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Co-production as a route to employability: Lessons from services with lone parents

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Citation:

LINDSAY, Colin, PEARSON, Sarah, BATTY, Elaine, CULLEN, Anne Marie and EADSON, Will (2018). Co-production as a route to employability: Lessons from services with lone parents. Public Administration, 96 (2), 318-332. [Article]

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CO-PRODUCTION AS A ROUTE TO EMPLOYABILITY: LESSONS FROM SERVICES WITH LONE PARENTS

ABSTRACT

Policymakers claim to support personalized approaches to improving the employability of disadvantaged groups. Yet, in liberal welfare states, mainstream activation programmes targeting these groups often deliver standardized, low quality services. Such failures may be related to a governance and management regime that uses tightly-defined contracting and performance targets to incentivize (mainly for-profit) service providers to move people into any job as quickly as possible. This article draws on evidence from third sector/public sector-led services in Scotland to discuss an alternative approach. These services co-produced personalized support in partnership with disadvantaged service users (in this case vulnerable lone parents). We suggest that, in this case, street-level co-production and personalization were facilitated by co-governance and co-management in the design and organization of provision. We conclude by identifying lessons for future employability services.

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers across advanced welfare states have increasingly prioritized the activation of disadvantaged groups who are excluded from the labour market. Successive governments in the UK have committed to a personalized approach to improving the employability of such groups and thus promoting transitions from welfare to work – the argument being that increasing compulsion in activation and conditionality in the benefits system is justified if vulnerable groups have access to personalized services designed to address their specific needs (Rice 2017).

However, despite claims of personalization being near ubiquitous in policymakers' advocacy of extending the reach of compulsory activation, there is evidence that many mainstream employability programmes in fact offer standardized, 'work-first' approaches, which seek to pressure people to find work quickly, irrespective of the quality of the job or the characteristics of the individual (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016). Such work-first programmes – with the contracted-out 'Work Programme' (WP), funded by the UK Government Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), a typical example – have struggled to deliver sustainable job outcomes and have been criticized for 'creaming and parking', whereby individuals closest to the labour market are assisted while the most disadvantaged receive little support (Considine *et al*. 2017).

These tensions have been reflected in debates on how best to enhance the employability of lone parents. Lone parents, like other potentially disadvantaged groups, may face complex barriers to work and thus require personalized support (Whitworth 2016). Yet, while successive waves of welfare reform in the UK since 2001 have increased the conditions placed on lone parents' receipt of benefits, the activation programmes that some are compelled to engage with appear to offer little by way of personalization (Kozek and Kubisa 2016).

There appear to be problems of both governance and programme content. Services such as the WP have been contracted-out to a relatively small number of large (mainly for-profit) 'prime contractors' who are incentivized to drive down costs and achieve job entry targets; accordingly, programme content is narrowly-defined (mainly focused on increasing job search effort), standardized and governed by the conventions of work-first activation, whereby users are compelled to engage under the threat of benefit sanctions. Accordingly, concerns have been raised by lone parents that their needs are not addressed by the WP and similar work-first initiatives (Skills Network 2014).

An alternative way of thinking about the governance and delivery of employability services may be offered by considering the concept of co-production. Co-production involves mechanisms that allow the pooling of assets and resources by those agencies and professionals delivering public services and their service users (and potentially other stakeholders) to achieve better outcomes (Bovaird and Löffler 2012). There has been a rekindling of interest in co-production within public

management scholarship during the last decade, which can be traced to a range of factors, including: the public sector's need to tap the assets of a range of stakeholders given continuing funding constraints (Nabatchi *et al*. 2017); an acknowledgement that multi-faceted, 'wicked' policy problems cannot be simply contracted-out, and instead require collaboration across a range of stakeholders and users (Zambrano-Gutiérrez *et al*. 2017); and a more general shift in thinking towards a 'new public governance' that prioritizes collaboration as a source of innovation (Osborne 2010). While the UK Government and its contractors rarely deploy the concept of co-production to describe their compulsory, work-first activation programmes, the potential added value of co-producing in the field of employability has been noted by a number of studies (Alford and O'Flynn 2012; Künzel 2012; Fledderus and Honingh 2016).

