

Involving people with learning difficulties in staff recruitment

More organisations are beginning to involve people with learning difficulties in choosing staff, and service users themselves have highlighted this issue as crucial if they are to be fully involved in planning and delivering services. Ruth Townsley and Margaret Macadam of the Norah Fry Research Centre explored the extent and nature of user involvement in recruiting staff for statutory, voluntary and private day and residential services. They found:

- f** 59% of the day and residential services surveyed had involved people with learning difficulties in choosing who to appoint on at least one occasion. The most common form of involvement was in the recruitment of care and support staff. Of the services who did not currently involve people with learning difficulties in recruitment, two-fifths were hoping to do so in the future.
- f** Very few people with learning difficulties had the final say over the choice of candidate. However, most involving services (78%) thought that people with learning difficulties had some influence over who to appoint.
- f** Most respondents felt that the availability of recruitment training for people with learning difficulties was a strong indicator of effective involvement. However, only 25% of survey respondents provided training.
- f** Other factors which promoted effective user involvement in the recruitment process included: commitment from staff and people with learning difficulties; good support, liaison and collaboration with trade unions and personnel departments; networking; and involving people throughout the process.
- f** One of the main barriers to involvement was a concern amongst service providers that people with learning difficulties would be unable to maintain confidentiality, or to work within equal opportunities guidelines. Research showed, however, that with training, practice, and careful and adequate support, most people with learning difficulties were able to participate successfully.
- f** User involvement in the recruitment process is a good way to gain additional information about candidates, particularly in terms of their attitudes towards working with people with learning difficulties. All fieldwork respondents agreed that involving people with learning difficulties enables more suitable candidates to be appointed.

People with learning difficulties as recruiters

People with learning difficulties were most frequently involved in planning the interview, preparing questions, interviewing candidates, and selecting the successful person. We found very few examples of involvement during other stages of the recruitment process (see Table 1).

The majority of services reported using some form of informal process, and/or an interview with service users, followed by a second interview with the service manager and other staff. In about one-third of services, people with learning difficulties were not involved in the interview process at all - their views were sought solely during the informal process. More unusually, a very small number of respondents explained that people with learning difficulties were wholly responsible for conducting interviews in their service.

Most services that actively involve people with learning difficulties thought they had some influence over who to appoint. The extent to which people had some influence differed according to whether this influence was direct or indirect. Where user influence was direct, it always involved an opportunity for users' views, scores or votes to contribute overtly to the final choice of candidate, in a way that was clearly defined and open to scrutiny. Indirect influence was more difficult to define, since it was, by its very nature, a more covert form of decision-making. Indirect influence was defined in different ways by those in positions of power within their organisations.

Barriers to involvement in choosing staff

We asked non-involving services (41% of all respondents) to tell us why people with learning difficulties were not currently involved in choosing staff. The main reasons that were given are outlined below.

Had not thought of it before

Some respondents were unsure why user involvement was not happening, or stated simply that it had not been considered a possibility.

Lack of clear guidelines

In other cases, the inhibiting factor was the lack of any clear guidelines. That is to say, although respondents were not aware of anything that specifically prevented user involvement in staff recruitment, there was nothing that actively encouraged it either.

Established recruitment procedures

In some services, established recruitment procedures were viewed as a bar to user involvement in recruitment. In most cases, this was because service managers felt unable to influence current policy. In other cases, the procedures were perceived as being 'too complex' for people with learning difficulties to grasp.

Concerns over objectivity, confidentiality and equal opportunities

One-fifth of the organisations that did not involve people with learning difficulties thought they did not have the necessary skills to participate in the recruitment process. Other reasons given included concerns from the personnel department or from managers about confidentiality of candidates' details, and about clients' ability to remain objective, especially with respect to internal candidates.

Equal opportunities policies, and lack of training in recruitment and fair selection

Almost all survey respondents (91%) reported the existence of a written policy on equal opportunities. Although the majority of respondents (74%) thought that nothing in their equal opportunities policy actually inhibited user involvement in staff recruitment, a few people commented that this policy did not actively encourage such involvement either.

Lack of commitment or outright opposition from managers

Many respondents felt that a lack of commitment to the idea of user involvement was at the root of their service's lack of action. This was particularly evident where the human resource or personnel department refused to be involved in discussions. In one

Table 1: Points in recruitment process at which people with learning difficulties were involved

	% among services that involve respondents (n = 108)	% among all services surveyed (n = 182)
Drawing up job description	8	5
Designing application form	0	0
Advertising the post	3	2
Short-listing candidates	10	6
Planning interview and preparing questions	50	30
Interviewing candidates	69	41
Selecting the successful candidate	65	39
Informing all candidates of the final decision	6	4
Other informal procedures, such as asking the candidate to share a meal or drink, or to visit the service	44	26

fieldwork visit (where user involvement was taking place) the interviewee reported that opposition to this initiative at a high level was making it difficult to progress any further.

Legal barriers

Several respondents raised issues connected with the legal responsibilities of employers. These centred around concerns “about involving people who ultimately don’t have to take responsibility for employing someone” (day service manager).

Promoting involvement in choosing staff

All of the barriers or problems outlined above had been overcome in various ways by services where effective involvement was taking place. Most people found that a combination of different factors were helpful in promoting involvement in their organisations.

Pressure and commitment from people with learning difficulties

In some services, people with learning difficulties had asked to be involved in recruitment. Indeed, where people with learning difficulties had access to self-advocacy, and where user-led groups were respected and listened to by service managers, involvement in recruitment was more likely to emerge as an issue for serious consideration.

