

# Rebuilding community

## ***How Hope is involved in supporting service users and others to be self-advocates for change, to campaign and stand up for their rights***

Northamptonshire is a county where public services are collapsing. Increasingly the public sector cannot be relied upon to deliver even statutory services for its residents and the burden is falling on the community and voluntary sector. Access to basic rights is a struggle and people have to be focused and determined to get the entitlement that is theirs.

Hope works to give voice to marginalised communities and individuals. Hope speaks on their behalf, arguing their case, acting as advocates, in the traditional way that charities have always done. Now, increasingly, we want to do in co-production with service users.

Many of Hope's service users and beneficiaries are people with limited confidence or ability to argue the case for themselves. They lack the skills, articulacy and opportunity through poor schooling, years of marginalisation, and being done-to by people in power.

Hope works to empower people who lack skills and be articulate on their own behalf: to argue their rights and stand up for themselves, both individually and collectively, working with Hope staff, volunteers, and others working in other settings, to argue for their rights and for justice.

### **How?**

Traditionally Hope has picked up the phone and filled in a referral form, and spoken with those who act as the gateways or guardians of resources whether that is benefits or housing, treatment or services. But we have always encouraged and enabled and empowered our service users to do this for themselves, and guided and helped them to do so. This is good for them in getting access to the immediate issue but also in the long term in building skills for similar events that may occur in the future. This is about service user development, building confidence and skills. We want to do much more of the latter and less speaking *for* service users.

Much of this work has occurred in one-to-one situations in the course of individual work – traditional casework, if you like. However Hope's theory of social work practice is to work at a systemic level to enable such discussion and campaigns for rights not to be siloed in individual discussions but conducted increasingly at a collective level. People are stronger arguing alongside others and collectively to achieve 'class action' for change.

As a result Hope's work to encourage greater self-representation takes various forms.

### **Individual action**



People will still need to speak for themselves in relation to their own interests, so Hope casework has always focused on individual coaching and encouragement for self-advocacy; helping people not to get angry, to be logical, to understand their legal rights, to grasp the limitation of the person they are engaging with. Such coaching is built into the one to one relationship of casework, and it manifests itself in our caseworker

not always making the calls and ringing up the relevant body; but this is involved, where caseworkers model behaviours and methods that may be successful in their outcomes.

### **Collective education to support individual action**



Increasingly Hope is using various forms of groupwork to enable people to gain skills in self-representation, but sometimes teaching these collectively. There is a strongly educative aspect in helping people understand the roots and causes of their own exclusion, and giving them the skills to speak with confidence, rather than losing the argument, marshalling facts and methodologies that will bring results. Peer learning helps drive these skills home, and we involve experienced and confident trainers who can mirror the

skills needed and teach people how to think on their feet. We will strive to offer more courses that create the understanding of people's positions and their willingness to contest their treatment.

### **Collective education to support collective action**

Hope will also create training opportunities where groups can be formed, who will use their collective strength to argue for their own interests. Drawing strongly from examples such as that of the STOP project in Toronto (<http://thestop.org/programs/build-hope/community-action-program/>), we teach skills in collective campaigning and advocacy to argue against policies and practice that create their individual lack of entitlement, using a range of non-violent, non party political campaigning tactics and methods to raise wider public awareness of inequality, discriminatory practice, oppression and exclusion. We use social media as the centre of campaigning, and increasingly strive to involve experts by experience in its production.



### **Production of opportunities for people to be self-advocates**



If a politician wants to visit, we welcome it, but then create opportunities for our service users to speak for themselves to them. So when the leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn asked to come, we said yes, but on the proviso that he spoke with service users. In a similar way we will engage with those in positions of power to create opportunities for service users to speak. We actively engage with politicians and other people in power to enable dialogue.

### **Partnership**

We work in partnership with various organisations and individuals to put this range of activities into place. Most notably we are pairing with the Community Organisers Ltd

deliver training on community organisation, using government funding. The courses are open to a wide variety of people.



### **What are our aims? How will we know whether we have succeeded?**

We strive to create change – in people’s lives, in terms of their confidence to speak for themselves and achieve the outcomes for them that they deserve or are entitled to; and in their confidence and willingness to speak up for their group or friends. But we also seek to achieve change in policy as a result of activism and campaigning. That could be something like the allocation procedures of a local housing association; or a change in the opening hours of a job centre.

We will seek to record how many people come on courses, what they learned, how their confidence improved, and the results of their self-advocacy; and also the results of collective campaigning.

### **Are we dabbling in politics?**

Yes, because everything that happens is political. But we have no party politics. Charities have always campaigned by lobbying politicians for policy change. That’s how slavery got abolished. Without campaigning by charities, there would be far less change in behaviours and policies. Not only is it entirely legal, its encouraged by some donors and national policy bodies, like NCVO, the voice of the sector. Our training above, to support and grow skills in community development, is funded by government,