

User involvement in the control of voluntary organisations

A study by Paul Robson, Michael Locke and Jonathan Dawson of the Centre for Institutional Studies at the University of East London was designed to help prepare the ground for increasing user involvement in the control of service-providing voluntary organisations working within a charitable framework. It explored problems in developing policy and practice and the ways organisations had tackled them. The study found:

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Most voluntary organisations saw user involvement in the control of organisations as desirable. However, few had formulated clear policies for user involvement; most had not set long-term goals or formulated detailed strategies.

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Half the organisations surveyed had users on their governing body.

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Managers felt that users were more concerned about quality of services than governance and management issues and that this was a key difficulty in increasing their involvement in this area. Lack of familiarity with committee procedures was also seen as a major problem. Some organisations believed the disability or condition of users inhibited participation in meetings.

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Organisations which had increased user involvement had done so through a range of gradual changes over many years. These had built up users' confidence and skills and overcome resistance within the organisation. Informal and practical changes had prepared the ground for constitutional change, rather than vice versa.

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The researchers conclude that:

Charity law is confusing on user participation in governing bodies, and consistent official guidance is needed.

User bodies have been crucial in developing user involvement, but their status is often ambiguous, notably whether they are part of, or separate from, the charitable organisation.

Voluntary organisations should review their purposes and values and appropriate forms of governance in order to clarify their expectations of user involvement and their policy intentions.

Background

Within the voluntary sector, there are increasing pressures to involve users in the control of the organisation, from a variety of sources:

- national policy and legislation as in the Children Act 1989 and the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990;
- requirements set by purchasing authorities and grant-making bodies;
- the growth of user movements seeking to change the basis of welfare from paternalist and philanthropic to democratically controlled and accessible by right;
- professional good practice initiatives to consult clients and involve them in decisions about their services;
- the consumer movement and the ideology of market choice.

In recent years, new voluntary organisations have been created on the basis of self-help or user control. Older and traditionally structured voluntary organisations have had some difficulties or ambivalence about responding. Some may see the empowerment of users as a principal aspect of their purpose and seek to draw users into decision-making procedures, whilst others may regard it more as a matter of adapting to environmental changes. There is also some resistance to the pressures.

The conventional wisdom has been that though user involvement may be desirable the problems of effective implementation are considerable and, arguably in some cases, insuperable. It is questioned whether the charitable framework with its philanthropic foundation is appropriate for organisations where users share in governance. Meanwhile, users have experienced a 'glass ceiling' within organisations, constraining them from involvement in the highest levels of decision-making.

An awareness is growing that if purchasing authorities and individual disabled people choose to buy services from user managed organisations the resource base of traditional organisations may be endangered. The challenge by the civil rights lobby to the legitimacy of some major organisations could spread to a wider loss of support.

State of play

Three-quarters of the 42 organisations whose senior managers were surveyed reported that voluntary organisations are attempting to increase user involvement and that service users want more involvement. But only just over a quarter of organisations had themselves introduced a policy or programme to develop user involvement in control. Twenty-four had users on their governing body.

Most organisations saw the main aims of increasing user involvement in terms not so much of control or participation in decision-making but in terms of responsiveness of services. They sought to ensure services met users' needs and were more effectively targeted and to ensure that those responsible for delivery were accountable.

Problems

Most senior managers thought the main problem in increasing user involvement was that users were more interested in receiving a good quality service than in management issues.

Several respondents commented that the nature of the disability or condition of their users inhibited participation in meetings. Among problems raised were that users: could be fatigued, stressed or too emotional, or through ill health be less effective at decision-making; might not have the level of literacy required for committee papers; would have difficulties in travelling; or might lack motivation or be institutionalised.

Most thought that people lacked familiarity with committee procedures and organisational structures. The language of committees was regarded as excluding people.

Nearly half the respondents saw differences of interest among users and professional staff, users and non-user committee members, users and carers. Conflicts could emerge because of their different experiences.

Nearly half of the respondents felt that the involvement of users tended to be dependent on personalities or particular individuals; when they left or lost interest nobody else picked it up.

Other problems recognised by smaller numbers of respondents were:

- a ruling network of professionals, activists and 'professional users' tended to be the ones involved or consulted, rather than 'ordinary people';
- user representatives became incorporated into the organisation, losing touch with ordinary users;
- users' participation did not extend to the highest levels within organisations;
- resources were controlled in committees or departments not accessible to users, and users' proposals tended to be rejected as unrealistic;
- the agenda was set by professionals, and only limited options presented as feasible, so that users did not have the opportunity to shape policy proposals;
- users interested in change were putting their energies into new user-managed organisations and movements rather than traditional charities.

Solutions

Organisations have implemented a range of practical measures working towards the common aim of increasing user involvement. Among the organisations in this study, users were involved in:

- representation on governing body committees, and working parties, formal and informal consultation on policy and campaigns;
- active contributions to the organisation, such as staff recruitment and induction, meeting visitors etc, working in partnership with staff;
- campaigning, publicity;
- self-help groups, advocacy, training other users etc.

Few organisations had formulated such measures into a detailed strategy and specific objectives. A few

had either formal or informal targets for increasing the number of users on their governing body.

One organisation, which has an informal agreement to achieve user representation on its Council, has alongside this: set up self-help groups, supported for a period by a professional; recruited a user as a volunteer in the office; involved users in running awareness training; organised staff and users to work together, eg going to a conference; organised working parties to involve those who may not be able to participate in Council; achieved wide representation at an annual strategy day; and undertaken ground level work on confidence and skills among users.