In other areas, people with learning difficulties were campaigning to change policies. For example, day-service users who had been involved in recruiting staff at these centres were pushing for this to happen in their own homes as well. During the period of research, a user-led group from a voluntary sector home was meeting with head-office staff to help with the drafting of guidelines regarding recruitment training and equal opportunities. Another group of service users wrote to the social services committee of their local authority to express their dissatisfaction that application forms were only seen by the personnel department and the formal panel, due to issues of confidentiality. Commitment from people with learning difficulties to the idea of user involvement in recruitment was found to be a vital ingredient for successful participation.

Commitment from staff

In some services managers and other staff were responsible for sowing the suggestion of user involvement. Their commitment was crucial to any development. Some services were lucky to have managers who were committed not only to the idea of user involvement, but also to providing advice and support on ways of implementing the process.

Liaison and collaboration with trade unions and personnel or human resources department

It was particularly helpful to include trade union officials and personnel department staff in taking forward the involvement of people with learning difficulties in choosing staff, and in training for service users. Personnel departments need to ensure that any involvement by people with learning

difficulties is following equal opportunities and fair selection guidelines. Encouraging them to be part of the involvement process often helped to allay their main concerns:

“If personnel are fully involved in the whole process, they can reassure unions and senior management that the process is correct. Managers have received good feedback from personnel that people can work with equal opportunities and can make sensible decisions.”
(manager, local authority residential service)

Ethos of the organisation

For many services, user involvement in recruitment was the result of a natural progression of user involvement in other areas. Where services were already involving people with learning difficulties in service management, it seemed likely that they would also be keen to set up user involvement in choosing staff:

“We are very much looking at empowerment and residents’ rights. Involving residents in choosing staff is just one part of this.”
(manager, local authority residential service)

Networking

The survey showed that networking with other people and organisations, including user-led groups such as People First, was an important way of finding out more about how to implement involvement in recruitment. Several service managers also mentioned that they had become aware of the idea of participation through reading the various pieces of literature that came through their establishment. The awareness that user involvement was going on elsewhere seemed to be a strong motivating factor for many service managers.

Experimenting and monitoring

Trying out different ways of recruiting staff, and keeping a record of successes and difficulties, helped many services to take things forward. Successful examples of user involvement were mainly found in services where staff and people with learning difficulties were willing to learn from their mistakes and experiment with new ways of working.

Involving people with learning difficulties throughout the whole recruitment process

Where people with learning difficulties were involved at every stage of the recruitment process, the outcomes were likely to be more positive for all concerned. This was particularly true when people were involved in drawing up the job description. If people with learning difficulties were clear about the sort of person needed from the outset, the whole recruitment process made more sense and was easier to understand for everyone.

Many services were planning to develop user involvement and were aiming for increased participation at more stages of the recruitment process. In a few places, people with learning

difficulties were also being involved in other human resource activities for new staff, such as probation and assessment, ratios and rotas, and staff induction.

Support

The skills needed for effective participation in the recruitment process are the same as those developed through opportunities for self-advocacy. People with learning difficulties can be empowered to access these skills with support from facilitators. The most positive and effective examples of involvement were found in services where supporters, with a good understanding of the recruitment process, encouraged small groups of people with learning difficulties to think about, discuss and practise aspects of the recruitment process.

Training, preparation and practice

The availability of training for people with learning difficulties was a strong indicator of effective involvement, and of greater participation in the decision-making process about who to appoint. The provision of good, appropriate training also helped to allay concerns held by management, trade unions and personnel departments, thus breaking down this particular barrier to involvement. For example, where good support and training was available, people with learning difficulties used and understood the concept of confidentiality. Where good equal opportunities training was available and where people had opportunities to practise scoring candidates, discrimination and bias rarely occurred.

Planning, practising and sorting out the practical arrangements of the interview day also appeared to make a real difference to the quality of the experience for all concerned.

In short, at all stages of the recruitment process, opportunities for training and practice were the basic vital ingredients of effective participation.

About the study

The project was based at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol. The research took place during 1995. Detailed questionnaires were sent to 471 managers of statutory, voluntary and private residential and day services, of whom 41% responded. Interviews with people with learning difficulties, successful candidates and other staff members were held at eight sites.

Further information

A full report of the research, *Choosing staff: Involving people with learning difficulties in staff recruitment* by Ruth Townsley and Margaret Macadam, is published in the *Community care into practice* series by The Policy Press in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Community Care magazine (price £11.50 plus £1.50 p&p).

A summary of the research for people with learning difficulties is available free of charge as part of the Plain Facts series. Plain Facts 7, *Choosing staff*, is published by the Norah Fry Research Centre, 3 Priory Road, Bristol, BS8 1TX. Tel: 0117 923 8137.

A resource pack aimed at supporters, trainers and staff working with people with learning difficulties will be published in February 1997 by Pavilion Publishing. For more details contact Pavilion Publishing, 8 St George's Place, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 4GB. Tel: 01273 820120.

Further information on the research can be obtained from Ruth Townsley or Margaret Macadam at the Norah Fry Research Centre, 3 Priory Road, Bristol, BS8 1TX. Tel: 0117 923 8137.

Related Findings

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 64** Moving from hospital into the community: an evaluation by people with learning difficulty (Mar 95)
- 66** Housing and support for people with learning difficulties (Apr 95)
- 70** Crime against people with learning difficulties (Aug 95)
- 75** Disparities in service provision for people with learning difficulties living in the community (Dec 95)
- 81** Housing, support and the rights of people with learning difficulties (Mar 96)
- 86** Supported employment for people with learning difficulties (May 96)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie, Publications Officer, on 01904 615905 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).



Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End
York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 0958-3815

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers and practitioners. The findings presented here, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.