



Involvement

Two years ago, we found that some degree of involvement was widespread in charities

Charities were involving people with lived experience (including beneficiaries) in a variety of ways:

Over four in five large (83%) and major (81%) charities surveyed said that beneficiaries have direct involvement in service design, as well as over half (55%) of small and medium charities.

76% of charities reported making some change to strategy or operations as a result of beneficiary or service user involvement, including 34% saying they had made a major change.

While these figures are encouraging, it was not clear to what extent 'involvement' meant a genuine understanding of user's needs, nor the extent to which charities were adopting more asset based, user led approaches to delivering social change and services.

In 2018 we found greater sophistication in approaches, but still a long way to go to embed meaningful user involvement

Interviewees recognised the importance of service user involvement, and were thoughtful about the issues involved in good user involvement practice:

'We do a lot of co-production work in services, ...we recently did an audit of co-production across our services and now we can assess where individual services are in their co-production practice and what we need to do to improve their practice.'

For some, 'service user involvement' felt outdated in the new context of citizen engagement and co-design:

'I would never use those words, it's about citizen co-production, that whole frame of service user involvement is so 1980s, there's a very different frame and you need to look at that as a key design requirement.'

Though some we spoke to wanted to push the envelope (as above) many also recognised that on balance the sector still has a long way to go:

'We often hear people have gotten involved and then nothing changes. We need to communicate next steps about what we did next.'

Some felt that the philanthropic sector in particular still holds on to an old view of service user involvement:

'Service user involvement is good in parts and [some are] engaging in co-creating, [but] in the philanthropic space there is still more of the 'we know what's best for you' approach. There is still a view that charity is what those with money and power do to those without money and power, and that fundamentally needs to change.'

It is challenging and resource intensive to listen meaningfully

Participatory approaches are inherently more complex and expensive than 'traditional' approaches to service design, and not all charities will have the resources to carry it out meaningfully. And charities are often not be ready to hear negative feedback about their organisations:

'I think the sector is pretty rubbish at it on the whole, we're really poor at listening to people we work with or engaging with them or co-producing. These things are very hard and require strong commitment from leaders and resources to do it. On the whole, people don't feel they have the resources.'

'We need to give space and be prepared when the grassroots people give you feedback you don't want to hear.'

But that is no reason not to prioritise listening

Some feel there is at least a growing awareness of the importance of user-led approaches to service design within some parts of the sector, even where it is not being implemented.

'It feels as though a more nuanced narrative is happening, the sector does still have a paternalistic approach, but there is some meaningful co production and design'

Technology will make listening easier and without doing it, charities may be circumvented:

'Digital and tech have helped to create platforms for people to connect without going through the charity and for people to volunteer without going to a physical space'

NPC's plans for 2019

In October 2018 we published [Make it count: why impact matters in user involvement](#), which explored the purpose of involvement, the spectrum of approaches, the gaps in evidence and how we can go about building the evidence base. We argue for a greater focus in the social sector on what user involvement aims to achieve, and better efforts to evidence the difference it can make.

Please visit our [website](#) or contact policy@thinknpc.org if you are interested in supporting this work.