Organisations have proceeded through small stages, allowing time to develop the confidence and skills of the users and to overcome resistance among trustees and paid staff. The experience of organisations is that the development of user involvement in their control takes many years; in some cases, a decade or more.

One organisation has undergone a gradual evolution from a paternalist, 'speaking for' type of organisation to a voice on behalf of users; it has built structures in slowly and let the governing body accept gradually by demonstration that users and carers on the governing body can work. In another organisation the process of creating local management committees (with parents in the majority) went back to the identification of the issue in a report from a consultant thirteen years ago which eventually led to specific proposals three years ago.

Individual staff have worked above and beyond contract hours to help establish user involvement. In some cases, a new appointment has been able to break new ground, and the coincidence of two new

'Active Reformers'

The research identified common features of the 'active reformers' in organisations increasing user involvement:

1. Issues clearly included on formal and informal agendas
2. Vision of a future with greater user participation
3. Some specific objectives, such as targets for representation on governing bodies
4. Different methods tried at different levels in the organisation, including face to face contact between the users and the trustees and managers
5. Condition or circumstances of users found not to be major constraint for participating in meetings etc
6. Readiness to experiment with structures, resources or space for users
7. Identifiable person with a role to lead and facilitate developments
8. Change undertaken over a longer period than expected, maybe a decade or more.

appointments has created a synergy for change. It has taken top down and bottom up effort together, and chief executives' commitment has been key.

Resources needed to be committed as a matter of policy. The empowerment of users through the improvement of skills and confidence required the support of professional staff, particularly at local level.

Users involved in decision-making bodies were likely to need training. So, too, were staff who would be working with users. Committee language and procedures could be demystified.

Organisations which have involved users in decision-making bodies have found that people and procedures have been able to work with conditions which were previously perceived as disabling in terms of contributing to meetings. Also the different experiences and interests of users, staff and carers could be creative.

Organisations' experience is that the development of user involvement in control should not be thought of as primarily a constitutional matter. Amending the constitution or increasing participation on the governing body has not been usually the first step. The ground has been prepared through less formal and more everyday measures, such as working together, and through more consumer-oriented practices, such as market research and access to information.

One organisation warned against putting all energy into getting the constitution right, especially at the start of the process of change; the groundwork should come first; principles and practices could be agreed and modified before being translated into a legal document. It advised that some questions needed to be aired and acknowledged but would remain unresolved.

User bodies

The presence of a user body has been crucial in a number of organisations, and different forms of bodies have been created: support networks, consultative groups, representative structures. There are often ambiguities about such bodies: whether they are within or outside the main organisation; whether legally they are separate bodies; where they fit in the constitutional structure; the extent to which they should have a separate voice. Organisations have found it helpful to clarify for such bodies: the lines of accountability and political legitimacy, in terms of the charitable organisation and the users; priorities and expectations; and resources and staffing.

Charity law

There is confusion about the possibility, in terms of charity law, of appointing trustees from among users who receive benefits from the charity. Some take the view that, because they are beneficiaries of the charity, users cannot be trustees, ie cannot be members of the governing body. However, a number of charities have been permitted by the Charity Commission to appoint users onto the governing body, though the interpretation of the legal position has varied. It is also a fundamental tenet that trustees act in the interest of the trust rather than as representatives.

The majority of respondents to this survey did not see the legal issues as a major obstacle, though it was not clear upon which interpretation of the law this was based. Respondents commented that constitutions could be changed if the will was there. Given the uncertainty, the study found that charities needed clear and consistent guidance about the legal position from the Charity Commission.

Conclusions

The findings of the research could be viewed either optimistically or pessimistically:

- Optimistically - there are lots of initiatives progressing user involvement and some are giving real power to users. Changes may be slow but this is to be expected since charities have been operating on traditional assumptions for many years. Managers and trustees are experimenting, and, even though they do not appear to have a clear vision of the future, at least they are swimming with the tide. There are some emerging models of organisations which use the principle of partnership to govern the relationship between users, professionals and others.
- Pessimistically - few of the organisations in this study had achieved user control. The pace of change is too slow, and some managers and trustees appear to be resisting greater user involvement. There is too much emphasis on the consumerist model which appears to give more of a say to users but has inbuilt limitations. Charities talk of empowerment but they do not deliver in a significant way. When users do become empowered, charities may expect improved publicity but not the internal consequences of their increased involvement in control of the organisation.

It concluded that, whilst the practical problems of governance and organisation development should not be underrated, they could be successfully tackled where trustees and senior management committed themselves to involve users in control.

However, most organisations were uncertain about long-term goals and policies and about their expectations of increasing user involvement, and the study concluded that each organisation needed to clarify these issues through reviewing fundamental concepts for itself about its purposes and values, and

about appropriate forms of governance and ownership. Such a review might suggest that power could be shared with users.

About the study

This research forms part of a research and development project aimed at exploring, developing and testing how to involve service users in control of voluntary organisations. The research was carried out in the period January - May 1995. A subsequent action research project is planned to work with a small selection of voluntary organisations on developing user involvement.

There were three elements in this research: literature review; a postal survey of 200 voluntary organisations (of which 42 responded), complemented by analysis of constitutional documentation; interviews with senior managers of voluntary organisations.

Further information

A full report, *Consumerism or democracy? User involvement in the control of voluntary organisations* by Paul Robson, Michael Locke and Jonathan Dawson, is published by The Policy Press in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (ISBN 1 86134 051 6, price £7.50, plus £1.50 p & p).

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