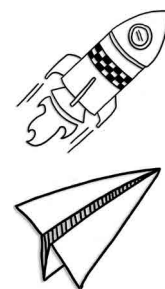


5.2. PROJECTS

Involving unemployed persons in campaigning and service delivery⁵⁷



Introduction

Justine is 36 and unemployed. In the past she has had many jobs in factories, pubs, shops and with cleaning agencies. Justine has two children, one at college and working part-time and one at school with a paper round. She has always participated in voluntary work in schools and in community organisations. Leaving school at 14 when her parents split up and starting work in a factory when she was 15, she has no formal qualifications. The jobs she has had have not been very rewarding with little personal or career development. Even poor quality jobs are scarce in the area where she lives. Justine becomes very upset when people look down on those who are unemployed and dismiss lightly the problems that they face. She believes people who have never had to deal with the employment services and their outsourced offshoots do not understand what they have to go through. Justine spends a lot of time looking and applying for jobs. She became involved in her local Unemployed Workers' Centre as a volunteer. In attempting to become an advice worker her role involves training courses and other opportunities. Justine says "just because you are unemployed it does not mean you are a lazy scrounger as portrayed in the media".

Description of the approach

The Unemployed Workers' Centre (UWC) is actively involved in the UK Anti-Poverty Network and has built a fine reputation for its campaigning work on issues around unemployment and benefits. The organisation does not see its service users as "clients" but as people with whom there is a common cause. The advisers in the UWCs, even those who are paid, were all once unemployed and volunteers. The UWCs have always integrated and involved the people who come to them for help, in the campaigns with which they engage. The Management Committee is largely made up of people who are out of work or claiming benefits, seconding others to ensure the necessary expertise and wide community involvement.

Participation of those who are unemployed or benefit claimants ensures that the organisation does not become removed from its purpose, aims and objectives. The organisation tries to put into practice the slogan "nothing about us without us." This standpoint is taken to the network meetings and is a shared philosophy across member organisations. The Get Heard initiative of anti-poverty organisations in the UK embodies this approach with organisations trying to bring the perspective of people experiencing poverty to the attention of policy makers. The toolkit produced gave comprehensive guidelines on the development of inclusive meetings, both in terms of accessibility and participation. The UWCs have been applying these guidelines in their everyday work and decision making. About 30 unemployed volunteers are active at the UWCs.

The services provided by the UWCs include:

- ▶ benefit checks;
- ▶ completion of claim forms;
- ▶ liaising with inland revenue/local authorities;
- ▶ representation at benefit tribunal;
- ▶ take up campaigns;
- ▶ on-site redundancy advice.



Challenges that job-seekers face

Participation in the field of unemployment has always been very difficult. Being out of work is an isolating experience. People are denied the social context of the workplace with its shared concerns and experiences. The government, ably assisted by the media, tries to individualise the problem of unemployment, placing the responsibility firmly with those who are out of work. The problems that unemployment causes to the person are a huge barrier to participation in civil society. The pressure to do nothing other than look for work plus the psychological effects of being labelled inadequate for being unemployed add to the difficulties. Financial issues mean that long-term planning becomes impossible

⁵⁷ *Breaking barriers – Driving change*, pp. 77-79, available at www.eapn.eu/images/stories/docs/eapn-books/2012-participation-book-en.pdf, accessed 26 October 2016.

with immediate basic needs the priority. Choices are limited and the wider picture of shared concerns with others becomes ever narrower. The problems that the individual faces seem insurmountable, so how can an unemployed person concern themselves with the issues of others?

The role of organisations providing participation opportunities for unemployed people

It is in this context that we all must assess the participation of unemployed people within our organisations. These difficulties must not be an excuse for inaction but they provide a constant reminder of how we need to organise ourselves to include people out of work. Expenses need to be met, a social aspect to the involvement experience should be prioritised and personal development encouraged.

Justine took all the training opportunities made available to her in the role of volunteer adviser. She takes an interest in the issues that come out of the work itself. The UWCs do not see advice work as an end in itself as it is often just used as a “sticking plaster” to cover up the problems caused by economic circumstances and punitive policies. The advisers at the UWCs are always trained to look out for the wider issues emanating from the cases that people bring through their doors.

The EAPN has network helped organise meetings with people experiencing poverty that Justine attended. As a result of this work she was encouraged to take part in a campaign on adequate minimum income. A number of people sent a letter to the UK Chancellor calling on him to raise the level of minimum incomes. The correspondents likened their pressing budget problems and weekly deficit to the much publicised national debt crisis. As a result, Justine made her first appearance on local radio talking about her difficulties and the motivation behind the campaign. Justine’s involvement led her to take part in the EAPN Conference on Minimum Income held in Brussels, representing the UK Network. She was interested and enthused through meeting and listening to the experiences of others, particularly those in Eastern Europe. Justine read on the subject and pledged to maintain her involvement. The UK Network had for some time been interested in taking up an idea that evolved from the Employment Working Group at EAPN. The plan was for unemployed workers to keep a diary of their journey in looking for work in a recession. The diary would cover both the interaction with the organisations and bureaucracies involved in benefits claims and job search as well as the emotional and practical difficulties of living on a low income. Justine was keen to get involved and began her blog, which can be found at www.justine-diaryofajobseeker.blogspot.com (accessed 28 October 2015).

Justine’s story is one that highlights how the obstacles to participation of unemployed people in the networks can be overcome. It links involvement with active campaigning and builds in personal development. The obstacles and barriers must not be underestimated but should not be used to deny participation.

Nothing about us without us!

Colin Hampton, colin.hampton@hotmail.co.uk,

Derbyshire Unemployed Workers’ Centres, www.duwc.org.uk

Testimony – A personal experience of participation

I used the service of the Derbyshire Unemployed Workers' Centre myself when I had to transfer from income support due to a change in law, which involved tax credits, and child benefit numbers, etc. The confusion left me with no income for a short while. Not knowing where to turn I saw the sign for DUWC.

Also a close family member of mine had been ill and went for a medical check to determine what support she could get, which I attended with her. When she failed the medical, I thought there was a mix up as the things in the submission papers were contradictory, especially as I had been there to witness the whole situation.

Eventually after living on a reduction in her income for almost a year I went to tribunal with her and a rep, and the decision was overturned in her favour. The whole process made her worse than ever. But this was another thing which made me become interested in helping others who face these difficulties daily. It seems there is very little real support, other than the agencies such as the DUWC.

I wanted to train in an area which I felt would be of use to the community and to my family. I am passionate about people and found out a lot about the issues affecting people already in poverty.

I like to challenge people's opinions to aid equality and I also want a job. Being a volunteer at the UWC has helped me gain new skills and be involved in my community. I have started an online diary project on my experience of job-hunting. I hope this project will help those who work in the unemployment services to understand the difficulties a job seeker faces. You can read my diary blog at the following address: <http://justine-diaryofajobseeker.blogspot.com>.

Justine Bark

Volunteer Welfare Rights Adviser and Campaigner

Acknowledgement

Some of the educational activities of this section were provided by the National Youth Agency (NYA), a United Kingdom-based youth work organisation working in several fields, including training and publications www.nya.org.uk.
