Re-Humanising The System

Looking beyond the spreadsheet and really connecting with people

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Policy & Practice Briefing

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Community Reporter movement has gathered stories about people's experiences of services across Europe. These stories explore benefit and tax systems, unemployment initiatives, the health and social care sector and probation services to name but a few. We've found that over-systemisation can result in people losing trust in services and leave staff morale low. This briefing sets out practical ways that services can address this by focusing on relationships, not processes.

WHO WE ARE

People's Voice Media is a social change charity established in 1995. We are committed to supporting people to improve their lives and bring about positive social change from the ground up. We believe that people's stories about their lives contain valuable insights. Working with people and communities across the UK and Europe, we use Community Reporting - a lived experience storytelling methodology - as a catalyst for changing practice, processes and policy.

"Nobody has a voice - only those in power at the unemployment services. With one strike of a pen they mess up your lives."

Positively or negatively, services have direct impact on people's lives and this means that the people working in services, regardless of position, have a relative degree of power. Power isn't necessarily a bad thing either. Having the power to change something for the better and using such power to do so, is something we should all be striving to do in our lives. Where power is problematic, is when it is distributed in vastly inequitable ways. It is problematic when people making decisions – those with the 'pen' – make such choices at a distance from the people whom those decisions affect. It is problematic when this void leads to decision-making without empathy and a prioritising of process over people. Ultimately this leads to poor decision-making and ineffective services.

Our work across the UK and Europe involves gathering stories about how people experience the world. Over the last couple of years, we've noticed a concerning trend amongst a significant proportion of people's stories when they are talking about experiences of services. These stories span different communities, countries and sectors and collectively they have shown us that we need to 're-humanise' services and put people back at their centre. In many instances, process has replaced common sense, and protocol has replaced humanity. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this need to re-evaluate how our services function has never been greater. Physically we may be more distanced than ever before, so we must work harder to build connections at a human level. In short, we must step out from behind the spreadsheet and connect at an emotional level in order to move forward. This briefing therefore argues that services should focus on the building of relationships, not the building of systems.

What we've learned from the stories

The insights from the stories can be broadly synthesised under three key problems – bureaucracy, depersonalisation and othering. **Bureaucracy** – administrative processes that create barriers – was a key issue raised in the stories. Speaking about Universal Credit in the UK, one person describes how the long wait to be provided with any money has led them to relapsing after over 4 years of sobriety: "It's a struggle – I have to use the food bank...I've got bills piling up, I'm back on my depression tablets". Such processes also hinder people working in services. For example, a probation worker described how the number of cases they now handle has risen and that "there's far too much computer work". Nowadays they can't remember all of the faces of the people they support.

It is easy to see how systems such as these can lead to **depersonalisation**. When services are not customised to the people who are accessing them, they very rarely meet people needs. Speaking about a support service for carers, one parent explains how at a group meeting it was outlined that the service was set-up to provide information and advice relating to caring. As the parent explains, "that seemed ironic to me, as there were five carers at the meeting and between us we had 150 years experience of caring – I'm not sure what they could tell us that we don't already know." The parent would have rather learned how to download digital music, as that was what they needed advice on.

A lack of personalisation can lead to the **othering** of people, which heightens power imbalances and blocks services from seeing the person they are supporting. In Spain, one woman who was trying to set-up her own business felt that the support lacked "empathy or connection" and she was left "stuck" in the system. In the

Netherlands, a man with autism who was trying to sort out tax issues explains how this was made worse by the service showing "a lot of distrust". This sentiment was also echoed by a person who was trying to secure work. They felt that they were blamed for not having a job by the employment service. Similarly, in the UK, a person with cancer felt judged by some services when seeking financial help – "they look at you as scum".

So, what does 're-humanising the system' look like in practice?

1. Push back against "computer says no": If the process gets in the way of achieving the bigger aims and objectives, then the process is broken and it is that, that needs to change. We can't always make this happen instantly – sometimes our own powers are limited. However, what we can do, is find workarounds and take a more common-sense approach to 'problems' that arise. Instead of accepting 'can't', think 'how can I make this possible?'.

2. Change the language: Power imbalances between services and the people who access them are found in the words professionals, organisations and institutions use. Terms such as 'service user' lack humanity and others like 'vulnerable' are patronising. Phrases such as 'hard to reach' represent the service's perspective, when perhaps 'easy to ignore' maybe what the people themselves feel is more accurate. Reflect on the language you use, think about how its positions people – and if you wouldn't like to be spoken to or about in that way yourself, then change it.

3. Measure different things and measure things differently: Look at where the value of the service really lies – is it purely in the numbers of people you engage with and the cost of that? No? We thought not. The value derived from services is found in the people's lives they help to make better. Quantitative data alone does not encapsulate this type of impact. We must therefore value qualitative data such as experiential knowledge – however, messy and unquantifiable – and use it to drive services forward.

4. Connect with people: Are real connections built by how many people a Facebook post reached, how many views a blog post has had or how many flyers have been handed out? Probably not. True connections are built by conversations. These shouldn't be curtailed or made to fit a certain agenda. We should invest time in talking to folk – colleagues as well – by getting to know one another, and sharing about ourselves, we build trust and understanding.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

What these suggestions enable us to do is put people back at the heart of services. To support this at a policy level, we recommend:

1. Service design should be done with people with lived experience in an equitable way
2. Service delivery should build relationships that connect and strengthen people, not processes that divide and disenfranchise
3. Service evaluation should prioritise learning over exercises designed to evidence purely quantitative targets

ABOUT COMMUNITY REPORTING

Originating in 2007, Community Reporting has been developed across Europe as a mixed methodological approach for enhancing citizen participation in research, policy-making, service development, and decision-making processes. In-line with work such as Glasby (2011), Community Reporting purports the validity of lived experience and knowledge-based practice in these fields. It uses digital, portable technologies to support people to tell their own stories in their own ways, and then connects these stories with change-makers in different settings and sectors.

REFERENCES

Glasby, J, (2011). *Evidence, policy and practice: Critical perspectives in health and social care.* Bristol, Policy Press

ABOUT THE STORIES

The evidence that has informed this briefing has come from Community Reporter stories gathered across the UK and Europe over the last 2-years. 350+ individual stories have contributed to these findings, and the experiences reflected in them cover a range of topics, including mental and physical health, caring, finances, unemployment and employment, poverty, the criminal justice system, health & social care, volunteering, disability, migration, housing and co-production.

Stories from the CoSIE project, NCAG members and our work with Ideas Alliance and The Men's Room have be utilised in this briefing. The stories can be found on an online archive at https://communityreporter.net

Ideas from Curators of Change and a sense-making workshop run as part of National Co-Production Week 2020 with Co-Production Oxfordshire have informed the recommendations.