

Field Study 3: Disablement Association Hillingdon (DASH)

1. Data Collection Method: Semi-structured interviews with Angela Wegener (Chief Officer) and Danny Holmes (Activity Leader), and user observations.

2. Profile: DASH is a medium-sized charity (annual income between £250,000 – 999,000), which aims to provide “*advice, support and information that will enable disabled people to make choices about how they live their lives.*” The charity perceives itself as user-led. Many of the trustees are also disabled people. DASH is a local charity supporting disabled people in the London Borough of Hillingdon. The current sources of income include the City Bridge Trust, Big Lottery Fund and Hillingdon Community Trust.

3. Services: The current services can be grouped into two types: advice and information, and activities. The charity originally offers advice and information (e.g. Direct Payment) on a one-to-one basis. Recently, the services have been expanded to include many activities designed to support disabled people, e.g. art and craft and sport.

4. Service Development/Improvement: DASH does not have a formal process for developing a new service or improving the existing one.

4.1. Questionnaire Survey: The charity occasionally sends out a questionnaire as a means to identify users’ requirements:

“About 4 – 5 years ago, we sent out the questionnaires to all our service users asking what else they want us to do. A lot of people came back to us and said that they have nothing to do during the day. They suggested activities that they would like to get involved in, such as art and craft. Some of them suggested some sport activities. That’s how we developed this side of our organisations.”

This kind of questionnaire is part of an on-going review to ensure that users are satisfied with the activities and services offered.

“We would like to get the feedback from our users whenever possible. It is part of an on-going review. Once we have got people saying that they want some activities then we ask much more specific questions like: What exactly do you mean by that? When do you want to do it? Do you want to do it in the daytime or in the evening? We have just started the youth club on the Sunday afternoon for the young people with disabilities. This is the result of parents saying to us that the council-run club has stopped because of funding. So we do something specifically for them.”

Nevertheless, there is no specific timetable for this kind of questionnaire survey.

“It is not something that we have timetables for. We do it as and when needed.”

4.2. User-led Procedures: Most of the service developments are user-led, since ideas are often initiated by users. In many cases, users take the ownership of the activities.

“Boccia is the newest activity, only starting a couple of weeks ago. Again, as a result of service users telling us that the nearest place they can play boccia is Hemel Hempstead. Obviously, transport for disabled people is much more difficult. To travel to Hemel Hempstead just to play for a couple of hours is not very feasible. That’s why we set it up for him. He actually runs the group himself.”



Figure 1: Boccia Playing Group

5. Service Quality: The quality of the services is very important for DASH. For information and advice services, the charity has been awarded the Community Legal Service (CLS) quality mark. This side of the service is assessed by an external auditor every two

years. In terms of activities, there is no formal assessment process. The quality of the services is evaluated based on user feedback.

“People are keen to voice their concerns if they are not happy. Another thing is that the number of the group will drop. We also have volunteers call our service users to check whether they are happy with the service. Is there anything else they want us to do?”

6. Service Costs: For DASH, the biggest spending is staff. Although the charity always seeks ways to reduce costs, user satisfaction is more important than cost effectiveness.

“To be perfectly frank, we focus more on the outcomes rather than the costs. If we can afford it, fine. For some sport activities, we do charge them money. This token charge doesn’t cover the whole costs. It may pay for the venue, but doesn’t pay for the staff.”

When you support disabled people, the group is quite small. You’re not going to achieve the economy of scale. Even though you can get a big group, the quality will suffer because users have to wait for a long time for their turn (to play).”

7. User Involvement: Service users are often involved in the new service developments, especially those related to activities.

7.1. Opportunity Identification: Users are seen as a main source for new service ideas.

“For the activity side, it is much more open. For example, we put together a cricket club, which was partly a result of conversations with service users from the Muslim community. They said that cricket is more their kind of sport than football. We very much listen to what people want and try to find funding so that we can put it on.”

Interestingly, the activity leader noted that most ideas for new services were captured through casual conversations with service users. This was down to good relationships between service users and staff/volunteers.

“Service users are very vocal. They will tell us what they want to do. Although we don’t have a structure (to capture their thoughts), because we generate quite a good rapport with service users, when we talk to them, we soon get ideas of what they want. Ideas were casually picked up during the activities.”

The interview results revealed that DASH is very open-minded and responsive to user ideas. If the activity/service does not require a large amount of setup costs, which need external funding, the charity is willing to put the new idea in practice without delay.

“For example we have a reading group every Monday at Uxbridge Library. There is a template on how to run a reading group, but we obviously have to adapt it to suit people with learning disabilities. Then there is a suggestion from users that they want to do a writing group as well. So now we have a writing group where they do things like some word searching and creative writing. For these kinds of activities, we don’t have to get funding for them. It only needs staff time, but nothing else. The library is a free venue.”

DASH is also keen to get other beneficiaries, e.g. carers and parents, involved in their service developments. According to informal discussions with several carers, DASH is perceived as approachable and open-minded. Most carers felt that their opinions were listened to and valued. They are willing to share ideas, because they have seen that their suggestions have been implemented.



