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Probation Board
for Northern Ireland

Service User Involvement in Criminal Justice Social Work: the theory, the practice and the 'real world' challenges

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Context

- Director of Operations with Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI)
- Commenced research with Ulster University late 2020, target completion date late 2026
- Probation Officers are Social Work qualified
- Work at every stage of Criminal Justice - Court, Community and Custody
- Service User Involvement Strategy introduced in 2017

Service User Involvement in Criminal Justice

- Service user involvement in Probation is very different and potentially more challenging than in other areas in Health and Social Care as all service users are ‘involuntary’
- Markedly underdeveloped and under resourced (Weaver et al, 2019)
- Little empirical evidence regarding effect / impact of service user involvement
- ‘Giving back’ is a critical component of desistance (Maruna 2001)

Aims and Objectives

- Aim

Explore the development of service user involvement in the criminal justice system, how 'offenders' are involved, what does this look like in reality, and what are the potential effects of involving 'offenders' and former 'offenders'.

- Secondary Questions

1. What are the benefits of current service user involvement initiatives and are they fit for purpose?
2. What are the constraints to service user involvement and what are the limitations of their involvement?
3. What are the implications for public policy and daily practice – should service user involvement be prioritised and formalised in the justice sector?

Literature Review

- Involvement and Participation
- Partnership and Power
- Desistance

Ethics

- Two phase ethical approval sought via Ulster University – phase one involved staff, phase two involved service users
- Additionally, approval was sought in each jurisdiction (NI, Scotland and England)
- Challenges in ethical / approval process
- Timescales underestimated

Two Phase Approach

- Phase One

Ten interviews were conducted with staff in Northern Ireland (3), England (3) and Scotland (4) who are involved in the facilitation of service user initiatives.

- Phase Two

One focus group with service users in Northern Ireland

Two focus groups with service users in England (one male / one female)

Six life story/narrative interviews with service users in Northern Ireland, five male and one female

12 life story/narrative interviews with service users in England, eight male and four female.

Recruitment

- Staff / facilitator recruitment
- Service user recruitment

Data Analysis

- Transcription of interviews
- Identifying themes / Coding
- Thematic Narrative Analysis
- Nvivo

Findings?

- *“I now have an identity because of the group. It helped me to not to associate my identity with my past, because I’m not my past now. It’s because of my past that I am where I am now, but I’m not defined any longer by the things that happened to me”*
- *“With the women’s group, I was able to bring my artwork in and I sort of taught a little class and we all made stuff and it shows me what is possible for me, what future options I have”*
- *“My mother once told me, “you’re never going to be anything”. I couldn’t see past that, I thought I’m gonna be nothing but look at me now, I’ve been published in CONNECT twice, because of this group I have my artwork hanging in Stormont, people in Probation ask me for my opinion and when I tell them, they listen, they do something about it, I’m not nothing”*
- *“Even if I just help one person, that’s all that matters and I really do think this approach is helping people, it’s giving people an even better chance, even more support. Just one person at a time”*

- *“Letting people know that their opinions, their ideas are valuable, the power of that is not to be underestimated. The guys in the group, we're all benefiting from that. You can see that, we're all keen to go to the group, we all get something out of the group. That group gives people a purpose, I don't think it's too strong to say it gives people a reason to still be here”*
- *“It's hard to describe but I felt worthless, the lowest of the low, and given what I had done, I deserved to feel that way. But I'm using my experience and I'm making a difference to people now, I'm helping people who are coming after me and maybe making probation a wee bit better. It will never take away what I did or how I hurt people but I'm doing my very best to help people and that makes me feel good”*

Questions?

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