# Getting the right trainers



**Enabling service users to train social work students and practitioners about the realities of family poverty in the UK**

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# Acknowledgements

## About the editor

This report was compiled and edited by Nick Perry in partnership with the project steering group and the wider participant group. Nick is a former policy and parliamentary worker for ATD Fourth World who subsequently undertook the MSc/DipSW course at Royal Holloway, University of London. He was seconded to the project first by the City of Westminster, and then by the London Borough of Lambeth. He is currently working as a mental health social worker in Central London and can be contacted at **ndsperry@yahoo.co.uk**

## About Bob Holman

Bob Holman is a retired community worker.

# Foreword by Bob Holman

Poverty is one of the most common features of families whose children come to the attention of social workers. It is not the only factor involved: many rich people have family problems, but families on low income are far more likely to be required to have contact with social care services.

Some social workers understand that years spent on low income can undermine parenting capacity and do attempt to alleviate families' poverty. Unfortunately others do not, and this report observes that 'there is considerable evidence that social work does not have a good record in understanding or combating family poverty'.

Recently, I asked some social work students if they had heard of Eleanor Rathbone or Peter Townsend. None had. I can understand the ignorance about the former (even if she was the driving force behind the legislation that brought in Family Allowances. After all, Eleanor died over 50 years ago). But Peter Townsend is one of Britain's leading researchers of, and campaigners against poverty[1]. The implication is that social work courses need to equip future social workers more fully – with the motivation, knowledge and skills to deal with the poverty of the families with whom they work.

An important way of achieving this is to enable people with experience of poverty and bringing up children to shape social work training. This is just what has been undertaken in a project bringing together users of social services (often called 'family members'), academics and social workers. The users have been given a central role in the design, delivery and evaluation of a prospective training programme.

*Getting the Right Trainers* is a perceptive, useful and practical account of which topics related to poverty should be included in a social work course, and how they should be conveyed.

Whilst it advocates for families in poverty, it does *not* say that children should not be properly protected. What it *does* say is that many parents would cope if problems associated with their poverty were taken seriously.

In a short endorsement, it is not possible to discuss the wealth of material in the report. Instead, I highlight just two matters that, after 43 years in the world of welfare, seem to me to be of special importance.

First, the definition of poverty. The government regards as poor those people in households with incomes below 60 per cent of median income. As users indicate, if this definition is accepted, then social workers can blame as inadequate those parents with slightly higher incomes who do not manage financially. In fact, it is the definition which is inadequate and, as the users make clear, poverty exists where income is too low for families to make choices about the way they live. The implication is that social work students need to see poverty not just from an official perspective, but also from that of the families who experience it.

Second is inequality. The participants in the project show that service users tend to be not just poor but unequal. Unequal financially: because they are at the bottom of a very affluent society. But also unequal within the context of social services departments in which officials are very powerful. The users explain their feelings of anger when social workers blame them for not coping, yet often fail to provide them with the resources to enable them to cope. As a friend explained to me, her powerlessness means that she dare not express her anger in case this counts against her as well. She is unequal.

Significantly, these comments fit in with the research of Professor Richard Wilkinson[2]. He shows that the most unequal citizens may develop a sense of failure and hopelessness which, through a psycho-social process, is turned into aggression or withdrawal. These features are then taken by outsiders as examples of the way they bring up their children.

Social workers, as the contributors to the project argue, can help by treating all parents with respect at all times. They can encourage and praise more than they condemn and blame. They can make sure that users know their rights and have independent advocates to put their cases.

This will not remove inequality but it will help to

counter it. I would add that social workers can introduce users to locally run community projects, where not only will they have fellowship with people like themselves but where they will be regarded as helpers, as contributors, not just as recipients.

I hope this report will convince social work trainers that service users want to be involved and have the ability to contribute to courses. I hope that the example of this project will be taken on board by all courses, both for fieldworkers and social work managers. I hope it will persuade funders to provide the wherewithal for users (and supporting organisations) to be properly financed for the part they play in shaping the courses. The project has been the result of co-operation between service users and academics and social work agencies. It is in itself an example of how service user participation could benefit social care agencies and the people that they are intending to help – it is an example to MPs, to policy-makers, to us all.

# 1 Introduction

## What is the report about?

This report is the product of a joint project between ATD Fourth World, Family Rights Group and Royal Holloway, University of London. The project has brought together social service users with experience of living in poverty in the UK, social work practitioners and academics in order to develop a training module on poverty and social exclusion for social work students and practitioners, to be delivered by people with experience of poverty. This report is a record of the work that was undertaken and a practical guide for the engagement of service user trainers to deliver such training in universities, colleges and the workplace.

## Why has the work been undertaken?

*'People who live in poverty know the solutions to their problems better than anyone else. Asking their opinions and giving them a voice is essential if we are to come to any true understanding of poverty and what can be done to eradicate it.'* **(Project participant)**

### The need to understand family poverty

People understand poverty to mean different things. The organisations involved in this project share the view that 'persistent poverty' is associated with inadequate income compounded by social exclusion and the difficulty in accessing basic rights. This includes a lack of education, training and skills; poor housing; poor health; and poor employment opportunities, severely impacting on parents' abilities to provide for their children. Families living in poverty often experience enormous difficulties in accessing their rights to decent health care, education and housing simply because of their poverty. They also face discrimination in the form of judgements from other people based on stereotypes of people living in poverty.

Such families often also experience social work interventions. Poverty remains the key factor associated with children becoming looked after by local authorities. For example, one study (published in 1989) illustrates the overwhelming links between poverty and children coming into

the care system by showing that children living in poverty are 700 times more likely to come into local authority care[3].
However, despite poverty and social exclusion being the most common characteristics of children and families involved with social services (as well as being high on the government's social policy agenda), there is considerable evidence that social work does not have a good record in understanding or combating family poverty[4]. The Department of Health publication *Child Protection: Messages from Research*[5] (published in 1995) found that practice at that time was tending to focus on acts of parental abuse, rather than the wider context of children's lives. Poverty and social exclusion were not central to the assessment process and child protection investigations were the priority at the expense of preventive family support work.

Subsequent good practice documents[6] have attempted to address these issues by requiring social workers to assess 'wider family and environmental factors'. But it is still the case that there are far too few social work training courses and social work education resources demonstrating the impact of poverty and social exclusion on families (and the implications of this for social work practice). Training and research on discrimination has tended to centre on issues of race, gender and disability, rather than poverty, and because of this, opportunities to support and empower excluded families have been lost.

### The need to involve service users in the training of social workers

Over the past 15 years, the value of involving service users in research has been established (although genuine participatory research remains in its infancy[7]). Users' views featured prominently in the recent Children Act studies, and researchers submitting proposals to the Department of Health are now required to say how they are involving users. Despite this apparent progress, service users had not been involved in training social workers in any systematic way until 2003. Nor does it mean that the views of families in poverty have been heard, or that the involvement of service users has been comprehensive.

Recent developments in social work education have attempted to address these difficulties. As noted in the Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) guide, *Involving service users and carers in social work education*[8],

*'Involving service users and carers in the education and training of social workers is higher on the policy and practice agenda than ever before. A three year qualifying training for social workers was introduced in England in 2003. The successful completion of the programme leads to the award of a degree at honours level that is the new professional qualification for social work. For the first time, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that run these programmes are required by government to involve service users and carers as stakeholders in all parts of the design and delivery of the programme.'*

As a result of the Department of Health's *Requirements for Social Work Training*[9], before the General Social Care Council (GSCC) can accredit universities to grant degrees in social work, approve their social work degree programmes or award funding for service user involvement, universities must demonstrate their commitment to service user and carer involvement in all parts of the design and delivery of the new degree. A similar commitment applies to post-qualifying courses and awards.

Although the Department of Health requirements specify that service users must be involved in all parts of the degree, they do not prescribe the ways that programme providers achieve this, in partnership with service user and carer organisations. The opportunity to develop these local partnerships is exciting and challenging. This report demonstrates the rich and insightful perspectives that people with experience of poverty can offer to social workers and social work programmes – contributions that will change the face of a British social work profession that has, through an historic lack of resources, become increasingly crisis-led.

The Department of Health's *Requirements for Social Work Training*, taken together with the National Occupational Standards for Social Work[10] and the Quality Assurance Agency's benchmark statement for social work[11], comprise the prescribed curriculum for the social work degree.

The development of a knowledge base that looks at issues of poverty, inequality and social exclusion is central to the improvement of social work education and training. The importance of this is also highlighted in the Post Qualifying Child Care Award, where the content of the training programme will address the impact of poverty and social exclusion on human growth and development, as well as the integration of these issues into the assessment and care planning process for children in need and their families.