These debates provide the starting point for this article. We report on our research with lone parents and key stakeholders involved in the Making It Work (MIW) programme in Scotland. MIW was funded by a UK Government-supported non-departmental public body – Big Lottery Fund (hereafter 'The Fund') – and delivered through third sector-public sector partnerships in five local government areas. Our research explored the extent to which an ethos of co-production and collaboration defined the governance, management and delivery model of the programme, and how this shaped the experiences of lone parents engaging with services. We aim to demonstrate how co-governance and co-management were important facilitators of user co-production in the creation of innovative, personalized employability services.

The next part of this article expands on the conceptual background to the research. We then provide a brief discussion of the context for research and our methodology, before presenting our analysis of lone parents' and key stakeholders' experiences of co-producing employability services. The article concludes by identifying potential lessons for the governance, management and delivery of future employability services.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Lone parents and employability services

The UK is often cited as being in the vanguard of the 'activation' movement that has reshaped European welfare states, but until recently the demands made of lone parents claiming benefits were relatively limited (Rafferty and Wiggan 2017). However, from 2001, lone parents with a youngest child aged five or older claiming the relevant means-tested benefit, Income Support, were required to engage in mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFIs) with advisers based at the public employment service, Jobcentre Plus (JCP). WFIs were extended to all lone parents on Income Support in 2004, and have since become more intensive and frequent (Johnsen 2014). Lone parents failing to comply with a mandatory Action Plan may be subject to benefit sanctions at the discretion of their JCP adviser. Given this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that studies have found largely negative views of JCP services among lone parents (Rafferty and Wiggan 2017).

Since ‘Lone Parent Obligations’ were introduced in 2008, lone parents deemed able to work are subject to the same conditionality regime as other unemployed people claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance, and may be required to undertake similar levels of compulsory job search activities (Johnsen 2014). The increasing compulsion and conditionality imposed upon lone parents has seen many engage with the support offered by JCP and/or the DWP’s contracted-out employability programmes. (It should be noted that the WP, introduced in 2010, was the main DWP programme experienced by participants in our research, but is due to be replaced by new Scottish Government-commissioned programmes in Scotland, and a new ‘Work and Health Programme’ elsewhere in the UK, during 2018).

Policymakers have consistently suggested that increasing conditionality on lone parents has been balanced with the provision of personalized services that are responsive to their particular needs (Kozek and Kubisa 2016). However, several studies have noted that WP practices and professionals tend not to recognize the implications of being a lone parent (Campbell *et al.* 2016). As noted above, part of this critique argues that contracting-out employability services to for-profit companies (which is central to the WP’s governance model) reinforces standardization, rather than personalization, as contracted providers seek to minimize variability in services and therefore maximize efficiency (and potentially profits) under ‘payment-by-results’ contracting (Lindsay *et al*. 2014). Considine *et al*.’s (2017) extensive survey work with WP advisers found little evidence of increasingly personalized services. Kozek and Kubisa’s (2016, p. 121) EU-level analysis concludes that under the UK Government’s approach to delivering employability for lone parents ‘personalization

involves the identification of those closest to the labour market… issues of gaming, creaming and parking may be the outcomes of such systems, and service options are often limited, focusing predominantly on job search and application processes'. Initial evaluations of the WP have suggested that the quality of job outcomes achieved for lone parents has been disappointing, with those who have moved into employment often entering short-term work followed by a return to claiming benefits (Campbell *et al.* 2016). While all initiatives targeting vulnerable groups face similar challenges in securing sustainable, high quality job outcomes, lone parents' groups have argued that increases in conditionality have not been matched with improved personalization in employability provision (Skills Network 2014).

This article explores the potential for an alternative approach to the governance, management and delivery of employability services that has the potential to offer genuine personalization in assisting lone parents – we argue that the values and practices associated with co-production may provide a useful starting point.

