



Now it's personal: Achieving citizen-centred welfare

The Adviser in the International Context: Where next for personalisation? Seminar Briefing – Friday 19th March 2010

Introduction

ippr's project *Now It's Personal* is exploring how welfare policy can reach its goal of providing personalised support for a more citizen-centred welfare system. As part of this project, ippr invited key industry professionals and policy makers to a seminar on the adviser in the international context. The seminar provided a forum to consider a range of approaches to welfare to work in different parts of the world.

The following key questions were discussed at the seminar:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of varying models of welfare reform, both in the short and long term?
- What lessons can the UK learn from welfare models in other countries?
- How can personalisation and client choice be maintained?
- How might the personalisation agenda change during an economic recovery?

The speakers were William Smith, Chief Executive of Ingeus Europe, Tunde Banjoko OBE, Chief Executive of Local Employment Access Projects (LEAP) and Dr Dalia Ben-Galim, Acting Head of Social Policy at ippr. William Smith and Tunde Banjoko drew on a wealth of knowledge relating to welfare models in Australia, USA and parts of Europe. In particular, they shared experiences of bringing welfare models from other countries to the UK.

The seminar was chaired by Chris Humphries CBE, Chief Executive of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. As part of their remit, UKCES is undertaking international research on best practice in employment and skills services.

This briefing summarises the seminar and draws on additional material in order to outline some of the challenges and pose key questions arising from the discussion. Links to the presentations and a pod cast of the seminar are available to download from ippr's website.

Summary

Key points made in speaker presentations are summarised below.

Dalia Ben-Galim gave an overview of ippr's project, *Now it's Personal*. ippr's best-practice hub is running alongside a number of delivery projects. The hub is working in a number of areas:

- Sharing best practice – through the network of partners and wider dissemination and an edited collection on personalisation and the adviser in international context.
- Learning visits, local and international – exploring the adviser role in different contexts.
- New insights – such as personal budgets, direct payments and the impact of devolution.

Key emerging themes arising from ippr's work include:

- The 'trusted individual' role played by the adviser is key in navigating the complex array of funding and support.
- A better understanding is needed of what a 'devolved' approach to tackling worklessness looks like at a local level.
- The impact of job quality and availability on job sustainability needs to be better addressed by policy.

ippr's work in this area is contributing to the direction of welfare reform in the UK through a consideration of the wider impact and transferability across public service delivery; by generating interest from across the UK political spectrum and internationally; and by providing an innovative model to test and evolve recommendations.

William Smith is Chief Executive of Ingeus Europe. He drew on experience from Ingeus' work in Australia, the UK and other parts of Europe:

- A reminder that the era of the personal adviser in the UK is a relatively recent concept that came about with the New Deal. It used to be the case up to 1997, that most of the advisory activity and engagement was linked to benefit claims.
- The Australian approach to advisers initially focused on the role being diagnostic; as soon as an action plan had been created, clients would be passed to other staff for job matching.
- Personal advisers currently face huge challenges and there are many tasks expected of the personal adviser. Personal advisers need a wide range of skills to respond to diverse client groups.
- An effective personal adviser is someone who can encourage self-help through questioning and challenging clients. Ingeus recruits advisers from a range of academic backgrounds.

- Cultural differences need to be taken into account when comparing approaches to welfare policy in different countries. The approach in France involves placing considerable importance on the role of the receptionist (known as a 'pilot') who steers clients towards the most appropriate channel of support.

Tunde Banjoko, OBE is Chief Executive of Local Employment Access Project (LEAP). He drew on his experience of bringing the influential US STRIVE employment programme to the UK¹:

- LEAP runs a challenging three-week course with a high proportion of ethnic minority clients. Ongoing informal support is given, for up to two years if required. There is a 70 per cent job-entry success rate.
- Empowerment is central to the programme used by both LEAP and STRIVE. Their approach focuses on soft-skills training, and the cultural and behavioural issues that are related to attaining, and retaining, meaningful employment.
- LEAP's style of delivery is adapted from the STRIVE model. A less confrontational approach proved more effective with UK clients. Despite this, the focus on what is being said, and why it is being said, remains the same as the US programme.