Whilst the brass tacks of training social workers is the thrust of this report, it is important to remember that service user involvement is not only required in respect of training social workers, but in the design and delivery of overall programmes, the selection of students and the evaluation of their performance.

## The need to respond to the Laming Recommendations and *Every Child Matters*

The tragic death of Victoria Climbié and the recommendations of the inquiry into her death have provided the framework for new government legislation around the safeguarding of children. The focus of the new legislation is on preventive and joined-up working.

There is an expectation that local authority education and social services departments integrate their services (in a similar manner to the integration of adult services) and that there will be a Director of Children's Services for all local authorities.

This move towards preventive working and supporting children and families in a holistic way is welcome. However, the prospective closer integration of social services and education departments at a local authority level reflects the need for increased understanding of family poverty across professional disciplines. It also highlights the fact that increased capacity for service users to become trainers of social workers, and other professionals, has never been more urgently needed.

## Why have we done this work?

● To increase understanding of poverty and social exclusion.

● The prospective closer integration of social services and education departments at a local

authority level reflects the need for increased understanding of family poverty across professional disciplines.

● To show that people in poverty know the solutions to their problems better than anyone else.

● To bring together messages about poverty from people with first-hand experience of it, in order that policy and practice across professions, as well as services across agencies, can be poverty-proofed.

● As part of the national drive to improve services for children.

● Children living in poverty are 700 times more likely to become looked after by local authorities.

● Social work does not have a good record in understanding or combating family poverty.

● Poverty and social exclusion have not always been central to the assessment process, and child protection investigations have been the priority at the expense of preventive family support work.

● Too few social work training courses and social work education resources explain the impact of poverty and social exclusion on families.

● Training and research on discrimination has tended to centre on issues of race, gender and disability, rather than poverty.

● Universities and colleges are required to demonstrate their commitment to involving service users across the board, before social work courses will be approved and accredited, or funding issued.

● The development of a knowledge-base that looks at issues of poverty, inequality and social exclusion is central to the improvement of social work education and training.

● Other service user groups have been involved in social work education and training at earlier stages but it has been more difficult to engage people living in poverty.

## Who is involved in this project, and why?

This is a joint project between Family Rights Group (FRG), ATD Fourth World, and Royal Holloway, University of London. The project has been funded by the Department of Health, the

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the Social Work and Social Policy Learning and Teaching Support Network (SWAPltsn).

**FRG** works with families, practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers to improve services for families whose children are involved with social services.

*'We provide an advice service for families, undertake policy and research projects, run training courses and conferences and campaign for changes in the law, policy and practice.'*

**ATD Fourth World** works alongside people living in long-term poverty to support them in their refusal to accept poverty as a fact of life and find the solutions to eradicate it together.

*'We believe that only by working in partnership with families experiencing poverty and social exclusion can real and effective change come about in the lives of those most affected by poverty. The majority of the families we work alongside have experience of social services intervention and the care system, either as children themselves, through their own children, or often both.'*

**Royal Holloway, University of London, Department of Health and Social Care** has a strong track record of child care research on issues of poverty and race. The department runs both qualifying and post-qualifying social work courses, including the Post Qualifying Child Care Award and Practice Teachers Programme, and is also part of Making Research Count, an initiative developed with several other universities to promote the integration of research into social work practice.

Part of the importance of the project has been the demonstration of what can be achieved by the pooling of expertise. The three partner organisations have each brought different sets of skills and resources, and this has enabled the project to succeed.

## What are the aims of the project?

1. To bring together the experience of people living in poverty (who are service users) and the experience of academics and social work practitioners.

2. To build an understanding between families living in poverty and those responsible for training social workers of how to deliver training that increases awareness of the impact of poverty on children and families, and the services necessary to improve the quality of their lives.

3. To develop and pilot a training programme for social workers on qualifying and post-qualifying courses in partnership with people living in poverty, and with these people as part of the training team.

## What methods did we use to achieve these aims?

In order to achieve the goals of the project a working group was established. This was made up of eight to ten family members who are living in poverty and have experience as users of social services. The group has also included academics (from Royal Holloway), social work practitioners, a social services manager, ATD Fourth World, FRG, and (over the course of the year) representatives from SCIE and the Department of Health.

Initially, the aim was for the working group to meet on six occasions. In reality, the participants have needed to meet more than this in order to complete the work of the project. The structure of the work and the practicalities of completing it will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

A key practical aim of the project was for family members to receive all travel expenses, childcare and other expenses associated with their attendance at meetings. As will be explained, this was in recognition of the expertise that the family members brought to the work.

In respect of reporting the project, the aim has been to do this via a formal publication. A complementary handbook including a literature review and module guide (prepared by Anna Gupta, Royal Holloway) is available on the SWAP website (www.swap.ac.uk).

The training module has been piloted on Royal Holloway's PQ Child Care Award programme. It is also planned to include it on qualifying and practice teachers' programmes. A presentation was also given by family members from the project at a Making Research Count conference.

**Central to the achievement of the aims of this project were:**

● ensuring that the 'pace' of the project was informed by the needs and preferences of the family members

● identifying the difficulties and obstacles faced by families in accessing services that meet their needs and recognising the impact of poverty on their lives

● identifying best practice for social workers in working with families living in poverty

● making proposals as to how to increase social workers' awareness of the impact of poverty and social exclusion on children, families and communities

● ensuring that the pilot training programme is applicable to the generic training of social workers for whichever client group, and for other professionals

● discussing what it means to live in long-term poverty

● putting in place groundrules to ensure that the contributions of all members of the working group were respected equally

● thinking together about how to make appropriate use of personal experience in training programmes

● supporting family member participants through personal difficulties and crises that arose during the project.

## Who is this report for?

This report is relevant to all institutions and organisations considering the challenge of involving users of social services in the training of social workers.

Whilst it is true that there has been representation of other marginalised groups within social work education and service development (particularly in respect of race, gender and disability), people with experience of poverty have not, to date, been represented. This report builds squarely on the successes previously achieved, and is a tool to enable the voices of people with experience of poverty to be heard on a regular basis.

The findings and recommendations of the project are specific to social work programme funders, providers and service user and carer organisations, and are also relevant to other professionals wishing to poverty-proof service user participation strategies and service development plans. Whilst the findings are reported in respect of children and families social work, they are intended to be transferable to social workers working with other groups.

Whilst the report is intended to influence social work education and training, for use by academic institutions and to stimulate discussions of professional practice in the workplace, it is intended to be accessible to anyone with an interest in the subject, and has been written, we hope, in a way which reflects this. At the end of each chapter, key messages have been distilled under the heading:

## Things to think about

● Service users must receive adequate travel and childcare expenses.

● The pace of training for people to become trainers themselves should be geared to service user needs.

● The sharing of expertise between people living in poverty, who are users of social services, social work practitioners and academics is crucial for the development of social care services.

● Service users must have a central role in the design, delivery and evaluation of a prospective training programme.

● What are the difficulties and obstacles faced by families in accessing services that meet their needs and recognise the impact of poverty on their lives?

● What is best social work practice in relation to family poverty?

● How do we make social workers aware of the impact of poverty and social exclusion on children, families and communities?

● The content of courses on poverty and social exclusion must be applicable to the generic training of all social workers for whichever client group, and for other professionals.

● Ground rules must be in place to ensure that the contributions of all members of the working group are respected equally.

● Thought must be given as to how to make appropriate use of personal experience in training programmes.

● It is crucial that universities and colleges embrace such programmes in order to tap the expertise of service users that would otherwise be hard to reach, and that they are prepared to pay for this expertise.

# 2 Decisions about process, and partner reflections

## What were the practical issues to think through?

The immediate concern was to secure funding for the project. In order to do this a steering group was set up and a proposal developed. The steering group thought through the practicalities of implementing the project. Issues that were considered included the need for support for family members, the structure of the sessions, and as mentioned above, ways of remunerating family members.

It is important to note that two of the three organisations involved already had trusting relationships with service users with experience of poverty and social exclusion in the UK. In this sense, there was capacity to build on an infrastructure already in place. As well as this, the three organisations had prior experience of working together. This is recorded to emphasise the importance of thinking and preparation prior to a project.

It is also important to note the commitment and flexibility of the steering group. This kept the project on track and maintained its quality.

