

# Engaging with involuntary service users in social work

Good practice guide



This guide is based on a research project at The University of Edinburgh which involved:

- Reviews of research on user engagement in social work.
- Seminars with around 70 professionals from six Scottish local authority social work departments.
- Practitioner-led research projects in each of these local authorities.

## The project found that:

- Worker-client relationships are central to engagement with involuntary service users.<sup>1, 2</sup> Face to face work, collaborating with service users to solve their problems, is essential.<sup>3</sup>
- Trust and respect, developed over the long term, can help to improve engagement.<sup>4, 5</sup>
- Clear and honest communication is also vital.<sup>6</sup>
- Involuntary service users may need active support to engage in social work decision making, e.g. independent advocacy in case conferences.<sup>7, 8</sup>

## **Involuntary service users of social work are diverse**

- They range from those who won't respond to any contact, to those who co-operate because they feel they have no other choice.
- We use the term 'involuntary clients' for people whose involvement with social workers is mandated by law, including families in the child protection system, users of mental health services, people with disabilities, older people such as those with dementia, and people in the criminal justice system.
- Engaging with involuntary clients can be challenging. Successes may be small and hard-won.

*drug users*

**adult protection**

older people

**disabled people**

young people

**parents**

**offenders**

**mental health service users**

**children**

**child protection**

**alcohol users**

**The social work relationship is vital for working with involuntary clients. Some things which can help to build positive working relationships include...**

- Maintaining continuity by avoiding frequent changes of worker.<sup>9, 10</sup>
- Striking a balance between exercising social work authority, and empowering the client to control the process where possible.<sup>11</sup>
- Giving practical assistance, e.g. advocacy, helping clients to fight for their rights.<sup>12</sup>
- Paying attention to what is positive in the client's behaviour and celebrating all achievements.<sup>3</sup>
- Showing the client your humanity, e.g. by finding a common interest, revealing something about yourself, showing empathy or 'going the extra mile' in working with them.
- Where the relationship has broken down completely, independent mediation services may be worth exploring.<sup>13</sup>

## **Building trust is essential in engaging with involuntary clients.**<sup>4,5</sup>

- Involuntary service users are often mistrustful of social services.
- Building trust, even on the smallest scale, can start to overcome their fears.
- Trust can be built by simple things: consistency; sticking to your word; being honest and upfront about the situation and why social work is involved; apologising if you or your organisation makes a mistake.<sup>14</sup>
- This does not mean that clients should feel that they can trust you with their secrets, or to always be on their side. It means that they can trust you to be honest with them, maintain appropriate boundaries and make these explicit.

## **Working with involuntary clients takes time and persistence.<sup>15</sup>**

### **Progress is often slow.**

- Clients often begin with negative attitudes towards social workers. However, they may revise these opinions over the long term.
- It is important to understand what the initial resistance is about and get beyond that. Many families have had bad experiences which leave them struggling to trust professionals.
- Clients' timescales might not fit with statutory or performance management requirements. It may help if you can be flexible and move at the client's pace.<sup>8, 14</sup>

## **Clear communication is crucial for engagement with involuntary clients.**<sup>16,17,18</sup>

- Many involuntary clients struggle to understand what is happening to them. This makes engagement difficult.
- Engagement can be improved by making clear at every contact what the purpose of the intervention is, what the client has control over and what they do not, what is going to happen next and what the likely consequences will be.<sup>19</sup>

- It may help to stick to a simple, clear message, and repeat this consistently, e.g. “I’m here because we are worried about your safety. We need to make sure you are safe.” Check with the client that this is understood and agreed upon.
- Empathy is crucial for maintaining engagement even where difficult issues are being discussed.<sup>20</sup>
- Avoid professional and management jargon and acronyms.
- Too much information (e.g. long, complex reports) can be as unhelpful as too little.<sup>21</sup>

## **Involuntary clients may be experiencing intense emotions**

- A parent facing the removal of their child, for example, may be feeling intense anger, regret, sadness and guilt. They may be looking for someone else to blame for what is happening.
- Clients may also be playing out scripts learned in earlier life. It can help to ask why people are behaving as they are, rather than taking behaviour at face value.
- It may help to consider what aspects of hostility are personal (responses to your own actions as a worker), and what aspects are not (e.g. anger at social services in general, or at previous workers).



## **It may also help to think about yourself and how you are feeling**

- If you feel a strong sense of dread prior to contact with a client, or of relief if a client does not answer the door, this may suggest that you need more support.
- It's OK to ask for support.
- Supervision ought to be there for you to use if you are finding things difficult. It ought to allow you the opportunity to discuss how working with particular clients makes you feel.
- You might want to ask a colleague to accompany you to visit a client you are having trouble engaging. A third party may be able to help diffuse the situation.

## **What else might help clients?**

- Acknowledging their circumstances and understanding their histories.
- Listening to clients' experiences; trying to understand how they feel about intervention.
- Giving clients access to a complaints procedure which they could realistically use.<sup>9</sup>



## **What else might help social workers?**

- Empowering them to have more confidence in themselves; re-asserting social work professionalism.
- Getting peer support e.g. through practitioners forums, from colleagues.
- Reflecting critically and honestly on social work practice.
- Avoiding falling into the routine, box-ticking mode.

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