

Peter Beresford

## **Negotiating The Learning: Social work, state and service users**

Hello everyone. Peter Beresford here. It's really good to be part of your conference and to be speaking with you. I am really sorry that I cannot be with you in Sweden. Instead I am speaking to you from Brunel University in West London where I work. I hope you can hear and see me ok. My focus today is on service user involvement in social work education and broader social work issues that relate to it and I want to refer to our experience here in England as well as the valuable lessons I learned when I spent time with colleague educators, students and service users in Sweden in 2008.

### **Introducing myself**

Briefly to introduce myself I have three roles and perspectives which I bring to what I say today. First as a social work educator and researcher here at Brunel University as I said where I also have responsibility as director of one of the University's research centres, the Centre for Citizen Participation, which prioritises participation and involvement in its process, focus and research approach and has a diverse service user advisory group. Second, as someone who identifies as a long term user of mental health services, which included social work as well as the gamut of mental health/psychiatric services. Third as someone actively involved in service user and disabled people's movements and chair of a national service user controlled organization and network, Shaping Our Lives, please

google us. Over a period of 14 or so years Shaping Our Lives has been actively involved in developing user involvement, user controlled research and user involvement in social work education. To sum me up I am engaged as and have the viewpoints of both a social work educator and researcher and a service user and user researcher. I find these different experiences really helpful and hope they will be helpful to you.

## **England and Sweden**

I want to start by saying a bit more about our experience concerning service user involvement in social work education here in England and the valuable lessons I have learned from Sweden. It is helpful to remember that service user involvement in social work education is a relatively recent development. But although it has only a short history, already it is an international development, with policy and practice taking different forms in different countries.

My involvement in two national initiatives, one in England, the other in Sweden, have made it possible for me to make some initial comparisons. The initiative in the UK is one that was originally jointly led by the Social Care Institute for Social Care (SCIE), which was given the task by government of developing the knowledge base of social care and Shaping Our Lives, my organization, the independent national user controlled organization. More recently, carers became become an additional partner in the project under the auspices of a team from the University of Sussex. We have all collaborated well

together and have met regularly in an advisory group that also involves local service users and carers and their organisations. The aim of this initiative, which is called Social Work Education Participation – check out our website through SCIE and which is funded by the UK Department of Health has been to develop a strategic approach to taking forward user and carer involvement at national level in England through collaboration between service users, social care and education and training organisations.

I was involved in the Swedish initiative as a member of the panel which met with eight universities discussing with them their progress on service user involvement in social work education.

### **A key difference**

The major difference that emerged for me between the UK and Swedish situations is that in England, since the introduction of the three year professional social work qualification at degree level at the beginning of the twenty first century, there is a legal requirement for there to be user – and indeed carer - involvement in all aspects and stages of social work education at both qualifying and post-qualifying levels. The same requirement does not currently exist in Sweden. English colleges have also received a sum of money to support the costs of user involvement from central government each year since this reform was introduced. Such funding and legislative requirements have helped advance user involvement in social work education in England, by providing a lever for educators and service users who

are committed to developing it. This has been really valuable and something I think you would find helpful to have in Sweden. However, even so, user involvement it is still patchy in the UK, with examples of very good practice in some areas and poorer, less developed practice elsewhere.

### **Areas for involvement**

Service user involvement in England is required and expected in many areas of social work education. For example, in student selection and assessment, in shaping and monitoring the curriculum, in presentations and teaching and in learning materials,. It should also be embodied in the theories and ideas that are taught. So, for example, the social model of disability and the philosophy of independent living developed by the disabled people's movement more and more figure on social work courses. Some placements are also taking place in service user organisations – and the same thing can be seen to be happening to varying degrees in Sweden.

### **Areas of difference**

But I also noticed some big differences in what was happening in England and Sweden. Different groups of service users seemed to be involved in the two countries. In the UK, disabled people, mental health service users and people with learning difficulties, as well as families with children, most often appear to be involved. In Sweden, people who had been in the criminal justice system and people who

had used illegal drugs seemed to be more involved. I did not see any people with learning difficulties involved in Sweden. As I have said, there are also in England efforts to involve parents with children involved with social workers, but I think efforts to involve children and very young people in England still tend to be limited. I wonder how that is working in Sweden. Creative and appropriate methods to involve children are needed and important.

