

Core Group – Peer Support, Carer and User (CU) Group University of Dundee, Scotland

Background to the CU Group

The Carer and User (CU) Group at the University of Dundee was set up in 2003 in response to the Scottish Government making service user and carer involvement mandatory in all social work qualifying programmes. This resulted in service users, carers, and their supporters from the health charities being approached, feeling they were welcome and of value, that their presence was necessary in universities for students to learn from their real-life experiences. The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), the regulatory body for Social Work in Scotland, oversees this work.

The establishment of the CU group at the University of Dundee immediately helped to break down barriers for the involvement of carers and users in their own eyes and those of the social work staff. This was real involvement, inspiring hope, and it felt if experiences were shared, both positive and negative with students, and that we could make a difference to future practice and people's lives.

The opportunity to make a difference from their own unique experiences, has always been treated very seriously by each CU group member. Group members ensure that whatever they are involved in, they attend on time and are well prepared. Their aim is to inspire students and new members, and there has been a willingness to grasp opportunities to have their voices heard.

CU Group Meetings

CU group meetings are nearly always chaired by a service user or carer, rather than a member of staff. This has been an important means of empowering the group. In addition to chairing the CU group meetings, a member of the CU group chaired the Social Work Programme Board for many years, this was at the invitation of a forward-thinking Head of Social Work. Along with the CU group member chairing the Programme Board, there was an additional member invited to represent the CU Group at the Programme Board.

At the heart of everything that happens and throughout the years the CU group has met formally in the University every six to eight weeks to plan and to be consulted on or to hear of opportunities about ways they could take part in the programmes. Often at the group's request they have met half an hour before the main meeting began to socialise and catch up with each other's lives.

As a generic group of people with many different needs and conditions CU group members had to learn how to make sure everyone was able to have their voices heard at meetings and came up with the idea of giving everyone present, large cards with printed words. The cards were either red or green, and the colour which was held up indicated if the person needed help (red), wanted the speaker to stop or wanted to speak themselves (green). This was always helped by regular banter and laughter.

Minutes of meetings have been essential to maintaining the cohesiveness of the group. Service users and carers have also written up the minutes on occasion. Minutes of meetings and information about other involvement opportunities are sent out usually through the Social Work office by email or post according to members' needs. A good example of peer support is around members having access to the minutes of meetings. Meetings are recorded, and one member would drive, quite some distance, to the house of another member (who was unable to read), so the two of them could listen to the recording together, thereby ensuring that each would be prepared and could take part meaningfully in the next meeting/activity.

There is always tea/coffee and light refreshments available at CU group meetings. (Lunch is provided for full-day activities.) Transport costs and an campus parking permit are provided for meetings and all other activities.

The CU group is a member of a wider Scottish network that has representation from each of the Scottish universities offering social work qualifying programmes, along with a national social services organisation. The network share experiences of involvement in social work programmes, research and plan collaborative events.

Peer Support

At the heart of the CU group has always been a warm, respectful, trusting, and caring environment. This has resulted in a safe, relaxed space for all to learn and support each other, and to build lasting relationships and friendships which have endured, some since 2003 to this day.

Members of the group have always worked to ensure that everyone can take part in activities. This has involved members driving to pick up other members, and staff and students collecting members from the train station, thereby removing transport as a barrier to involvement.

In addition, CU group members have stepped in to support other members who no longer receive formal support through the voluntary sector. Ways have been found, for example, to transport these members and give them lots of support. New members and those who are developing their skills are quietly supported by experienced members until they find their feet and their confidence. Phone calls, emails, and texts between members help dispel worries, inspire creativity, and help keep the group together.

For many years the CU group has developed ways to meet up socially for meals and has developed ways to include as many people as possible, members often driving and travelling quite far, to collect people. This reflects how the CU group is also about friendship at its base, friendship with each other and with staff and the students.

Members special birthdays and other important occasions are remembered and celebrated and loss including attending funerals acknowledged. It is specially warming for members when a student who has shared time with them meets up with them and shares their progress in practice, and/or asks for advice.

Tasks of the Group

Nine Principles were established by the CU group to guide the involvement and support of service users and carers in social work education. These early Principles were both clear and enlightened:

- 1) Nothing for us without us.
- 2) Communications should be two way – bottom up from CU group and top down from the Social Work department.
- 3) Feedback should be acknowledged and responded to and wherever possible acted upon.
- 4) Members should see change from involvement where possible.
- 5) Fair funding for CU members, if they wished, as a result of their involvement, and also for the CU group to develop.
- 6) No tokenism.
- 7) The CU group meetings were to be chaired always by a service user or carer, and that person should be given support, if required, according to their needs.
- 8) Staff and visitors were welcome to attend CU group meetings for the purpose of consulting the group and creating new opportunities.

- 9) The group would act as a reference group and a critical friend for the Social Work department.

Each CU group member in their own way has conveyed their emotions and experience in their own inimitable way. Students and staff have learnt how people feel in certain situations, overcome their prejudices when they heard them speak, been challenged, and had the opportunity to learn from service users and carers in a non-threatening, supportive environment as to what helps and what hinders in their situations. It is wonderful for the group and staff to see members flourishing as their confidence grows to take part in teaching and discussion.

CU group involvement has included:

- Student Induction
- Roleplay with students
- Teaching concerning, for example the innovative Caring Experience module which the group created and developed and for which they have won awards
- Programme reviews, and other consultation including proposed curriculum changes
- Co-marking of student presentations
- Research
- Chair Programme Board
- Admissions

One of the things the CU group is most proud of is that members were able to keep meeting and continue their involvement through the Covid-19 lockdown. Thanks to an enterprising, creative staff member who made sure everyone who required it, was supplied with an iPad by the university. This enabled the group to continue their involvement online, and it ensured lived experiences continued to be an important element of social work education, and helped to reduce isolation for students (and CU group members).

Ultimately, students have had the opportunity and privilege to meet and share time with CU group members, to see them as people first with hopes and dreams and not just as users of a service.

Challenges

Amongst all its positive experiences, there are two main challenges to highlight:

- 1) Staff change and absence, and whether new staff understand the strength and skills of group members, this can lead on occasion to some frustration.
- 2) Payment, there was a payment of £20 offered per half day that was introduced in the beginning of the group, this has not altered due to a confusing and unhelpful welfare benefits system in Britain which leaves some group members fearful about claiming in case they lose their benefits altogether.