Co-production as a route to employability

Following previous work in this field of public administration research, particularly in the tradition of Ostrom (1975), Verschuere *et al*. (2012, p. 1085) define co-production as '…the mix of activities that both public service agents and citizens contribute to the provision of public services'. For Nabatchi *et al*. (2017, p. 1) co-production is similarly 'the involvement of both users and public sector professionals in the delivery of public services'. But if we are to explore the presence, potential benefits and challenges of co-production, we need to do more to define (our understanding

of) the concept. This is because, for some, there remains ‘confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the concept’ (Scottish Government 2015, p. 1), partly because co-production is sometimes seen as an intrinsic process of interaction between any service organization and its users at the point of delivery (Fledderus and Honingh 2016).

Our own view is that co-production, and the related concepts of co-governance and co-management discussed below, fit our purposes well. We are less interested in viewing co-production as an inherent process within street-level bureaucracy, but rather as it has been defined in an emerging public management literature – as a model of designing and engaging with public services that is distinctive from, and potentially more effective than, the norms of New Public Management (NPM). We are interested in searching for evidence of co-production as a form of dialogue of equals, where service users and providers co-create personalized services and outcomes (in this case the employability journeys of the former). Thus, co-production ‘puts service users on the same level as the service provider… it aims to draw on the knowledge and resources of both to develop solutions to problems and improve interaction between citizens and those who serve them’ (Burns 2013, p. 31). This implies substantial user control over services, in ‘the type of and way in which services are delivered’ (Pestoff 2009, p. 209), so that provision ‘treats individuals as people with unique needs, assets and aspirations, but also as people that want support tailored to their needs’ (Burns 2013, p. 31).

We are also interested in an emergent literature that links street-level co-production between service users and providers, with the governance and management of provision. Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) and Pestoff (2012) differentiate between ‘co-production’ at the frontline, where users produce and shape their own services in collaboration with street-level workers, and two potential facilitating mechanisms: ‘co-governance’, in which a range of stakeholders participate actively in the design and planning of services on the basis of shared decision-making and responsibility; and ‘co-management’, referring to collaboration across stakeholders in resourcing and delivery, based on the idea that services will be more effective where resources and expertise are pooled among different organizations and stakeholder groups (Schlappa 2017).

INSERT TABLE 1

These features distinguish co-production and its related concepts from the NPM norms that arguably dominate employability and various other public services agendas in liberal welfare states. Whereas advocates of co-governance point to the potential benefits of collaborative and trust-based governance arrangements, much of the public services landscape in the UK remains defined by NPM themes around the efficiency of market-type mechanisms and contractualism (Osborne 2010). Extensive research with WP providers has confirmed that such NPM mechanisms remain crucial to the governance and planning of employability services (Fuertes and McQuaid 2016). Similarly, we argue here that co-management can offer a route to inclusive and collaborative service design, producing two key benefits: providers will

signpost users to each other's services rather than competing on the basis of 'payment by results'; and the inclusion of a broader range of providers will allow for tailored, personalized services. Yet, policymakers who have followed an NPM approach to the management of employability services have argued that 'black box' contracting, where 'service providers, contracted by the DWP, are able to design service provision as they see fit' (Fuertes and McQuaid, p. 101), is also conducive with personalization. The problem is that a growing evidence base suggests that a target culture and emphasis on cost competition (both NPM norms that are also defining features of DWP programmes) can lead providers to favour standardized programme content rather than genuine personalization (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Considine *et al*. 2017).

Co-governance and co-management therefore offer an alternative framework for thinking about the governance and delivery of employability interventions and other public services. Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) are particularly interested in these processes as a means of tapping the contribution of the third sector, but other researchers have supported similar attempts to arrive at an 'extended understanding of co-production as practical dimension of collaborative governance' (Bartenberger and Szescilo 2016, p. 511) in order to connect the planning, design and management of services with street-level practice.

Both co-governance and co-management seem to connect with the values of street-level user co-production, in that all three are 'asset-based approaches' (Burns 2013) – co-production redefines users as active participants rather than passive recipients,

adding their energy and resources to services; co-governance and co-management allow for all relevant policy and delivery stakeholders to pool their assets and expertise to produce more holistic services.

