

The Keys To Power

Peter Bates

User consultation and empowerment has become a critical theme in all sectors of the caring services in the UK over the past few years. When the project concerns economic activity as well as the provision of support to disabled people, user involvement becomes even more critical. Theories of management in the industrial and commercial sectors have increasingly emphasized the participation of the worker, not simply as an obedient operative, but as a responsible, creative member of a team. The best ideas for product development, efficiency savings, and marketing are likely to arise from the rank and file members of the workforce, if only their goodwill can be harnessed.

Unfortunately, the gap between rhetoric and practice is wide, and this, combined with tokenistic implementation, has earned the movement less respect than it deserves. Where efforts have been made, they have concentrated upon either training the user (which assumes that it is the powerless who must reform the oppressors), or upon creating completely new organisations unpolluted by traditional values and practices along cooperative or collective guidelines.

There are a number of alternatives to these options, such as training the power holders to let go, creating new patterns of decision making, or reinterpreting the notion of empowerment so that it relates to independent living rather than service design and delivery. This article offers a further alternative - the management response to empowerment.

The case can be simply and naively presented as all about keys. Who holds the front door key, the filing cabinet key and the safe key? If the answer is that paid staff hold the keys, then it is the paid staff who hold the power. Any residents meetings or users councils are simply a gloss disguising the true situation. Let me explain what I mean.

The front door key grants the right to occupy the building. Can service users occupy the building if staff are absent? If so, and particularly if this is a deliberate policy, and not merely an unfortunate consequence of poor staffing levels, then users are trusted, respected and empowered.

The management response to empowerment is then to ask about buildings insurance, intruder and fire alarms, injury, theft and damage. How will keyholders be assessed? What provisions will be made to award this responsibility and to withdraw it?

The front door key also stands as a symbol of buildings ownership, or at least day-to-day administrative responsibility.

Can residents redecorate the walls, change a light bulb, put a shelf up? How does health and safety legislation affect these activities?

Who can arrange for visitors to come, show them around, exclude disruptive people? Where such decisions are made by the service users, they will have graduated from guests to owners.

The filling cabinet key represents records and confidentiality. Despite legislation awarding rights of access, many service users in the UK remain unaware of what is in their files, and only a minority participate in writing them. Information is power, so users can hold their own records, have free access to all non-confidential information, and help to create such data where it is needed. The key to the filling cabinet poses questions of confidentiality, professional cooperation, and accountability.

The traditional response to these agency needs has been a casefile, maintained by and for the agency's benefit. Alternative models must answer these questions or demonstrate that they are unimportant. In particular, as the need for management data grows with contracting, alternative methods of measuring needs, service utilisation levels, and outcomes will be essential.

The key to the safe is the third and perhaps most significant area of power. Who orders stock, pays bills, receives payments, handles petty cash, signs cheques and maintains financial records? Since the largest expense is often the pay budget, who recruits staff on to the payroll? If arrangements are made to involve service users in these processes, then the systems must be safe, auditable, and open to scrutiny.

There are projects in the UK to demonstrate that every single one of these areas can be handed over to users. Such demonstration projects can offer help and guidance to others who are attempting to make this journey by pointing out the problems and calming fears.

However, the examples are hard to find. That is why I have begun a survey to locate examples. I do not expect to find many projects that have achieved all of these goals, but they may have worked in one or two of these areas.

If the answer to any of the questions below is "Yes", then I would be very glad to hear from you and send you a short questionnaire.

1. Do users occupy the premises whilst these are unattended by staff? Are users issued with keys to gain access to the premises during the usual hours of the service provision or out of hours?
2. Are all users invited to give their opinions about the project? Do users sit on the management committee? Are users included in working parties? Is training provided for users to join in committees?
3. Does the project actively recruit users/ex-users as members of staff? Do users have support during their transition to the role of staff member? Are users involved in the recruitment and selection of staff?
4. Can users assist in areas of buildings maintenance? Are they paid for this?
5. Do users have access to their personal files? Can they write in them? Is organisational data written by users? Do users see organisational data? Is information presented in a format which is accessible to those with additional needs?
6. Are users involved in petty cash systems? Do they order stock? Do they sign cheques or authorize financial transactions or maintain financial records? Are users involved in making management decisions over budgets?

Peter Bates,
Day Services Manager,
Westminster House,
Mapperley Hospital,
Porchester Road,

UK - Nottingham NG3 6AA