Seminar Discussion

Following the presentations there was a wide-ranging discussion focusing on the key themes set out below:

Model of the adviser role – recruitment, referrals and workforce development

Personal advisers play a central role in supporting and motivating welfare recipients in many countries, but factors like recruitment, degree of specialisation (or generalisation) and the extent of training and development for advisers all vary from one country to another. ippr's report *Now it's Personal: Personal advisers and the new public service workforce* identified six key types of adviser role. Recommendations were made for the specialist training that is needed for advisers (such as in awareness of mental health problems and understanding drug and alcohol misuse) in order to meet the needs of a wider range of groups for earlier and more effectively targeted support.²

Seminar participants raised the following areas for discussion:

- It is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect one personal adviser to work with all client groups. A recent trend at Ingeus, both in the UK and Europe, is the move away from every personal adviser being a 'generalist'. There is a growing need for more advisers to carry out specialised roles.

¹ STRIVE takes a 'people first, tough love' approach. Clients often have complex, multiple barriers which must be addressed before retention in employment can be successful. A four-week 'core program' in 'classroom' format combines soft skills, workplace attitude and enhanced computer skills to tackle attitude problems and raise confidence.

² McNeil, C (2009) *Now it's Personal: Personal advisers and the new public service workforce*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research

- In addition, referrals, such as to physiotherapists or psychologists, are an important way for advisers to provide additional support to clients.
- Good interpersonal (soft) skills were highlighted as essential criteria for advisers. The ability to constructively challenge people was considered more important than having a background in a particular area.
- There were mixed views on whether a system be put in place for advisers to become accredited or attain a particular qualification. It was felt that advisers gaining NVQ qualifications should not be discouraged, but further evidence is needed to examine the benefits and shortcomings of particular qualifications.

Participants discussed how recruiting advisers from a range of different backgrounds appears to impact positively on overall provider performance. In addition, specialist skills training for advisers results in better outcomes because more personalised and targeted support is given to clients.

Contract procurement

Welfare models throughout the world vary enormously in format and scope. Along with many EU and international countries, the US operates a model of contracting out services to welfare providers. However, within such a framework a variety of approaches still exist. For example, a range of operational models have been adopted by the delivery organisations that vary from 'work first' to 'people first' in addition to blended solutions that incorporate training and development alongside work placements.³

In recent years the UK has moved further towards a US-style model of contracting out services, but with differences. For example, the new DWP Commissioning Strategy aims to promote diversity of providers (particularly Third Sector providers) and consider the distinct needs of core client groups (including those with significant barriers to employment)⁴. These are important to retain because they result in a more personalised and responsive service, with a central focus on the client journey.

Balancing the tensions between providing a personalised service and the degree to which contacts should be prescribed was a key area of concern for participants:

- How can contracts be procured effectively? In some countries a prescriptive approach can be stifling and can lead to inefficiencies, for example in Germany where in some cases the distance between chairs and tables is prescribed.
- On the other hand, a prescriptive approach can have benefits. In some cases (also in Germany) the contracts between the state-run employment service and the contracted provider prescribe co-operation. This means that clients are not just referred, but are brought to the offices of the provider where a handover can take place. That level of interaction between both parties is important.

³ Armstrong D, Byrne Y, Patton L and Horack S (2009) *Welfare to work in the United States: New York's experience of the prime provider model*, Department for Work and Pensions research report No 614, London: HMSO

⁴ As above

- In Sweden it is commonplace to attach the CVs of the personal advisers when tendering for a contract. Such an approach may be logical, but it also assumes that there is a certain type of profile for a personal adviser. It can be more effective to attract advisers with a range of different backgrounds.

A degree of flexibility in contracts can be beneficial, but a balance needs to be found in order to ensure performance can be assured to a high standard. Lengthening contracts might be one way to offer greater stability and give providers the opportunity to develop longer-term strategies to assist people facing multiple disadvantages.

Conditionality

The rights and responsibility agenda has been explicit in the UK over the last decade. The government has created clear links between individual behaviour and engagement with labour market programmes. Participants discussed the adviser's role in a system that encourages a 'work first' approach and incorporates conditionality in the process:

- A common problem across different countries is addressing long-term unemployment. A variety of mandatory and voluntary approaches exist, but outreach and engagement remains difficult.
- LEAP encourages clients to navigate their own way through the system. Caution was voiced around forcing people onto a particular programme.

The UK Government incorporated elements similar to other European welfare models, for example from the Dutch and the Scandinavian approach to welfare, where personalised support is matched by clear obligations on individuals to engage with support.⁵ However, the success (both in terms of efficiency gains and cost savings) of some conditional, 'work first' programmes has been questioned.⁶ Criticisms include the focus on outcomes which mean people may be compelled to accept jobs that are not suitable or sustainable in the longer term.