There are clear potential benefits in promoting co-production in shaping street-level interactions, and co-governance and co-management in service design and management. Co-production has the potential to deliver the personalization promised but rarely achieved in policy areas such as employability – services designed with users to draw on their assets are more likely to offer genuine opportunities for them to make choices and personalize their own journeys towards employability (Lindsay *et al*. 2017). Personalized services that are responsive to individuals' needs are likely to increase the buy-in and commitment of users, address their specific barriers, and thus support them to make progress (Garven *et al.* 2016). The continuous improvement of services may also be facilitated by more open feedback mechanisms, with users being empowered to critique and reshape programmes (Pestoff 2009). More generally, for service users, there is potential for increased feelings of fulfilment and empowerment as a result of their active involvement in street-level services (Garven *et al.* 2016). Crucially, as noted above, encouraging users to take ownership of their services has the potential to increase the assets invested in programme content – users may engage more proactively with services, encourage and support peers, and increase the visibility and credibility of services within their local communities (Alford and O'Flynn 2012).

It is worth reiterating at this point that most DWP activation programmes in the UK do not reflect the values of co-production. As noted in the pages of this journal, many users encountering the WP receive standardized, work-first support, with little opportunity to influence the content of services (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016). Another barrier to co-production within employability services rests in the way that service users are often compelled to connect with delivery organizations as a result of the conditionality regime of the welfare state. Whitworth (2016, p. 426) notes the inherent contradiction within compulsory activation that presents the unemployed as 'self-governing subjects' but offers 'no co-produced processes to engage or develop the agency of the unemployed'. Alford (2009, p. 131) similarly reflects on the internal tension defining attempts to co-produce employability where 'the application of sanctions to induce long-term unemployed people to search for work will not only be ineffectual but in some cases will be positively counterproductive'. It has been shown that compulsion and benefit sanctions 'are not good generators of complex, positive actions… where judgement, forethought and discretion are required', and have the potential to stimulate 'non-compliant behaviour – exactly the opposite of what is sought' (Alford and O'Flynn 2012, p. 183).

Advocates of alternative approaches also identify potential benefits in supporting complementary processes of co-governance and co-management in the planning, design, management and delivery of employability services. Co-governance arrangements based on collaboration are better able to tap the knowledge and resources of the range of stakeholders whose expertise is required to plan solutions to complex problems (Schlappa 2017), for example by including third sector

organizations (TSOs) whose mission and/or size would otherwise preclude their involvement in service delivery (Pestoff 2012). The potential value of co-governance (where key stakeholders, including the state as funder, seek to arrive at consensus on sharing resources and decision-making in the planning and design of services) has been contrasted with the market-oriented model of governance in countries like the UK, which critics have suggested privileges competition to drive down cost, so that specialist 'partners' are sometimes included in bid documents, but then marginalized in the delivery of employability programmes (Lindsay *et al.* 2014).

Similar arguments can be made for the co-management of services, 'where representatives from different organizations work alongside each other to manage the delivery of a service…for co-management to occur, individual actors use the respective resources that they control to contribute to the development and delivery of a service' (Schlappa 2017, p. 165). There again appears to be a potential advantage when compared with NPM practices that (in the UK employability context) empower 'prime contractors' to manage supply chains, but offer little opportunity for other partners to share in the shaping of content. Pestoff (2012, p. 17), reflecting specifically on the role of TSOs in managing and delivering services, takes the view that sometimes 'co-production in the UK context appears to imply a more limited service delivery role for voluntary and community organizations, that is, they are simply service agents'. As we will find below, alternative approaches are possible – in the case of MIW, co-managed services emerged from processes of co-governance and led to opportunities for co-production.

CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH AND METHODS

The policy context

Scotland provides an interesting context for research on local employability services, and the potential for co-production. At the time of writing, most employment policy is formally a 'reserved' responsibility of the UK Government, with the Scottish Government funding additional local employability services targeting the most disadvantaged groups and communities. From 2018, mainstream employability provision previously delivered through WP and other DWP initiatives will also be devolved. There is currently limited detail on the shape of these services, but the Scottish Government's (2016, p. 4) principles for the governance of employability emphasize the aspiration that services should be 'designed and delivered in partnership', potentially representing a shift away from the contractualism and managerialism of UK Government agendas. Furthermore, Lindsay *et al*. (2014), argue that there is some, albeit mixed, evidence of a more collaborative approach to employability in Scotland, where TSOs have worked closely with the Scottish Government and local governments to deliver specialist provision for disadvantaged groups. Research on Scottish Government-funded Local Employability Partnerships has identified a stronger emphasis on (and clearer structures to support) collaborative decision-making than is often reported within UK Government-funded programmes (Sutherland *et al*. 2015).