Involving people with physical and sensory impairments and with learning difficulties raises access issues. That is to say, physical and communication access must be addressed if they are to be involved on equal terms. This may be an area for further work in Sweden. In both Sweden and the UK, older people do not seem to be as much involved as might be hoped, given that they are the largest single group of people eligible for and using social care services. There does so far seem to be a stronger awareness of physical, communication and cultural access issues in the UK than in Sweden.

### **Social work students' interest**

It was evident in the Swedish project that while some social work students were not interested in service user involvement, others were very interested in getting involved. This seemed to be particularly true where they had shared experience and identities as service users and valued the direct experience that service users brought into their professional education. Students seem to have been less involved in the UK, but the Swedish experience suggests that not only may this

bring many benefits to students, but it may provide further insights and support for user involvement, encouraging its positive development. Certainly from our experience most students greatly value learning sessions provided by and involving service users.

## **Service user organisations**

There also seem to be differences between service user organisations in the UK and Sweden. In Sweden I encountered people involved in organisations of former drug users, alcohol temperance organisations and organisations for people with experience of prison and the criminal justice system. In the UK, there is much more emphasis on the involvement of people who are part of organisations controlled by disabled people, mental health service users and people with learning difficulties. Such organisations seem to have developed differently in the two countries. There are lessons for both countries from the different ways this has developed.

## **Barriers in the UK**

There are some problems and barriers, perhaps shared problems and barriers it may be helpful to mention.

Perhaps because user involvement is a requirement in England, policy and practice for paying service users for their contribution, time and expertise have developed extensively. This has encouraged service users to get involved. Welfare benefits policy however has not

necessarily been consistent with service users getting involved and this has created barriers, although some reforms have been taking place in national policy and practice. The same progress on payment does not seem to have been made generally in Sweden as far as I understand.

In the UK, there has so far been a failure to address user involvement across different issues and make sure it is all connected up helpfully. This means, for example, that although service users and their organisations are increasingly expected to get involved in consultations and other initiatives for participation across a wide range of policies, at local and national levels, little attempt has been made to integrate these demands or to support service users and their organisations' capacity to take them on. I am not clear if the same problem exists in Sweden, certainly we have found it can overburden service users and their organisations and discourage their involvement when it can be really helpful.

### **Importance of user controlled organisations**

Related to this, in the UK, while the government has committed itself to supporting the development of a national network of local user controlled or user led organisations, which would ideally be the focal point for all such involvement, as yet adequate and reliable funding and resources have not been made available for this. The funding of user controlled organisations remains inadequate and insecure, so that some organisations are failing, even as new ones are being set

up. This puts a real limit on the degree of effective user involvement that can take place in social work education. The limited capacity of service user organisations in the UK means that many either do not know about or are not involved in social work education, despite the important gains it may bring. Our experience suggests that supporting such user controlled organisations is really helpful for taking forward effectively user involvement in social work and social work education.

In the UK there therefore seems to be a bit of a mismatch at present between the expectations of social work education departments in University, which are keen to advance user involvement and the resources available to service users and their organisations to undertake this. Instead of resources going from central and local state to service users' organisations to support capacity building among service users, in England, colleges are themselves having to finance and develop training for user involvement in social work education. Since they only receive their state funding on an annual basis and it is limited, it is also difficult for them to think and act strategically over the longer term.

### **Helpful steps forward**

One area where work seems to be advanced in the UK is in the development of service user materials for social work education. The disabled people's movement, particularly, but other movements too, have produced theory, new research approaches, research findings, articles, DVDs and books which are beginning to be widely used on social work courses. I don't know if the same things is happening in

Sweden, but I would say from our experience that it is really helpful and that it represents a valuable expression of ‘user involvement’.

Similarly in the UK, service users are increasingly being recruited to social work departments as members of staff, particularly with responsibility for developing user involvement, but also in other more mainstream roles. As I have said, I am myself identified as both a service user and a senior academic teaching and researching in a social work department. I think it is important that this happens more and more. This may be an area where more work could helpfully be undertaken in Sweden in terms of encouraging the recruitment of service users to educational staff. The employment of workers, including as user involvement workers may also offer social work departments a helpful route to develop enhanced user involvement in Sweden. People with experience as service users are also increasingly undertaking PhDs in the UK and this may be another area for expansion in Sweden.

