

# Empowerment for Everyone!

How users and professionals can be empowered through partnership

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The workshop was based on the module being developed for the Ex-In (Experienced Involvement) Project, funded by the European Union.

The module in Ljubljana was entitled, "Empowerment in theory and practice", and was run at the Faculty of Social Work at Ljubljana University. Once the Ex-In Project is completed a comprehensive module handbook will be produced.

The Faculty of Social Work is committed to enable service users to access the education system.

The service users who attended the focus group/testing of the module made meaningful contributions and provided an evaluation of the module for future development.

Slovenia is a very small country with only 2 million inhabitants.

Today's topic will be empowerment for everyone, not just service users. We are also aware, that we need to empowerment professionals if we want them to work according to empowerment concepts..

The focus group was held in the Faculty of Social Work at Ljubljana University from 12/12 2006 until 8.1.2007. The focus group met to discuss and modify module. From the final evaluation form, we can say that education programmes gave the service users empowerment.

Techniques used in these meetings ranged from brainstorming and communication of views. These meetings helped service users to voice their rights.

Community housing and relationships, amongst other things, were discussed in the meetings.

The people in group home settings were isolated from their friends and the community and they took some convincing that their knowledge was valid. They needed to understand what empowerment meant to them and to bring them to the position of asking the questions rather than being questioned.

### The workshop member's thoughts on empowerment:

Low self-esteem of one's own position can be a barrier to changing your mind set. This was a problem with the group initially in Ljubljana.

We need to believe that with small changes we can make big changes. Empowerment is a tool to help people to get their power and to reach their goals and wishes.

As in the recovery process it (the change) has to be come from the person. It is not important to introduce self as, "I am (name) and I am a service user".

We need to find where and who is going to support us.

Question form the participants:

#### Is there such a thing as a mental health voice in Slovenia?

Yes it is. Service users have started their own groups. They also settled their own organizations. The problem is, that they are poor conditions financially. There is peer support and advocacy in existence.

#### Do the models in existence include young people?

The module could be used in lots of incidences with all types of people. Empowerment is a process (there is a handbook in process, in Slovenia, which is due to be finished in October 2007). This is still being tested by focus group and is part of the Ex-In project. But we believe that this can be addressed to many other groups as young people for instance.

This model sounds like it would be effective for young people. Petra was involved in creating a website for young people before her work at Ljubljana University. We were aware, that the internet is something, that nowadays is used by many young people, they do not need to tell you a proper identity and they have chance to express their feelings. The internet is very useful because people can contribute anonymously; this use of internet was very successful. We need to recognise the mental health of young people – work in schools could be very valuable. This project in schools still needs progressing. CBT could be really valuable to young people in schools.

#### People with mental health distress can be very isolated; how do you involve these people in decision-making?

Empowerment is a process. Even if they are really isolated it may take a long time but we need to be there and think creatively about problem solving which may be very small to begin with – relationship-building is the key.

We need to share prejudice with each other to check and admit we don't know everything and discuss how the group could reach the other members that are isolated – use your own experience of how you would get people involved.

Look at your group – who is strong and who is not confident? Maybe the groups need to be divided into two smaller groups to allow the quieter members to join in. As long as you believe that people can change or have got good potential don't give up on them – that is why feedback and evaluation is very important.

We should try with the, seemingly, most difficult or unchangeable people first to find the solutions for everyone else.

Service user involvement – there seems to be a lot of emphasis on service users expecting them to work in a similar way to organisations.

It doesn't matter what services are involved – it should be flexible.

Feedback from workshop members:

“It's more than “ticking the box” where the talents of service users are concerned.”

“PCT's give us a list of tasks – so finding out what service users want is very important.”

“Empowerment; are we using it for the right reasons? I would like to develop this module for young people.”

“North Manchester is trying to get a service user group together. It has a long way to go but the sooner we get there the sooner service users get a voice.”

“It's a good mix of workers and service users. It's important for me to remember I am carrying a 'baton' for service users.”

“The empowerment issue is very important, but it is important not to let power go to people's heads. We need to listen to those that cannot communicate.”

“Today has made me think about how I work.”

“The challenge is doing, not just saying.”

“What happens when the funding runs out? What happens from here and how the developments in Slovenia take root will be very interesting.”

*Thank you to the workshop member who made the notes*