The deployment of co-production as a central concept in the discussion below also seems appropriate. There has been considerable interest in co-production as a

model of public service delivery in Scotland, particularly in healthcare and community development (Scottish Government 2015). Garven et al. (2016, p. 83) argue that 'the language of asset-based approaches now permeates the health and social services policy agenda'. Thus, while there remains debate, even within government, as to how best to promote co-production, there is an explicit commitment among policymakers to the principle: 'The 'Scottish Approach to Government' has evolved and developed over time. This approach places considerable importance on partnership-working, involving a focus on assets-based approaches and co-production…' (Scottish Government 2015, p. 4). The language of asset-based approaches is less often found in discussions of employability, but the Scottish Government's interest in the potential value of co-production in public services, the distinctiveness of state-third sector relations, and the imminent further devolution of employability provision produced a unique setting for our research.

Making It Work and our research

MIW was a programme of intensive, personalized support for disadvantaged lone parent families with complex needs, defined by the funder as those: with disabilities, or caring for someone with disabilities; with a large family (three or more children); residing in a depressed labour market; living in chaotic circumstances; with little work experience; or who have been out of work for more than two years.

MIW aimed to increase the numbers of lone parents moving into sustainable employment and was based on a model of voluntary participation, with access to services that included personalized caseworker support, delivered by street-level

‘Key Workers’ (KWs), a range of employability-building and training activities, and signposting to other services including childcare. The programme received £7m funding from the Fund. The Fund is a non-departmental public body responsible for distributing 40 per cent of all funds raised for good causes by the UK’s National Lottery (approximately £650m each year); it supports community projects and has a specific focus on engaging service users with multiple and complex needs.

MIW was delivered between 2013 and 2017 in five Scottish local government areas: Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire. It was delivered through partnerships led by TSOs working in collaboration with providers in the public sector, with local government and/or their agencies as a key partner in all areas. The funder required bidders to describe how MIW would be delivered through partnerships involving a co-leadership role for the third sector. The programme supported more than 3,000 lone parents over four years. Almost one-quarter of these self-reported an illness or disability (more than half of these were depression or anxiety-related), and eight per cent were carers of someone with an illness or disability. More than half had not been actively engaged in the labour market (not working or seeking work) in the period prior their engagement with the programme. All were in receipt of benefits and 88 per cent were living in rented accommodation.

Research methods

The research reported here involved three blocks of fieldwork, undertaken 2014-16. Semi-structured stakeholder interviews were conducted (mostly) face-to-face with representatives of MIW and other stakeholders across the five partnership areas. A

purposive approach was taken to sampling, working with key stakeholders to identify relevant contacts. These interviews explored a range of themes relevant to how MIW was developed and delivered: collaboration with partners and engagement with mainstream employability and welfare services; engaging lone parents; personalized support models; working with employers and in-work support. One hundred and four stakeholder interviews were carried out over the three years of research (34 in 2014; 35 in 2015; 35 in 2016).

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with MIW service users. Ninety user interviews were carried out over three years (36 in 2014; 34 in 2015; 20 in 2016). These interviews included users at different stages of engagement with MIW. A purposive, non-randomized sampling approach was taken, involving the research team working with MIW partnerships to identify a range of user experiences, and including subjects who were willing to participate in the research, and available for interview during the fieldwork period. Interviewees included some of those who had successfully transitioned to work and/or training, but most continued to face complex and/or multiple barriers to progression. The age of interviewees ranged from 20 to 47. They reported caring responsibilities for up to four children. All but one were female. No respondents refused to participate, although in a small number of cases health or childcare problems meant that subjects failed to attend arranged interviews. Further information on our interviews is provided in Table 2. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

INSERT TABLE 2

FINDINGS

Following the framework outlined by Brandsen and Pestoff (2006), we assess progress on ‘co-governance’ (i.e. collaborative planning and service design), ‘co-management’ (partnership-working on managing and delivering services), and ‘co-production’ (where users participate in shaping services in collaboration with street-level workers). We explore these issues in turn below before turning briefly to a discussion of factors that acted as facilitators of, or barriers to, co-production. We conclude by arguing that effective co-production may offer a route to better quality services and a means for policymakers to deliver on their promise of personalized employability provision.