The agreed timetable for meetings was that every eight weeks, family members would meet with support workers from ATD Fourth World, Family Rights Group and Royal Holloway in a morning session, and then in the afternoon they would be joined by the other project participants (i.e. social workers, academics and representatives from the Department of Health and SCIE). In between these meetings, every four weeks, the family members' group would meet. It was felt that this arrangement offered the opportunity for family members to be the central focus of the project, as well as offering them support in between and preparation time prior to all-together meetings. It was also hoped that the time the family members' group spent together would enable a real sense of group cohesion, mutual support and shared ownership of the project.

All of the meetings were held at ATD Fourth World's centre in Camberwell, South London. The meetings were held at a time that took into account participants' need to take and collect their children from school. Lunch and refreshments were provided.

As workers and participants from different agencies were being 'rewarded' for their time, it was felt essential that the same principle should apply to family members, in ways that did not impact on their benefits. The options were discussed with family members and it was agreed that they would receive high street vouchers from ATD Fourth World following each session that they attended. In recognition that family members on benefits cannot be expected to pay for childcare and wait for re-imbursement via a cheque in the post, this was paid for on the day, as were travel expenses.

## What did we do?

- A steering group was set up.
- A proposal and a budget were drawn up and funders contacted.
- Six days of meetings (morning and afternoon) were arranged.
- Six days of service user-only days were arranged (in between all-together meetings) so that service users would become the focus of the project and that there was time to offer support and preparation time, and develop group cohesion.
- The meetings were held at a time that took into account participants' needs to take and collect their children from school.
- Money was made available to pay childcare and travel expenses on the day.
- High street vouchers were made available so that service users could be remunerated without it affecting their benefits.

## How did we engage the family member participants?

It was felt necessary to have as much diversity as possible in terms of age, gender and ethnicity among the family member participants. Six family members were approached by ATD Fourth World to be part of the project. As well as having experience of long-term poverty and social services intervention, they had all been part of ATD Fourth World's family support network and Policy Forum Project. Therefore, being part of the social work training project was not a 'jump into the deep end' – it was an extension of work already completed.

As the majority of the families brought into the project by ATD Fourth World were from White backgrounds, Family Rights Group were asked to contact and invite families from Minority Ethnic backgrounds. This process is discussed in more depth in Reflection 4 below.

It was also important to establish whether any family members and practitioners had worked together in the past (as this could have presented problems), and that family members were convinced of the total confidentiality of what they would share.

## How did we structure the work, and why?

At the beginning and at the end of the morning and afternoon meetings, time was usually spent in the large group. In between, small groups would form to work on the required task. In the afternoon, each of the small groups usually consisted of a mixture of family members, support workers and social care professionals. Family members found small groups particularly useful as they enabled people, including those less confident in public speaking, to talk and to share their perspectives, as well as to enable participants to get to know each other better.

On occasion, role-plays were prepared in the small groups and then performed in front of the whole group, in order to express ideas and practise a technique that could be used in training sessions. This proved to be a powerful way of demonstrating the experiences of families living in poverty, as well as building participants' confidence.

Prior to the project starting, the Steering Group decided to engage someone to participate in the afternoon sessions, as well as to observe and take notes. This person was also to have the task of co-ordinating and editing the evaluation and final report. The first person considered was Nick Perry, and fortunately he was able to undertake this role. Nick is a former ATD Fourth World worker and was already known to some family members and staff. This was beneficial in respect of establishing the trust that was necessary to enable family members to relax about the reporting of their views. It was also important that he was able to subscribe to the philosophy and value base of the project as well as its aims and objectives. Following his time with ATD Fourth World, Nick undertook social work training at Royal Holloway. He could therefore contribute from the perspective of social work postgraduate student and social work practitioner.

How did partners experience the project, from a process point of view?

### Reflection 1 – family member participant
*'I was asked to attend the project in order to represent the views of service users from a Black perspective.*

*'Meeting the group on a regular basis gave us the chance to bond. It brought a better understanding of the various paths that can lead to poverty. Splitting into small groups forced me to interact with everyone.*

*I learnt not to judge a book by its cover.*

*'I did not feel that the views of the Black community were explored properly and there were issues about race and services that needed challenging.*

*'There should also have been a wider variety of food available – not just sandwiches!'*

### Reflection 2 – family member participant
*'Working in small groups was helpful because everybody could speak, but I also liked working in a big group because this gave me the confidence to speak in public. I have a lot of anger inside me towards social workers, because of the way I was treated. I want to be seen as an individual who has views and opinions.*

'In this project I was able to speak to social workers and say exactly what I thought. Lots of supportive friends helped me to feel on an equal footing with them. This is not the case for some families I know who are dealing with social workers at home and who feel threatened.

'I would have liked to have seen the family members have the opportunity to chair meetings. I would also like to have been better prepared for meetings – for someone to have helped me to prepare at home for what we would discuss next time.

'I couldn't come to meetings before 10.15 am, and I needed some time to talk and relax before joining the group. Sometimes, I came with an empty stomach because I didn't have time to have breakfast before leaving home – I had a long way to come.

'Talking about poverty is a very emotional thing for me. Money talks. Money is power. Because I don't have much money I always have to make choices, and there are limits on what I can give to my children. This makes me feel guilty. We have done work to try and change the system, but in the end, people's lives will still be the same – they are still poor.

'Personally, I gained a lot from the assertiveness session. I have learned to be more assertive, especially with my children. I am now able to say 'No' to people, and at the same time to feel respected. I have seen a counsellor, which is painful, but the right step. This transformation might have happened anyway, but the project has opened my eyes to ways of changing.

'Things have changed at home. I used to spend hours cleaning wondering how people would judge me if it was not impeccable. Now I feel that it is a family home, and that this is the most important thing. I try to share the cleaning. I have also started doing things for myself like going swimming again.'

## Reflection 3—social worker participant

'I have not encountered a project of this nature in my 20 years as a practitioner in social work, and when I was asked to participate by FRG, I was a little apprehensive. I also questioned how much free time would be available to me to enable me to contribute to the project.

'I found the first session particularly useful as each person was given the opportunity to present a brief picture of themselves and why they were involved with the project. A list of ground rules were agreed by all participants and the aims and objectives of the project were discussed.

'As the project went on I began to question my own professionalism and training, in conjunction with my lifestyle and value base – all of which are crucial to my direct work with families. I believe that having the participation of families who have had direct experience of poverty and continue to remain in these circumstances has not only furthered my knowledge about this subject but has also made me reflect on my practice as a social worker.

'I began to examine my own perception of poverty and being part of the group enabled me to actively listen and engage more with the families who are, or have been affected by poverty.

'I found some sessions quite thought-provoking. In some instances I felt that some individuals had received a poor service from social services and therefore had some unresolved frustration and anger. As a practitioner I felt that I needed to be apologetic for their experience.

'Working in partnership with the families was a positive and enriching experience for me and I do hope that my involvement was beneficial to other participants.

'Finally, what I found of great importance and encouragement was that there was diversity in the group, with representation from various backgrounds of race, disability, culture, religion and gender.'

## Reflection 4 – supporting organisation participant

'The project had a clear remit in the early stages which, on paper, looked fairly straightforward and inclusive. As partners in the project, we had agreed that we would provide six family members from Black and Minority Ethnic communities who had been involved with social services and had experience of living in poverty. This was a challenge, as the only direct contact we have with families is via our advice line, which families ring for advice in a crisis situation. These families

have rarely developed a long-term relationship with us.

'The families were found through a mail out and "ring around" to approximately 40 voluntary and statutory agencies in London who have contact with Black and Minority Ethnic families involved with social services.

'On reflection, the budget for the project did not lend itself to the inclusion of Black and Minority Ethnic families, for whom English may not be their first language and an interpreter may be needed. We should also have thought more about the fact that there are cultural aspects to and problems around parents leaving children with carers and about single parents who have to return to work within the government's welfare-to-work programme.

'Whilst we all seek to include and provide services for Black and Minority Ethnic families, planning and budget preparation should be seen as the main process for inclusion. To guarantee this inclusion, we agreed to support any shortfall of funding in the area of childcare and travel.

'The process of getting people to travel to a venue in an unknown area, as well as to meet new people, was a learning experience in itself. The Black families came from West, South and North London. This involved arranging a taxi every session for three participants and their interpreter; collecting one, meeting another half-way and showing her the route; the other made her own way there.

'Communication with families had to be by letter, as the families could not access electronic mail systems. Whilst the families attended all sessions, the social worker participants did not. Whilst some of the support workers had social work backgrounds, they were not practising in children and families teams and although four social workers had initially expressed their interest in attending, we rarely had full social worker attendance at the all-together group. This limited the conversations families could have with social workers and often led to the families feeling sorry for the practitioners, which I found disempowering.'

