illness and other barriers to work in projects designed to enhance their employability. It also reflects on how their involvement can improve services.

The views expressed in learning points are those of participants at various events and are not necessarily shared by their employers, SCR or Communities Scotland.

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This is one of three learning points produced to share lessons from the partnership's work. The other two are: Case Management (LP 33) and Integration of Services (LP 32).

Why service user involvement?

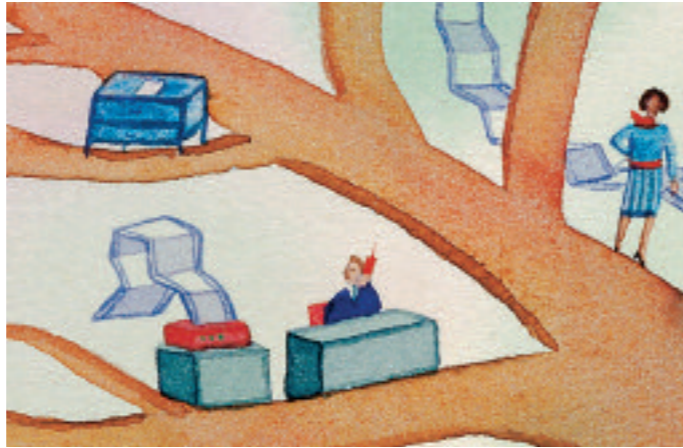
Service user involvement (SUI) in the management, design and delivery of services gives clients a role in improving service quality, which in turn has a positive impact on their future.

Involving users has become an increasingly important issue for health and welfare services. Government and other funders are keen to see more user-led activities and greater value is attached to the role of service users. The EQUAL SUI project carried out a literature review which showed that involving service users can have a significant and positive impact on services.

The literature review also showed that in employability services users are sometimes stereotyped as more passive and dependent with little to offer and little to gain from involvement in service development. Developing ways of boosting the role of service users has been seen as much more difficult to achieve. Involving people in developing the service for themselves and others, however, can improve client skills and confidence. It can also improve the ability of projects and the service as a whole to respond to the complex needs of the long-term unemployed.

What do we mean by service user involvement?

The EQUAL SUI Project was a joint action research project between Glasgow Caledonian University and public and voluntary sector projects that were developing integrated services and case management for people whose health problems were a barrier to employment. Over 18 months the study identified existing approaches to help these people, and recommended new ones.



The study found employability services involve their clients in a variety of ways; from consultation alone to full participation in management. It also illustrated other approaches:

- Information sharing: North Lanarkshire's Routes to Health project showed how forming a service user group to contribute to a newsletter about the project improved understanding between staff and users and increased user confidence.
- Consultation and regular reviews: the Sorted/Wise Move project in Edinburgh showed that regular reviews of a programme by service users with addiction problems can have a significant impact on the short, medium and longer-term development of a programme. It can also make users more trusting of the services they are using and increase staff confidence.
- Participation in service planning: the Rosemount project in Glasgow helped service users act as peer researchers to identify what other users wanted from the service. They felt empowered by their involvement as researchers, passed on their skills to other service users and the service itself became more effective as a result.
- Sharing lessons and improving understanding: the EQUAL SUI project involved service users to help plan and organise a conference involving several countries across Europe. The service users' participation and presentations gave agency representatives a better understanding

- of the benefits of service user involvement.
- Including service users in delivering a service: the Community Renewal project in Paisley showed that some people can be helped to make the transition from service user to staff member. Not only did service users gain skills and confidence, but the organisation also got a better insight into the issues facing clients as they move towards full employment.

What are the important issues?

Involving service users in employment services can help them develop the skills, confidence and abilities to prepare them for employment. But while this may empower those who expect to get most in the first place, those with the lowest expectations may remain 'unheard'. And helping these people takes time and resources.

A service user perspective may sit uncomfortably alongside expectations that professionals have about how they design and deliver their service. They may accept more the idea of a client-focused rather than client-led service.

Government and local authorities stress the value of involving users in service development but SUI is not routinely used as a performance indicator. The result is that SUI tends to fall off the agenda of medium to large scale services. There is little evidence of a set of standards being used to ensure that SUI is handled well.

What has been learned?

The major lessons are as follows:

- User involvement is a valuable tool for employability services – for enhancing users' skills and for making services more effective.
- Timing is crucial to securing the enthusiasm and energy of service users. The best time to learn from their experience of a service varies for each service
- Staff need resources and support to develop SUI policies. Where staff don't feel involved in how a service develops it is difficult for them to see the benefits of SUI.

- Policymakers support the idea of SUI in employability services but admit they need guidance on how to put it into practice.
- Most projects can find a method of involvement that suits users and staff. There is a wide variety of approaches that agencies can draw on. It demands flexibility, resources and time to be effective.

For policy makers

- Performance indicators and guidelines such as the National Standards for Community Engagement could be developed nationally to encourage SUI to be adopted as normal practice.
- SUI activities enhance employability and help improve projects, but information gathered in the process could be used more effectively to inform the policy process for workforce development on a larger scale, in a similar way to the Scottish Drugs Forum's SUI programme.

For local partnerships

- Involvement is different from engagement. The commitment to act on users' views can help build trust and improve efficiency.
- Employability partners need to understand the benefit, both for clients and services, of involving users in service development and delivery.
- Senior managers should invest time to promote the benefits of SUI to front line staff and provide them with the appropriate resources.

For practitioners

- Key features of projects that successfully involve clients in service development and delivery at the same time as enhancing their own employability are:
- small rather than large-scale services;
 - creative in their approach;
 - able to provide quick and effective responses to users' views;
 - honest about what can and cannot be changed;