Case study 3: Disablement Association Hillingdon (DASH)

Organisation overview
DASH is a medium-sized charity supporting disabled people in the London Borough of Hillingdon. It provides advice, support and information to allow disabled people to make choices about how they live their lives. It receives funding from a range of sources including the City Bridge Trust, Big Lottery Fund and Hillingdon Community Trust. DASH provides two main services: information and advice, and activities for disabled people.

Information and advice: DASH provides information on all disability-related matters from holidays and finding carers, to transport issues and disability legislation. DASH also administers the Direct Payments Scheme on behalf of the Local Authority and provides advice and support on all aspects of independent living to users of this service.

Activities: More recently, DASH has expanded their work to include group activities for people with physical disabilities and learning disabilities. Activities include a gardening club, a reading group, keep fit, boccia, cricket and arts & crafts.

Beneficiary involvement in service design and development
DASH occasionally sends out a questionnaire as a means to identify users' requirements. The programme of activities was instigated because of suggestions made from users via a survey conducted 4-5 years ago:

'. . . 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 crafts. Some of them suggested some sport activities. That's how we developed this side of our organisation.'

Although there is no formal mechanism for involving service users in service design and development, the charity seeks feedback about activities on an ad hoc but regular basis and responds to users' suggestions:

'Service users are very vocal. They will tell us want they what 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.'*

Feedback comes from parents and carers as well as service users, which can also lead to service development:

'We have just started the youth club on Sunday afternoons 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.'

Users also frequently take responsibility for running activities, as is the case with the newest activity, boccia:

Figure 1: Boccia Playing Group

Once a new service idea or potential activity is picked up by a staff member or volunteer the idea is shared with their colleagues. If the team agree that the service idea is interesting, they will explore how to deliver it, for example through identifying potential funding schemes or contacting suitable funders. If funding is secured, the team will start investigating practicalities of delivering a new service or activity, such as sourcing potential venues. If it is a low-cost activity, the team is likely to set it up immediately and put a token charge on it. In this way, the new activity can sustain itself.

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

Challenges of involving users in service design
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 3: Dig for Diversity – Allotment Project

DASH has very limited experience with trained designers. The charity has never involved a designer in any service development or improvement project. When questioned whether the charity would like to engage with design disciplines, the interviewees responded positively but said 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.'

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.

Overcoming challenges
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.'