## Reflection 5 – academic participant

'I have felt that the group has worked well. I have found it to be challenging and stimulating and it has developed my own thinking in this area of work, both as an educator and practitioner. I think breaking the group into components has worked well and it has been effective because there has been a balance between everyone having a clear role as well as a genuine feeling of collaboration and mutual learning.

'I have not sensed any defensiveness or any patronising behaviour in the group, which are common occurrences in such collaborations. The facilitation of the group has been excellent, and has enabled the process to take place.

'I have gone on to be involved in the delivery of the training with family members. The receptiveness of the social work practitioners to the material has been varied, with some being extremely positive and others being defensive or, on occasions, dismissive. A challenge will be to deliver the training in ways that encourage a collaborative rather than defensive approach to the development of more respectful and effective services for vulnerable children and their families.

'I hope that this work will be able to continue and develop in some way beyond the formal end of this project as it has a valuable, and indeed currently unique contribution to make to the development of social work.'

## Reflection 6 – funder participant

'I was impressed with the atmosphere of the group – people are excited and positive about the project and about its potential. This is very important as such a project relies on participants feeling valued and continuing to contribute. It is a supportive environment which is reflected by the fact that most people are vocal in the meetings; no one seems to be a passive observer.

'The lunchtime is an important way of increasing this atmosphere, as people catch up and get to know each other.

'Small group discussions are useful as one hears more perspectives and people can discuss things more easily. The feedback is also interesting as one can see the themes that really do emerge.

'Securing the meeting dates early on has been useful for forward planning and achieving maximum attendance.'

## Things to think about

- There should be regular meetings for service users to develop a sense of ownership of the work, mutual support and group cohesion.

- Meetings should be organised around school hours.

- Refreshments should be provided before and during meetings, and there should be regular breaks throughout.

- Lunch is a good social time which helps to break down barriers and build relationships.

- Service users need remuneration that does not cause problems if they are on benefits.

- Expenses need to be made available on the day of the meeting.

- Groups should be as diverse as possible (in terms of age, gender and ethnicity).

- Small groups enable less confident participants to contribute.

- Role-plays are a good way of presenting material.

- Service users must be able to say what they need to say and practitioners should be prepared for this.

- Enable the leadership of the meetings to be shared between participants.

- Help service users to prepare for meetings on a one-to-one basis.

- Assertiveness training is helpful for service users.

- Ground rules and confidentiality are crucial.

- Check if service users and practitioners have had a client-professional relationship in the past.

- Having service user input inspires practitioners to reflect on their practice.

- Budget for translators.

- Communications to participants will have to be by letter as many people do not have access to email.

- Involve practitioners that are current children and families team workers, and who have enough time to be able to attend the project on a regular basis.

- Set meeting dates early.

# 3 Determining the learning outcomes for the training module

As outlined in the last chapter, it was agreed that through the family meetings (in the morning) and all-together meetings (in the afternoon), there would be an opportunity to discuss and develop ideas regarding the most important things for social work students to learn about poverty. These ideas have formed the learning outcomes of the training module.

This section records some of the ways in which the project participants developed their ideas about what should be included in the training module as well as some of the comments and issues that arose from these discussions.

The comments have been recorded under the main themes of the family and all-together meetings, and these sub-sections have been recorded in the same order as the meetings occurred throughout the project. It should be noted that it has not been possible to include all the contributions that were made at each meeting. Comments have (for the most part) been reported in the way that they were phrased by participants.

As an aid to thinking about the issues that family members wanted to include in the future training module, it was necessary to start with basic discussions about people's views on what poverty is, as well as their own conceptions and experiences of good social work practice. This took place on the first day of meetings. Family members were asked to think in particular about what social workers need to be aware of when working with people experiencing long-term poverty.

## Knowledge about the reality of living in poverty and the effects on parents and children

It was felt that social work students need to be given an understanding of the following:

● the effort it takes just to survive

● the effects of things like poor housing

● that the condition of a house doesn't always reflect whether or not children are neglected

● why social services are more often involved with people from backgrounds of poverty

● that poverty is about more than just a lack of money, but that money is important too.

## Social workers' relationships with families – values and attitudes

It was felt that social work students need to understand and demonstrate the following:

### Being human

● the importance of building a trusting working relationship based on both parties having the child's best interests at heart

● the importance of delivering services in a way that promotes dignity

● what it is like in someone else's shoes – *'could you do better in our circumstances'?*

● the importance of not having preconceived ideas

### Being real

● the importance of not making promises you can't keep

● the importance of being honest about your ability to deliver what a family wants and the resources that you have available

● the problem of accessing preventive support services when a family's need is poverty-specific and does not necessarily fit neat eligibility criteria

### Cultural awareness

● the importance of providing services that are open to a variety of cultures in order to prevent exclusion and segregation

● the importance of enabling a mixed race child to have a mixed race social worker

● the importance of using ethnic monitoring information to influence service development in the local area

### Respecting rights

● that providing a service is 'not doing you a favour – families are *entitled* to services'

● the need for social workers to work in partnership with families and for families to work in partnership with social workers

● the importance of not making parents passive partners, where the terms of partnership are decided by the social work agency alone

● the importance of not setting people up to fail

● the importance of informing people of their human rights and welfare entitlements

### Good and bad practice regarding assessment and interventions

It was felt that social work students need to understand:

● the importance of taking the needs of all family members into account

● the anger that results from support (e.g. respite care and money) being offered to foster parents but not to birth parents

● that, from the social worker's point of view, decisions last as long as a case is open, but for the parents, children and siblings in question, these decisions last a lifetime

● the frustration created by the double standards of a social work agency blaming family members if the family can't achieve something, but blaming a lack of resources if a social worker can't achieve something.

Family members were also asked to think about what training they would need to be able to participate in the training of social workers. This training is obviously crucial to the deliverability of the training module. Training needs were taken into account when devising the ongoing programme of the project.

## Training needs

### Supporting trainers

● The host academic institution must take responsibility for the creation of a shared learning environment where expertise is respected.

● Two service user trainers should work together wherever possible.

● Collaboration between service users, academics and practitioners is crucial in terms of delivering training.

● Provide confidence-building and assertiveness training.

● Provide role-playing training.

● Provide motivational training – turning negative energy into positive energy.

● Provide preparation and planning training.

● Attend a session to watch another trainer at work.

● Enable people to keep their contributions real and raw.

● Support people to resist becoming 'professionalised' if this is their preference.

### Using equipment

● Train people to use videos.

● Train people to use equipment such as overhead projectors, Powerpoint computer presentations, microphones.

● Provide copies of the easy guide to the Children Act and access to social services information leaflets.

The first set of meetings looked at what poverty means to the different participants (whether they had direct experience of it or not) as well as their feelings about partnership working and their personal reasons for involvement. This was an important stage in assisting all participants to feel ownership of the project. It is hoped that student social workers' understanding of poverty will be broadened by hearing about poverty from the perspective of people with first-hand experience, as well as the reasons that these people give for wanting to be involved in the training of social workers.

## What does poverty mean to you?

● Being on the margins.

● (For some people) Not being able to read and write and not having had a good education.

● Lack of power over your own life and a lack of choices.

● Having no voice; not being heard.

● Having no right to refuse services that you feel are inappropriate.

- Feeling inadequate.
- Having low self-esteem.
- Lack of status.
- Feeling shame and stigma.
- Not having enough money or support.
- Having a wealth of expertise in survival, courage and humility, but this not being recognised.
- Being blamed and judged by others for the situation you are in.

## Why should we work together?

### To benefit families, so that we:

- improve services to parents and have parental rights respected
- reduce the numbers of children in care
- enable families to give their own views as to what they need in order to get the best long-term outcomes for their children
- enable people with experience of poverty to contribute their ideas on current policy
- enable people with experience of poverty, and training and research organisations, to work in partnership so that grassroots voices are heard
- work out what is realistic for families to expect from social workers, and for social workers to expect from families living in poverty.

### To benefit social workers, so that we:

- reduce conflict in relationships between social workers and service users
- give social workers a better understanding of the choices made by families living in poverty
- improve our understanding of the institutional culture and pressures of social work agencies, and how these can affect the practice of social workers
- improve social workers' ability and confidence to be creative and flexible.

### To benefit agencies, so that we:

- develop an understanding of what it means to be a customer and translate this into what basic standards families should be able to expect from social workers
- enable people with experience of poverty to

share their experience of social work reports and how these reports could be made less discriminatory
- reduce costs over the long-term.

