

**Good Practice for Involving Service Users[[1]](#footnote-1) in Social Work Education**

**Introduction**

It is now universally accepted that quality engagement with, and involvement of patients, clients, service users, carers and communities can have a positive impact on the delivery and outcome of both health and social care services. This is particularly true in the training of new staff. Social work has been to the fore in involving service users in the delivery of the Degree in Social Work (the Degree) since it was introduced into N Ireland in 2004.

Furthermore, shortly after the commencement of the Degree, a major report was commissioned by NISCC, HEA and SCIE; ‘Participating and Learning: Citizen Involvement in Social Work Education in the N Ireland Context’ (Duffy 2006). In brief this report formally recognised the invaluable contribution made by service users to social work training, and recommended that this group should be meaningfully involved at all levels in the delivery of the Degree, including strategic planning. It also urged that this contribution had to be supported and valued - 'in monetary terms'.

The out workings of the above report build a strong foundation upon which the meaningful involvement of service users has flourished. This has been evidenced in each of the reviews of the Degree (2009, 2014 and 2019). This progress was also recognised in the 2018 Regional Service User and Carer Conference, 'Learning through Listening' at which a Quality Improvement Plan was agreed.

In seeking to progress this Quality Improvement Plan, between June 2019 and March 2020, further meetings and workshops have taken place with representatives from the academic institutions, statutory, voluntary and community organisations, as well as service users who have been involved with the Degree. This collaboration has led to agreeing a shared mission statement, with associated objectives and underpinning value base. These are outlined below along with the resultant guidelines upon which practice should be based.

**Good Practice for Involving Service Users’ in Social Work Education**

**Mission Statement**

To encourage, facilitate and support the meaningful involvement of service users within the delivery of the Degree in helping students connect with the core purpose of social work which is to seek to improve and safeguard social well-being.

**Objectives**

To set out regional guidelines in relation to the involvement of all service users within the Degree to:

* encourage and sustain service user engagement and involvement
* clarify contracting and payment issues
* ensure duty of care and support is delivered to service users involved in Degree delivery

**Values**

A collective commitment from all social work agencies and educational establishments to :

* engage with and promote shared relationships with service users from a basis of mutual respect and trust
* value and respect the lived experience of service users from all backgrounds and social work settings
* learn from the voices of services users
* work creatively in partnership with service users
* ensure that service users will be the co-owners and co-producers of their contributions, underpinned by choice, including the right to withdraw at any stage
* promote and nourish service user growth and personal development
* ensure safety and duty of care to service users

**The Guidelines**

Within the context of effective service user involvement, all social work practice and educational organisations are responsible for and will work proactively and collaboratively towards involving service users in the delivery of the Degree.

**Guidelines for Social Work agencies:**

1. encourage their staff to be open to involving service users in the Degree within a clear and transparent process.
2. provide guidance to all social work staff in terms of having appropriate conversations with potentially interested service users.
3. develop approaches that will ensure that service users are referred onto university/higher education providers in an ethical and supportive way. (Staff undertaking this role should have experience of the Degree).
4. ensure that there is engagement across the diversity of service users, providing support to those from ‘harder to reach’ groups to encourage participation
5. record and audit the number of service users who engage with the Degree each year

**Guidelines for University/HE providers:**

1. ensure that there will be a nominated person, that all staff will be aware of and link with, responsible for co-ordinating both the involvement and support of services users, with a recognised work weighting attached to this role.
2. offer all service users the opportunity to meet and have conversations in the college in order to discuss and reflect on what is involved before a decision to participate is taken.
3. ensure service users have the option to hear about the experiences of other service users either through meetings or use of digital recordings.
4. have conversations with service users about the importance of ensuring their safety in relation to the sharing of personal information.
5. provide opportunities for service users to engage on a voluntary basis or to receive payment for contributions within a transparent and equitable process.
6. make service users aware that payments may impact on certain benefits. Advice should be given to service users to seek guidance from an appropriate source to allow them to make an informed decision to proceed.
7. register each service user with the University / HE provider in contributing to the professional development of students ensuring adherence to GDPR requirements. (This will not prevent engagement with other establishments).
8. ensure that each service user is linked with a tutor who will act as a key first point of contact and provide ongoing support, particularly before, during and after each engagement with students.
9. facilitate the sharing of service users’ views, needs, aspirations, experiences and knowledge in real face to face contacts with students to enrich learning
10. evaluate the service user’s experience and impact on students’ learning in respect of both short-term and long-term outcomes
11. provide opportunities for personal and educational development.
12. access for service users to staff care services if required
13. disseminate and share resources across the region

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**Conclusion**

The positive practice in this area which has, and continues to evolve across the Social Work Programmes in N Ireland, should be recognised. The guidelines outlined above are made both in testimony to this positive situation and the reality that service user involvement has rightly gained its place at the centre of social work education.

The guidelines are not intended to be overly prescriptive. They reflect the views of many of those involved in this area. They provide some parameters and clarity around continuing to value and encourage the vital and creative involvement of service users’ lived experiences in helping prepare future social workers for the challenging world of practice. They also recognise that meaningful engagement is time/resource dependent, cannot be rushed and can only be achieved in partnership with service users. Ultimately, they reflect the reality that it is everyone’s responsibility to promote a community of learning and practice. This community of learning will require continuing efforts to sustain and build upon the progress that has been made. Future actions have been identified and will need to be carried forward in a continuing spirit of collaboration and partnership between agencies and in partnership with service users.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**References**

Duffy, J. (2006) Citizen Involvement in Social Work Education in N Ireland Context A Good Practice Guide

Duffy, J et al (2020) Differing Knowledges: Comparing the contribution of drama students and service users in role plays preparing social work students for practice. *Social Work Education* (Accepted 15th Jan 2020)

MacDermott, D., & Harkin-MacDermott, C. (2019) Co-Producing a Shared Stories Narrative Model for Social Work Education with Experts by Experience, *Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/09503153.2019.1704235](https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2019.1704235)

Mc Keever, B. (2019) User Involvement More than Words. Derry Guildhall Press

1. In the interests of brevity, the term service user is used to describe social work service recipients and carers, whilst recognising that the language of involvement is both political and contested. (Duffy et al 2020). It is also of note that a leading and influential advocate for service user involvement refers to ‘users’ as those who directly use services as well as those who care voluntarily for those who use services (carers) (Mc Keever 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Future action steps have been agreed and will be shared by the Partnership with all stakeholders in due course [↑](#footnote-ref-2)