### **Another helpful way forward in England**

As I mentioned at the beginning of this report, a strategic national initiative to advance user involvement in social work education in which I have been fortunate to be involved has existed for several years in England, funded by the Department of Health. We did have funding for two more years, but the spending cuts now taking place in the UK mean that it seems that has been reduced to one year, sadly limiting some of what we can do. A web-based network is currently

being established as part of this. There have also been a number of national as well as regional and local conferences on the subject, bringing together different stakeholders and sharing learning and experience. This could offer a helpful way to go for people concerned with user involvement in social work education in Sweden too.

### **State, social work, service users and social work education**

Finally I would like to turn to more general issues – issues which set the context for this development and discussion of user and carer involvement in social work education.

In what I have been saying so far, I have highlighted at least four spheres of activity and their relationships. These are 1. state/government, 2. social work, 3. service users and 4. Social work education. Each of these is a complex entity involving complex ideas. I can only outline these here of course today.

### **Who shapes social work?**

The reality in the UK is that social work practice generally is and has not been shaped and constructed by social workers themselves. The concern that has been expressed within social work from many stakeholders, coming from many different political positions, has been that social work has been shaped much more by government and its policymakers; that social work has been governed by the constraints and ideology increasingly imposed upon it by successive neo-liberal, managerialist governments, committed to new public management

ideas and their policy approaches and agendas. We have heard such concerns especially during the discussions that have taken place here in the wake of the Baby Peter tragedy and inquiry and the resulting social work task force, strongly expressed by social work leaders, trade unions and professional and policy organisations, practitioners, researchers and educators and now in the first report of the new government appointed Monroe Inquiry into child protection social work. Great concern has been raised about increasing external controls over practice and practitioners, the emphatic use of information technology as a vehicle in this; constraints in professional independence and decision-making; the dominance of management and financial decision making as the bottom line in shaping what professionals do and of course their large scale recasting as care managers. Maybe you experience some of these problems too in Sweden.

### **State and social work or something more?**

Here in the UK the struggle has tended generally and predominantly to be presented as one between two sets of institutions; those of social work and those of the state (both central and local). Social work has sought to defend itself in terms of its professionalism. It has argued the failure to respect its professional standing - and a key proposal for the future has been that social work establish a college of social work to provide it with a voice and strengthen its standing for the future. This is now happening. Social work education is key to

and stands close to the profession of social work. Most if not all social work educators in England come from a professional background of social work. It is sometimes argued and even assumed that only social workers can themselves undertake such education. Only social workers should have a role in shaping social work. I want to suggest that such a view of social work professionalism, such a narrow interpretation of it, may be problematic and unsatisfactory.

### **The equal importance of user involvement**

I am on the other hand encouraged, by emerging developments in the UK like the Social Work Action Network – check out its website - which argue explicitly and determinedly for a social work based on social justice and committed to broader struggles alongside other groups and interests towards the achievement of social justice, human and civil rights. Its deliberate and close alliance with and involvement of service users and organisations is also a priority and highly evident.

Which brings me to my final point. If the struggle for social work has often been presented as one between a controlling state and a modern profession – if it has been seen as a struggle with two key strands to it, then I would dispute this. I would argue that there are three key strands and three key discourses here.

- There is that of the state and governments and their concerns – which I have already mentioned;
- There is that about social work with a professionalizing purpose – to which I have also referred;
- But there are also service users, their organisations and agendas.

And for service users there are big ambiguities about social work. They value its advocacy role. They value its social approaches when those operate. But they also see social work with its key control role as often acting as part of and on behalf of the state, for example, when it is involved in the regulation, policing and restriction of rights of asylum seekers and refugees.

This reframing of the context and framework of social work is key for social work education. Is social work education to be a narrow project, something committed to advancing the professional role, status and identity of social work, truly only centrally involving state and profession. Or is it an activity that can and should be undertaken in equality with service users and their organisations to advance the knowledge base to secure social justice and the rights and interests of service users? If it is the former, then I suspect it will have limited and regulatory prospects as a narrow professionalized social work that fails to operate in alliance with service users and their organisations. If it is the latter, then we may have an expanding, pioneering and effective area of professional education for the future

and we will see social work education and service users increasingly allied and working together. This I believe is the route to a successful future for social work education. I know that I and many other service users think that what we need for flourishing social work education that supports a flourishing social work practice is effective and broadbased user involvement. Thank you