## Why are we participating?

### To educate, so that:

- service users aren't categorised
- social workers don't see people as 'stats' and don't make assumptions about them
- real people and real stories affect social work students and mould their future practice
- social work students understand what it's like to be on the receiving end of services
- social work students learn that most of the time families know what they need, they just need assistance to access it
- the importance of family support at an early stage, before crises occur, is clearly shown
- agencies understand that preventive work is cost-effective
- we raise awareness regarding poverty and the link between poverty and children in care – not just in social care training, but in wider society.

### To advocate, because:

- participants from ATD Fourth World are involved to provide not just their individual experience, but the collective experience of those families who can't be present
- it is necessary to improve services for those that are going to receive them.

### To innovate, so that we:

- highlight the need for the training of social work students and practitioners to include service user trainers with experience of poverty
- explore the links between social work, poverty, race and culture
- show that it is possible for people from different backgrounds to share their experiences and provide a framework for training social work students in a participatory way.

The second set of meetings focused on role-play training needs and was geared to the practical ways in which social workers can

assist families to engage with them and build a trusting relationship.

Three members from ATD Fourth World demonstrated a role-play in which a lone parent (with her child) was late for a first appointment at social services. The role-play was constructed from the experience of ATD Fourth World members and what they have said about first meetings with social workers. The aim of this exercise was to provide an icebreaker, to engage the participants, and also to introduce the theme of the day, which was the idea that poverty can be used (by social services) to 'blame' struggling families. Following the role-play there was small group (and then large group) discussion centred on what helps families in such situations and what is important in respect of how social workers are trained for such meetings.

## What helps families in meetings?

### Being treated with respect

- Give people a nice welcome – and a cup of tea if you can.
- The layout of an interview space is important (are desks used to show where power lies?).
- A smile or two helps.
- Let families know in advance if there is a change of plan.
- Let people know the aim of a meeting.
- Say things clearly and avoid jargon.
- Give space for people to tell their story in the way they want to tell it.
- Inform people of their rights – e.g. allow them to have a friend along to support them.

### Feeling that the professional is on your side

- Do write on files exactly what has been said face to face – not something different.
- Do share with families any notes that you take in order to get their agreement, and send copies whenever possible.
- Do acknowledge to families that sometimes you will exaggerate circumstances because this is what is required before people can get support (as well as explaining the risks of doing this).

- Do acknowledge that it is difficult for people who have been in care themselves to ask for help with their children, and praise them when they do ask for help.
- Do offer family support as a benefit to the child not a punishment for the parent.
- Do praise families – even for small achievements.
- Do show your commitment to confidentiality.
- Do your investigations without pre-judging the situation.
- Don't judge people on their past – recognise that people and circumstances change over time.

### What enables social workers to do a good job?

- A good attitude – non-judgemental, caring, open-minded, genuine (not patronising!).
- Having enough time to do the work.
- Being able to show that you welcome families as human beings.
- Relating problems that family members have to your own experience as a mother/father/child – to show your own humanity.
- An acknowledgement of power differentials and a commitment to minimising these.
- The availability of translators (that speak the correct language/dialect).
- Good knowledge of local, non-statutory support services.
- An ability to understand what is within parents' control and what is not.
- For social work to have good publicity and offer good incentives.
- For social workers to have decent wages.
- For social workers to have the resources available to support families in the ways that they want to be supported.
- For social workers to receive positive feedback for work done well.
- An awareness of research on outcomes for children in care and care leavers, so that an informed decision can be taken about whether or not a child will do better in the long term if they are taken into care.

This led to concrete recommendations in respect of the content of the module:

# Recommended learning outcomes for the training module

## Self-awareness and poverty-awareness

● Have an understanding of our own definitions of poverty (and how these may change).

● Develop awareness of 'poverty-ism' – where people are discriminated against because of their poverty.

● Develop an understanding of what families need in order to cope.

● Develop an understanding of what is 'good enough' in a family's circumstances.

● Don't aim for something impossible.

## Power and powerlessness

● Have an understanding of the fear and stress (and the potential effects of this on behaviour) that come with powerlessness in the face of local government institutions, and from the fact that your children could be taken away from you.

● Gain more knowledge about the difficulties of inequality – the difference between rich and poor.

● Develop awareness of societal double standards where 'multiple carers' aren't acceptable but 'au pairs' are OK.

● Develop awareness of the problem of 'multiple professionals'.

● Develop a deepened awareness of where social work theories originate – are there class perspectives to be explored?

● Think about who defines what is a functional or dysfunctional family? Would it be fair to use the royal family as a case study…?

## Practical skills

● Provide training around recording – notes and report writing – in a way that does not oppress families and individuals.

● Have an understanding of the importance of service user ownership of assessments.

● Have an ability to distinguish risks that parents create from needs that are created by a family's poverty.

● Have an understanding of the need for statutory services to provide the financial wherewithal for people to make changes – e.g. a suggestion of a special diet for a child may be difficult on a family's current income.

## A rights-based perspective

● Develop an understanding of the importance of independent advocacy for a family.

● Have an ability to see the resilience of families and the positive qualities, skills and strengths that they show.

● Practice not judging by appearances.

● Have a deepened awareness of adults' rights as parents as well as children's rights.

● Develop an understanding of social workers' own rights to good supervision and support.

The third set of meetings took these ideas for the training module and (via a discussion paper produced by Royal Holloway staff) enabled the participants to look at them in more depth.

Group discussions focused on the discrimination that service users can experience because of their poverty – how that discrimination can be institutionalised in social work agencies as well as its practical consequences for service users. There was also an opportunity for participants to express how social workers can counter such discrimination through good practice. The shorthand phrase used in these discussions for discrimination against people on the basis of poverty is 'povertyism'. 'Povertyism' perpetuates a lack of knowledge and understanding about the lives of families experiencing poverty. It may also be a by-product of practitioners' lack of power (within their agencies) to offer material aid to families in need.

# 'Povertyism' in social work agencies

## 'Can't do' culture

● Social work agencies can be affected by 'povertyism' and social workers are told that their agency is not there to act as an 'income maintenance agency'.

● Institutional cultures, stressful working

environments and the different functions of a set of local authority children and families teams can influence the way in which people act and the quality (and joined-up nature) of the services that are delivered.

● Prejudices and pre-conceived ideas mean people experiencing poverty are at a disadvantage – someone can have an image of you without knowing you (e.g. if you are on benefits you should have enough to get by; if you can't, you must waste your money on alcohol and cigarettes or spend it irresponsibly); the stereotype of you is that you are likely to neglect your family – e.g. if there is nothing in the cupboard, you are not feeding your children; *'the man on the street can have that attitude, but [social workers] are being paid for the work that they do…'* (Project participant).

## Failing families

● There is low expectation from agencies for families experiencing poverty – an attitude that it is not good value for money to invest in these families.

● People are not prepared to risk investing in a family because they don't feel that it will make a real difference.

● 'Povertyism' in a system can make people feel that they don't matter, e.g. when there is no immediate relief available if you are in crisis – you have to wait three weeks.

● 'Povertyism' can mean that agencies don't think through the self-esteem implications (or bother to explain the budgetary reasons why) second-hand items are given, and don't address the feelings of injustice around why this varies from area to area.

# Practical consequences of 'povertyism'

## Getting blocked

● So much time and money can be spent proving your need for services – constant phone calls and visits.

● When asking for services, you are treated in a disrespectful way – made to feel bad and guilty.

● 'Povertyism' combined with a family's lack of means can result in a lack of respect – if you have means then you can choose not to have social services interventions (e.g. a better-off parent with a similar problem may not have an intervention, because they can buy in help).

● Waiting times can be for hours and hours.

● You are expected to feel grateful to the agency.

● It encourages a 'beggars can't be choosers' approach to service delivery.

## Getting judged

● 'Povertyism' affects the balance of power between individuals and the way in which their rights are respected – e.g. people in poverty (as clients of social services) are at a disadvantage compared with 'posh' clients, who are perceived as intimidating and have their rights respected as a matter of course.

● People become subject to judgements from services and abuses of power – e.g. why are professionals allowed to make comments about bad decorating? This is not a child protection issue.

● Preconceived ideas: if you fit the poverty stereotype then the 'risks' about your family life that are being 'assessed' can be blown out of proportion.

## Getting disempowered

● There's no real right to say what help you want and need – that is for the professional to decide.