A programme of conditionality that fails to address the real barriers preventing people from working is likely to cause hardship and is more likely to keep people cycling in and out of the welfare system. Attempts to introduce outreach programmes and fast-track referrals, such as to social workers, at an early stage are important measures to help overcome barriers that stand in the way of gaining employment.

Localism

Devolving the current, highly centralised structures in the welfare system is increasingly being seen as a priority because it allows providers to account for variations in local populations and labour markets resulting in more tailored interventions. Seminar participants discussed how different levels of government can act in a devolved setting and the extent to which federal systems offer a different model to learn from:

⁵ DWP White Paper (2008) *Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future*, London: HMSO.

⁶ Wright, S (2008) *Contracting out employment services: lessons from Australia, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands*, London: Child Poverty Action Group.

- Germany operates a regional system that operates from a municipal level with no national programme, such as Flexible New Deal. A more localised system takes into account regional differences, variations in the labour market and can tailor the service to the attributes and the qualities of the people who are typically unemployed. Such an approach reflects the design of the service delivery model.
- However, a tension was felt between the need to offer a localised service, but at the risk of losing some of the benefits of a national programme, such as the standardisation of quality that means a postcode lottery of services is less likely to take place.

There are lessons to be learnt from a federal or more local approach where specialised services to clients can be better tailored to the local area. Devolved commissioning could offer Local Authorities the opportunity to increasingly shape the profile of local welfare to work provision. As an elected body, Local Authorities should be playing a key role in bringing providers into the design and delivery of the welfare to work market. The Local Authority also needs to play the role of guaranteeing diversity of local provision. However, it shouldn't be assumed that greater local control will automatically translate into savings, or a better service for clients. In order for this to happen a more personalised delivery of welfare services is also necessary.

In-work support and sustainability

There is increasing recognition that, for many people, getting a job is only the first step. Ongoing, often informal, support is important, particularly due to the increase in short-term, temporary contracts in the labour market. In-work support builds resilience and eases the adjustment and transition into work.

Job sustainability is not just a problem encountered in the UK. The decline of traditional industries, such as manufacturing, is apparent throughout Europe and has resulted in a number of long-term unemployed individuals whose skills do not match the needs of employers. A discussion between seminar participants demonstrated that the adviser has a crucial role to play in promoting empowerment and resilience, particularly through periods of transition:

- It was acknowledged that being on a programme is often the easy bit, but when outside of a more nurturing environment it gets more difficult. Recommended incentives included an ongoing focus on career progression and an assurance that staying in touch is not just linked to keeping records.
- LEAP's approach is to 'work with the whole person'. The approach gives the client the tools to deal with obstacles they may encounter in the first month in work. Building ongoing relationships is crucial so that clients keep in contact, or are receptive when contacted.
- Targeting the hardest to help groups was recognised as a difficult area for advisers. LEAP's approach centres on the principal that the programme is beneficial, even if people don't get work at the end of it. Sustaining people spiritually and emotionally is important. Ongoing access to services after a programme has ended was also considered important.

The challenge for personal advisers from all parts of the world is to support clients who are faced with the current problems within the labour market. Contracts that include alternative forms of performance measurement, such as improving skills and training and consideration of 'distance travelled', (i.e. for jobseekers needing support over a longer period), should be considered, although this may be constrained if funding models require 'payment by results'.

Conclusions

- The UK has much to benefit in learning from international practice and experience, especially as so many countries are facing similar challenges to our own. Particular areas for the UK to learn from include:
 - A longer-term approach to in-work support: LEAP highlighted that short term work contracts result in people coming back for support again and again. Providers need to be looking at longer-term models which can provide ongoing careers support, as well as ensuring individuals stay in work for six months to a year or longer.
 - Learning from approaches that target the hardest to help groups without resorting to conditional measures, particularly through implementation of outreach programmes and first addressing underlying barriers (such as attitude and confidence problems) as pursued by STRIVE.
 - Observing federal systems, such as in Germany, where a local approach results in specialised services that can take into account regional differences in the local labour market.
- Adopting practices from other countries can be hugely beneficial, but cultural differences need to be kept in mind and differences from one country to another accounted for. A system that can learn from, and in some cases adapt, other approaches is necessary.

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