Figure 2: Discussions with Carers

Relatively quick responses to users and carers’ comments seem to be the key to gain their

trust, which enable the charity to continually identify new services/areas for improvement.

For service ideas initiated by staff or created as a result of suitable funding opportunities, the service users will be consulted to make sure that the new service and/or activities suit users' needs or their interests.

"Sometimes you see the funding and you think: 'I have to go for that'. If there is a funding and it's something we could do, then we explore how to do it. For example, we got the Big Lottery Fund for sport activities. So we did a questionnaire asking people what sport activities do they want. When we test ideas with users, you can see their enthusiasm."

7.1. Opportunity Exploration: Once a new service idea is picked up by a staff or a volunteer. They will share the idea with their colleagues and line managers. If the team agree that this service idea is interesting, they will explore how to deliver it, e.g. identifying potential funding schemes or contacting suitable funders. After the funding is secured, the team will start investigating practical aspects, such as potential venues. If it is a low-cost activity, the team is likely to set it up straightaway and put a token charge on it. In this way, the new activity can sustain itself.

The interviewees pointed out that the service development/improvement is a team effort. Thus, there is no designated project leader.

7.2. Service Development: DASH occasionally uses techniques, e.g. brainstorming, to generate new ideas with users. Nevertheless, in most cases, they rely on close relationships, good communication skills and intuition.

For example, they have practical techniques for teasing out ideas from different groups of users. While open questions work well with people with physical disabilities, a lot of probing questions are needed for people with learning disabilities. According to informal discussions with service users, the researchers recognised that getting people with learning disabilities to express their ideas clearly

require experience and genuine communication skills. Knowing what to ask and how to ask makes significant differences in the answers received.

The interviewees observed that, in general, all service users, especially those with physical disabilities, are keen to engage in service development and service delivery (e.g. encouraging a user to lead the activity that he/she suggested). Moreover, promoting users to lead an activity is perceived as a way to help them develop important life skills:

"We normally have the art and craft group on Wednesdays. We also have a store in the craft market where they sell what they made. It is entirely run by one of the service users. This gives her new skills. She has really benefited from it, picking up skills such as learning how to manage money."



Figure 3: DASH's craft store
(Source: www.uxbridge-craft-market.co.uk)

The information discussion with service users confirmed that users are keen to be involved with the service development process. They not only want to suggest ideas, but also would like to plan all the details on how services or activities should be carried out. They are willing to spend their own time working with a charity to get the service right.

Although the charity does not carry out a formal pilot test before launching a new service, it often uses a 'trial and error' approach to evaluate the new service and adjust it accordingly. Interestingly, DASH does not see this practice as an iterative

development process. It is perceived as a means of collecting feedback from users. *“We don’t have many overheads, so the first session can be the test. We do let people come along to the first session for free.”*

7.3. Advantages and Disadvantages: DASH’s experience of user-led service developments has been rather positive. The key benefits of involving users at the early stage of service developments are ensuring user satisfaction and the relatively high rate of attendance, as well as encouraging users to develop new skills, which is one of the main objectives of the charity. This practice also helps strengthen user relationships. Many service users feel that they are part of the organisation.

Based on their experience, there was no serious conflict or a case where users could not reach a consensus agreement.

Nonetheless, the interviewees admitted that it is not practical to make every project user-led. Although the allotment projects (Dig for Diversity) are the results of user request(s), there is a need to make the allotment plots accessible to users with physical disabilities. It is not practical to ask the users to lead such activities. Thus, it is important to take users’ capabilities/constraints into consideration.



Figure 4: Dig for Diversity – Allotment Project

8. Design Involvement: DASH has very limited experience with trained designers. The charity has never involved a designer in any service development/improvement project.

When questioned whether the charity would like to engage with design disciplines, the interviewees show positivity but expressed that they cannot afford to hire a designer.

“It’s very difficult. Every penny that we get, we spend on the services. It is hard to justify spending money on designers. Having said that, people are likely to be more engaged if we make things more attractive”

The conversation implies that the interviewees are not aware of emerging design disciplines, such as service designers and interaction designers. When questioned what design inputs they would like to receive, the interviewees selected website design, since the website is considered an important part of its branding and marketing.

Despite carrying out a significant number of user collaboration projects, the interviewees are not familiar with the concepts of co-design, co-creation and co-production. The charity supports the idea of working with users and encouraging users to take the lead in the service development. However, there is a need to give the third sector organisations more access to volunteer designers.

Main Lessons Learned

1. It is observed that user inputs are strongly evident in the early stage of the service development, e.g. identifying problems, and proposing new ideas. However, the involvement appears to drop in the detailed development process.
2. The knowledge and tips on how to collaborate with certain groups of users, e.g. people with learning disabilities, should be openly shared with people inside and outside of the third sector.
3. User involvement and user-led projects are perceived as a skill development scheme. This benefit should be widely promoted to get more users interested in working with charities and voluntary organisations on service developments.
4. There is a need to communicate new design disciplines to the third sector.

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