● Practitioners need to understand the stress and frustration that families bring to a meeting – and try not to add to it!

● It's important that showing emotions isn't seen as a negative thing.

● You are expected to 'get on with it' (i.e. getting your kids to school, and with everything that they need) as others don't have any problems in this way.

● 'Povertyism' and a family's experience of this at the hands of a professional can result in barriers forming and a lack of honesty – there can be a real fear of admitting how badly you are struggling for fear of losing your children.

## How agencies and practitioners can embed practice that prevents 'povertyism' and other forms of discrimination

### Learn about what matters

- Understand the effects of being in care and that people leaving care can be disadvantaged on many levels.

- Know about the links between children taken into care, care leavers and inter-generational poverty.

- Demonstrate an understanding that 'neglect' can be created by society as well as individuals.

- Understand that local authorities as corporate parents may not have equipped young people for parenthood.

- Feed back regularly; keep in touch.

### Learn about advocacy

- Think about how you could complain as a professional if you don't agree with a decision.

- Recognise that people don't want handouts – they want to help themselves.

- Respect people enough to take the time to explain things – e.g. the politics of why your agency's budget is the way it is; which agencies provide what (Community Care Grants come via the Department for Work and Pensions, not local social services departments, for example).

- Have good accountability and complaints procedures (and assist families to use them).

- Offer fair access to services.

- Don't operate double standards – e.g. why is a parent sending a child to boarding school (seeing them infrequently) acceptable, when missing a contact appointment with a child in care (owing to unforeseen circumstances) is so frowned upon?

## Practical suggestions for building good working relationships

### Customer care

- Show manners and common courtesy to people.

- Listen, but achieve things for a family as well.

- Go with your gut and not pre-conceived ideas about people.

- Don't label people.

- Don't assume that people lie to you.

### Show that you are trustworthy

- Offer a human touch; don't be a robot.

- Believe in a family.

- Offer families encouragement for the things that they have managed to achieve rather than criticising them for the things they have not managed to do – *'a little bit of encouragement goes a long way …'*.

- Recognise and develop the aspirations of a family.

- Be prepared to take a risk on behalf of a family.

- Provide services that families want at an early stage to prevent the situation getting worse.

### Demonstrate partnership

- Refer families to other services if the agency cannot provide for the family itself.

- Do not abuse your power and offer people experiencing poverty a poor service because you feel that they are not in a position to challenge you (or the agency).

- Don't talk down to people.

- Avoid an 'us and them' mentality.

### Stick to social work values

- Offer quality services – *'if you want to help, help properly!'*.

- Enable families to have dignity and respect.

- Take a creative approach to supporting families.

- Respond to complaints speedily and in a meaningful way.

- Recognise (and do not abuse the fact) that when people are stressed it is harder to complain.

- Have good channels of communication with people – be as accessible as possible.

The focus of the fourth set of meetings was to prepare family members for the presentation that they were to give to the *Making Research*

*Count* conference later that month. The sessions provided training for this conference and were designed to build participants' confidence. The conference presentation was role-play-oriented and focused on a group that is particularly vulnerable to poverty and life-long social services interventions – care leavers. The presentation also raised questions about good and bad social work practice.

## Why care leavers are vulnerable to the problems of poverty

- Care leavers often start their adult life in poverty.

- Emergencies do not happen nine to five; a flexible model of support is crucial.

- Care leavers (and some families) going to live in bedsits can be vulnerable to exploitation by others living in the block who are hardly ever police-checked.

- Young people having grown up in care are likely to have lived at many addresses and their education may have suffered.

- Care leavers often find it difficult to settle into, and be accepted by communities, because of the stigma of having been in care.

- Young people having grown up in care are less likely to have good job opportunities.

- Care leavers need practical support and explanations around basic living skills, which benefits to claim and how to budget.

The fifth set of meetings was used to bring in an external trainer and to build up family members' confidence and assertiveness. As mentioned above, these skills are crucial in respect of enabling service users to cope with the transition from safe, project-based learning and sharing to an academic environment where they will be teaching unknown social work students and practitioners. The external trainer offered exercises which explored issues such as 'When do I succeed in making myself heard?'; what assertiveness looks like; and how to share experiences in a useful way.

The sixth set of meetings was reserved for the evaluation of the project. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

## Things to think about (for students and practitioners)

### Do understand:

- the effort it can take for families just to survive

- the effects of living in poor housing

- that the condition of a house doesn't always reflect whether or not children are neglected and that there is a difference between 'messy' and 'dirty'

- why people from backgrounds of poverty are more often involved with social services

- that poverty is about more than just a lack of money, but that money is important too

- the importance of building a trusting working relationship based on both parties having the child's best interests at heart

- the importance of delivering services in a way that promotes dignity

- what it is like in someone else's shoes – *'could you do better in our circumstances?'*

- the importance of being honest about your ability to deliver what a family wants and the resources that you have available

- the importance of providing services that are open to a variety of cultures in order to prevent exclusion and segregation

- the importance of enabling a mixed race child to have a mixed race social worker

- the importance of using ethnic monitoring information to influence service development in the local area

- that providing a service is 'not doing you a favour – families are *entitled* to services'

- the need for social workers to work in partnership with families and for families to work in partnership with social workers

- the importance of informing people of their human rights and welfare entitlements

- the importance of taking the needs of all family members into account

- the anger that results from support (e.g. respite care and money) being offered to foster parents but not to birth parents

- that, from the social worker's point of view, decisions last as long as a case is open, but for the parents, children and siblings in question, these decisions last a lifetime.

**Do not forget:**

- the danger of having preconceived ideas

- that mistrust is caused by making promises you can't keep

- the frustration created by the double standards of a social work agency blaming family members if the family can't achieve something, but blaming a lack of resources if a social worker can't achieve something

- to be straightforward about the problems of accessing preventive support services when a family's need is poverty-specific and does not necessarily fit neat eligibility criteria

- the problems caused by making parents passive partners, where the terms of partnership are decided by the social work agency alone

- the importance of not setting people up to fail.

# 4 Evaluating the project

## Whole group evaluation

The sixth set of meetings was given over in its entirety to group evaluation of the project. The steering group had requested that the external trainer be involved to equip family members with training and presentation skills to facilitate the evaluation. In the end, it was not possible for the facilitator to be present. However, she helped the steering group to think about the questions it was important to ask and to answer.

As with the previous meetings, there was a morning meeting for family members and then an all-together meeting in the afternoon. In the morning, the family members stayed as a large group rather than breaking up into smaller groups to feed back. They discussed the project by doing the following exercises:

### Talk about your finest hour in the project – what has been most valuable?

**Togetherness**

● Meeting all the different participants.

● Seeing all the professionals in the all-together meeting.

● Working to keep families together.

**Empowerment**

● Encouraging each other that we do have power as service users.

● Learning about the power of mutual support.

● Showing our strength at a Making Research Count conference.

● Bringing 'povertyism' to the fore and developing ideas.

● The possibility of renewed hope that this project might change things.

● Building self-esteem and assertiveness.

● Learning about support services other than social services.

**Respect**

● Learning to respect professionals and vice versa.

● Working with professionals, on equal terms.

● Learning how poverty is compounded by racism.

● Being able to say what I want without being judged.

### What do you think the project has done well, OK, not so well, and not at all?

**Well**

● Providing information before meeting days, with the day's aims explained.

● Having meetings in a venue that is easily accessible.

● Not having hierarchies with professionals.

● Ensuring everyone has a chance to express what they want to, without being judged.

● Flexibility in the structure of the sessions.

● Allowing preparation time, and the family members' group to develop.

● Small group exercises talking about poverty and social work practice.

● Assertiveness training session – which focused on families and not problems.

● Providing travel expenses, childcare costs and vouchers (and offering vouchers after people had committed to the project, rather than as an incentive to come).

● Organising an ending activity (which was a trip to the seaside).

**OK**

● Ensuring that participants are fully prepared for meetings.

● Being aware of the needs of people whose first language is not English.

● Ensuring that training is adapted to different people's needs.

- Training for the role of trainer.
- Opportunities to practise as a trainer.

**Not so well**

- Having meetings at different venues, as people had different distances to travel.
- Ensuring that there is a balance of men and women.
- Making sure the whole group is aware of others' special needs.
- Ringing up people after meetings to check that they had understood what was going on.
- Ensuring that people understood that supporting organisations' staff were not social workers.
- Enabling participants to do role-plays in their own language and having translation facilities.
- Translating written project information into different languages.
- Engaging social workers who were able to be part of the project from beginning to end.
- Providing a wide enough range of 'professionals' – e.g. politicians, teachers, social services managers.
- Ensuring that all participants join the project at the beginning and stay to the end.
- Challenging racism in social work through this kind of project.
- Having enough training on equipment such as microphones, overhead projectors, Powerpoint.
- Having sufficient time in afternoon sessions.
- Having higher and more imaginative payments – e.g. a night out, or babysitting provision.
- Explaining where the project goes from here.

**Not at all**

- Starting the project off with a social event so people could get to know each other.
- Providing breakfast on meeting days, as people didn't always have time to eat before leaving home.
- Providing a crèche on location.
- Arranging for individual training between meeting days.
- Making a video of a day in the life of a family experiencing persistent poverty.

The all-together group (in the afternoon) looked at group dynamics, group make-up, the pace at which the group worked, the way in which participants saw themselves contributing to the training module, and the way in which it could be made easier for social workers to be involved.

**What was your impression of the mix of participants? Was everyone represented who needed to be? What did you feel about being in a group of mixed backgrounds and experiences?**

- We could have had a better representation of people with special needs.
- We needed a better male–female mix and a wider range of ages.
- Care leavers and asylum seekers were not formally represented.
- Representatives from children's rights groups could have been involved.
- It would be good to have young people involved so that they could share their experience of being a child in a family that is involved with social services.
- ATD Fourth World participants were representing others who could not attend the meetings.
- Family members sometimes dominated the meetings but this was a pleasant change from meetings at social services.
- The groups challenged my negative stereotypes of social workers.
- We learned from each other without always agreeing.
- We found our common ground.
- We need to be together longer and get to know each other better before we can approach the issue of racism properly.
- We need the commitment of social workers to see the project through to the end.
- It was important that there were no professionals present that we had been involved with in the past.
- It has been important to have group ownership of the project.

## Did you feel that the pace of the project was appropriate to the needs and preferences of the family members?

- We need to look at why some people dropped out.

- There was not the capacity from the supporting organisations to do enough preparation with family members between meetings.

- There was not enough time to think about where we have been in the project and where we go next.

- It would have been useful to have a folder to keep all the papers in.

- We could have been a bit more disciplined about using our work-time properly.

- Maybe the pace was too quick for the people whose first language is not English.

- Written information should have been translated for those whose first language is not English.

- It's important to remember that this is some people's only opportunity to let off steam about their situation.

## How do you see your role in delivering the training module?

- I feel ready to be a trainer but I need more practice.

- I want to explain to students that there is real discrimination against people in poverty and that people aren't told about their rights (especially regarding welfare benefits and human rights).

- I want to teach social workers that they have rights themselves and that they will have to be strong when they go to work in their social work agencies if they are going to support families as they want to be supported.

- I want to demonstrate the breadth of families' support networks – maybe this could be done through a video or a family tree.

- I want to go out and say what I have learnt.

- I want to encourage social workers to challenge bad practice in their work place.

- I want to ensure that we protect our mutual support systems.

- It is important for us to go to social services departments and train staff there about poverty and its impact on families.

- It is important for tutors at universities to use trainers for their knowledge, not to ask them personal questions.

## How can we make it easier for social workers to be involved?

- We need to go to them and ask them.

- We need to get social workers seconded to this sort of project so that their agency is backing their involvement, and so that the agency can own the successes of the project.

- We need to ensure that this is part of social workers' workload, not something they have to do on a voluntary basis.

- We could approach the British Association of Social Workers for their support.

- We could have prepared social workers better for the negative feelings that family members have towards social services and explain that this is a result of their experiences.

- We could have supported social workers better so that they did not feel threatened, and so they recognised they were coming into a disempowering situation.

## Reporting the project

There has been a commitment within the project to a transparency of process – both in respect of the development of the work of the all-together group, and in the reporting of the work of the project.

In order to be able to present a near complete draft to the family member group within the lifetime of the project, it has been necessary to report the project while it was in progress. In turn, this has meant sticking to a tight timetable, the main aim of which was to consult family member participants on the content and structure of the draft report in summer 2004. The report editor and the steering group were responsible for the production of the consultation draft.

The family member group met in July to do this work, and comments were fed back to the steering group via the supporting organisations.

## Steering group evaluation

The whole group evaluation has been valuable in respect of pinpointing the specific ways in which the project has benefited individual participants, the ways in which it could have supported individual participants better, and the way in which it could have done more planning in respect of next steps. It is also important to record some of the lessons learnt by the steering group on broader themes:

### Defining poverty

At the beginning of the project, it was difficult to reach a consensus about participants' understanding of poverty. Some participants have life-long experience of persistent poverty resulting in poor educational attainment, long-term unemployment, and long-term health and disability issues, whilst others' experience of poverty is more recent and stems from having lived on Income Support, or having been in the position of becoming lone parents and reliant on benefits. This resulted in a group with different levels of capacity to engage with the main objectives of the project. On one hand, this made the running of the meetings more challenging; on the other, it meant that there was an added layer of diversity to the discussions.

### The work programme and training

Whilst the structuring of the work around small groups has been beneficial for participants, has resulted in the development of mutual support, and has delivered a set of learning outcomes, there has not been sufficient emphasis on the training needs of family member participants. This is work that needs to be undertaken as part of the follow-up work to the project.

### The added value of service user trainers

The project has demonstrated the importance of involving service users in respect of designing (as well as participating in) its work programme. This has enabled a greater sense of ownership from family members and has addressed the power differentials between participants in the group. This sense of ownership and safety has in turn enabled participants to feel confident to share their experiences and to contribute to the development of a set of learning outcomes which are truly reflective of the difficulties that are often experienced by families living in long-term poverty. The real-life perspectives of service user trainers are a huge resource for social work students to tap.

### Training teams

As the project has progressed (and particularly through family members' involvement in the Making Research Count conference), the importance of partnership between service users, academics and practitioners has become clear. The combination of skills and experiences has enabled the delivery of hard-hitting, thought-provoking and best practice-oriented training on the realities of poverty in the UK. Whilst this is not to say that there is only one way of delivering such training successfully, it is clear that the teamwork of the participants has provided a supportive and safe platform from which to deliver presentations to practitioners (in unknown and potentially intimidating environments).

### The lack of capacity for supporting organisations

Support for family member participants in looking through and making comments on the write-ups of each day of meetings could have been managed better. This was attempted at the beginning of the project, but it became clear that such work was not possible within a large group, and that the supporting organisations did not have the time or resources to undertake one-to-one work with family member participants. Not doing this work has put the project at risk of missing steers from family member participants in respect of its ongoing work programme.

It has been possible to do support work during meetings in order that less confident family member participants have been able to contribute, however the project would have benefited from extra capacity in this area. It is also the case that, due to the fact that family member participants' lives are affected by an ongoing experience of poverty, the project has not always been top priority for them – especially when there are problems at home. The capacity to telephone families to remind them of the next meeting (as well as the value of their contributions) has helped keep them involved.

There are also capacity questions in terms of how supporting organisations will progress the work that has been started in this project. Whilst the project will have been successful in its aim to produce a model training module given by service users to social work students and practitioners, extra resources will be needed if supporting organisations are to be part and parcel of enabling service users to deliver the training programmes in an academic environment.

## Poverty and racism

Working alongside Black and Minority Ethnic families in this project has developed an awareness of the global and cultural influence of poverty on these communities in the UK. Families have often originally come to the UK to improve their access to opportunities, education and a life away from the levels of poverty that exist in many developing countries. This is relevant to some of the Black families involved in the project. Some families regularly send money home to relatives because of chronic poverty or because relatives' lives had been affected by tragedies such as floods in Bangladesh, or hurricanes in the Caribbean. Relatively speaking, families living in poverty in Britain may well be better off than their kin at home and therefore feel they need to support their extended family even though their resources in Britain may be extremely limited. Collective responsibilities to kinship networks wider than the immediate family are particularly important for many Black and Minority Ethnic families living in Britain and assessments need to take account of the family's particular value base and cultural context.

Professionals must guard against making assumptions on the basis of outward appearances. Appearances can belie actual circumstances. For example, as mentioned above, a family sending financial support to relatives overseas is not necessarily well off. Equally, the wearing of cultural dress (which can sometimes appear opulent) does not necessarily mean a family has sufficient resources.

During the project there were also issues raised around the possibility (or not) of ethnic origin being a benefit in respect of accessing extra support services. Evidence shows that Black families don't often get the services they need[12]. When working with Black families and those from other Minority Ethnic origins, professionals need to be aware of the impact of poverty and racism and develop an ability to challenge this. In this way people's lives are understood in their proper context, so that relevant services can be offered. Unfortunately, there was not the time or capacity within the project to explore fully the links between poverty and race. This is an area that would benefit from much further research and development.

## The engagement of practitioners

The irregularity of practitioner attendance was a problem for the project. It was particularly a problem in respect of not getting a full picture of the difficulties and current practice issues in children and families social work. On reflection, the project should have been more systematic in engaging social workers. There should have been a direct approach to social work managers and agencies (as opposed to the practitioners themselves) to release practitioners to the project. This would have enabled the individual practitioners to feel that the project was not an extra pressure on their workload. Equally, agencies would have been able to share in the successes of the project.

## The transition from training to practice

From the input of the social worker participants to the project it is clear that there is a problem to address in the 'institutional culture' of (particularly statutory) social work agencies. This term refers to the way in which statutory responsibilities, budgets, recruitment and retention issues, stress levels and other institutional factors affect the way in which social workers are able to do their jobs. There was a sense throughout the project that agency culture is a strong force in the moulding of practitioner approaches. This was acknowledged by family members during the project, and it was felt to be an important learning outcome for the training module. There was a desire from project participants to equip social work students better for the transition from training to practice. Awareness of these factors also strengthened the participants' belief that service user trainers are crucial to both pre- and post-qualification training programmes. Having said this, the involvement of service user trainers in the workplace does not come without its difficulties.

Whilst most of the participants at the pilot sessions on the London Post Qualifying Child Care Award and at the Making Research Count conference found the input from family members stimulating and useful, some felt angry and patronised as well as defensive when challenged about social work practice. Ironically, the challenge for the future is to create a learning environment in which the unique contribution of service users is valued by professionals who are able to reflect on ways of improving social work practice without feeling threatened or judged.

## Things to think about

- Choose venues that are practically accessible for families, and settings that put people at ease.

- Provide opportunities for service users to practise being trainers.

- Consider gender balance within groups.

- Check that people have understood sessions.

- Is there a wide enough range of professional participants?

- How will you engage participants to stay for the whole of the work programme?

- Challenge racism where it exists; think about access to services or training for different cultural groups.

- Be able to explain to service users what happens when the work finishes (and have the money available to enable ongoing involvement).

- How do you best represent care leavers, asylum seekers and children's rights groups?

- Why do people drop out?

- Provide a folder for participants to keep their papers in.

- Don't attempt too much in a session – be clear and focused.

- Recognise that rights perspectives are crucial.

- Recognise that post-qualification training for social workers is as important as pre-qualification training.

- Get agencies' backing for practitioners' involvement.

- Involve service users in the design of the project to maximise ownership.

- Use training teams made up of service user trainers, practitioners and academics.

- Ensure that supporting organisations have enough capacity to do the work that is necessary.

# 5 Lessons and recommendations

Our project has drawn out issues of importance for the various different partners in the process of enabling service users to become routinely involved in the training of social work students.

This report adds to the growing body of work offering practical methods to institutionalise service user participation in social work education. This includes the SCIE resource guide (already referenced), the GSCC and SCIE conference report *Living and learning together*[13], and the Mental Health in Higher Education (mhhe), NIHME West Midlands and Trent Workforce Development Confederation good practice guide on service user and carer involvement in mental health education[14].

This work can only be done with adequate resources. In June 2004 the Department of Health increased to £640,000 the funding available to universities to support service user and carer involvement. A total of £1.34 million is to be committed in 2004/05. This money will be distributed by the GSCC, with the remainder being distributed to SCIE and Topss England (now Skills for Care).

As the organisation responsible for publishing and promoting good practice in social care, SCIE is developing a strategy to support service user and carer-led organisations in fulfilling their role. The recommendations applicable to funders of training projects (below) are particularly relevant for the Department of Health and SCIE.

Skills for Care has been asked to establish learning materials for service users and carers and to ensure that training is offered across the regions as part of their support for service user and carer involvement in all social care training. In the light of this, the recommendation to establish a national network of supporting organisations (recommendation 5) is particularly pertinent.

The GSCC has been asked to provide advice, based on its monitoring of the existing service user involvement grant, about the outcomes which might be expected from the successful application of the new funding. This report has provided concrete examples to universities and colleges of what genuine participation (in respect of training social workers) must look like.

Above all else, the recommendations of this report are designed to build the capacity required to provide high quality qualifying and post-qualifying training. These issues are crucial to the three main partner groups concerned: funders of training projects, supporting organisations delivering training, and programme providers hosting training. The recommendations have been grouped accordingly. Some of the recommendations are applicable across groups.

## Final recommendations

### For funders of training projects

1. Sustained funding must be made available by central government departments (e.g. the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Skills, the Department for Work and Pensions) to enable supporting organisations to provide long-term training and support to service user trainers.

2. Hidden costs to supporting organisations of providing such intensive support to family member participants must be recognised and covered.

3. Funding must be available for future training engagements as well as the ongoing development of service user trainers, because once service user trainers have been trained, it is important to keep their momentum and confidence going.

4. Funding must be available for evaluation in order to keep developing the learning process.

5. Social work training would benefit from having a formalised national network of local supporting organisations that are qualified to replicate the training of service users that has been undertaken in this project (this will have funding implications).

### For supporting organisations delivering training

6. Service user and carer supporting organisations must have the right infrastructure, skills and contacts in order to provide training teams to programme providers.

7. Projects must have a committed and flexible steering group from start to finish in order to achieve the aims of the work.

8. Using training teams that comprise (at least two) family members, a social work practitioner, a supporting organisation member and an academic is an excellent way of delivering service user trainer-led sessions.

9. Family member participants will be living with the consequence of social work interventions during their involvement in the project. This must be recognised, and as a result, supporting organisations need to provide family support as well as project-oriented support, alongside training.

10. Social work practitioners' must be supported in order to sustain their involvement in such work. This will only be achieved by a formal engagement process and through the commitment and agreement of the employer agency.

11. The expertise of family member participants (and service user trainers) must be recognised by providing remuneration which takes account of families' resources, social security benefits and childcare situations.

12. Small group settings should be used to enable the support, training and development of service user trainers.

13. The impact of mixed language and ability groups must be understood and provision made so that all participants have their voices heard and that groups can work at a pace which is inclusive of all.

14. Proper budget-setting is crucial to this work. Think through in full all the costs that will be needed and integrate within the budget the costs of training service users. It is important to remember that no supporting organisations can do this sort of work as part of their existing budget, and that flexibility within budgets (to cover unforeseen costs) is extremely valuable.

15. Enabling engagement with equality and diversity issues in a meaningful (non-tokenistic) way requires support work and other services. Supporting organisations should establish the ethnic make-up of local service users, seek to reflect this in project groups, and ensure that the support necessary to secure this diversity is budgeted from the very start.

16. Further thought should be given as to how to set up regular training opportunities for qualified social workers and their agencies, in order to embed 'anti-povertyism' in agencies, and so that it is possible to counter the potentially negative effects (on social work practice) of working under the pressures of statutory children and families social work.

## For programme providers hosting training

17. Develop constructive, respectful partnerships between academic institutions and voluntary sector supporting organisations.

18. Have a flexible approach to the work that service user trainers are asked to do and when they are asked to do it. This should include an understanding of trainers' childcare responsibilities (e.g. be aware of when school holidays are; training partnerships should be localised).

19. A welcoming, non-intimidating environment is necessary in order to deliver service user-led training, and host institutions must understand the fact that service user trainers may not be able to meet all the practical requirements of travelling to, and being at work all day. Provision must also be made (between supporting organisations and academic institutions) for the payment of travel expenses on the day, as well as access to lunch facilities and a rest space for trainers.

20. Host institutions must recognise that the training teams will provide training that may be very inter-active and thought provoking. Receivers of the training must be made aware that the style is not necessarily going to be conventional; nevertheless it is rich and should be valued as such.

## Last word

This report and its recommendations are delivered in the context of working towards the eradication of poverty in the UK. Whilst poverty, inequality and social exclusion persists in this country, it is important for those with direct experience of it to be part of the process of educating social work students and practitioners about the impact of family poverty and the practice and services needed to assist those caught in the poverty trap. Involving service users with direct experience of poverty is the only way to reverse the historic discrimination which people in poverty continue to face, to enable social workers to become better advocates for them, and to keep together families experiencing poverty, wherever possible, for as long as possible.

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**For more information about this project and the organisations involved contact:**

## ATD
# FOURTH WORLD

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