Co-governance and co-management of services

Our interviews with key stakeholders found clear evidence of effective co-governance, encouraged and supported by the funder. The Fund’s call for grant proposals specifically required bidders to establish cross-sectoral partnerships and to present a plan for partnership maintenance. Bid teams were encouraged to build inter-disciplinary partnerships that might be able to create provision responsive to the combination of barriers faced by lone parents (for example, by including TSOs run for and by lone parents; by integrating employability and skills provision with childcare services; and by partnering with debt management and healthcare providers). Bidders were also required to offer a detailed explanation and justification of third sector co-leadership within planned activities. The emphasis on evidencing

collaborative arrangements that were responsive to users' needs, rather than on driving down costs through efficient sub-contracting, offered a distinctive approach to governance compared to the UK Government's employability programmes (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016).

As noted above, the funder's support for an inclusive and collaborative approach to partnership formation also ensured a central role for TSOs – such as the grassroots lone parents' charities, Gingerbread and One Parent Families Scotland – that brought credibility and expertise to the programme. There was an acknowledgement that such organizations were often excluded from mainstream employability provision (and would not, at any rate, be able to engage in compulsory activation programmes given ethical concerns). Across all five areas, the encouragement of the funder and 'up-front' grant-based funding supported a careful and collaborative approach to partnership-building. While stakeholders were sometimes frustrated by the gradual pace of partnership formation, there was agreement that a collaborative and inclusive process had produced better-informed services.

Relationships between stakeholders were formalized in partnership agreements, with a Lead Partner in most areas establishing 'service level agreements' with delivery partners. Such agreements tend to focus on articulating a minimum service quality and justification of resources, without imposing the elaborate 'payment-by-results' mechanisms. The absence of payment-by-results funding meant that there was none of the competition to claim outcomes that has contributed to problems of creaming and parking under initiatives such as the WP (Considine *et al*. 2017). This is not to

say that we can discount creaming as part of the relationship between users and KWs. It is possible that KWs engaged in typical forms of street-level discretion by rationing their energies towards those who appeared most eager to achieve progression – a form of creaming and parking that is arguably ubiquitous in employability services (Fledderus and Honingh 2016). Nevertheless, there was no evidence of KWs feeling pressured to cream and park in response to job entry targets. Furthermore, our extensive survey work with service users demonstrates that KWs engaged with, and provided different kinds of support to, a wide range of lone parents, many of whom faced other substantial barriers to work (Batty *et al*. 2017).

This emphasis on collaboration supported the emergence of a consensus around the aims and added value of MIW. The Fund was determined that MIW should not duplicate existing work-first activation programmes, but instead build co-produced services supporting lone parents with complex needs and/or in disadvantaged communities. Thus, delivery partners across all five areas expressed a commitment to engaging lone parents who faced multiple barriers (which was confirmed by our survey and qualitative research with MIW participants) (Batty *et al*. 2017).

Interviewees described how partnership structures rooted in co-governance facilitated directly the co-management of services. We found numerous examples of the sharing of resources and expertise among frontline delivery partners in an effort to build joined-up, multi-faceted services that would respond to users' needs. First, there was agreement, and concerted action, on the need for street-level engagement

with disadvantaged groups and communities that would not otherwise be reached by mainstream services (reflecting the consensus among co-governing partners as to the most effective use of resources to address the needs of those facing substantial barriers to employability).

This consensus informed a range of practical service-building activities on the ground. For example, MIW North Lanarkshire targeted successive disadvantaged neighbourhoods in a time-limited, rolling programme of intensive community engagement activities. The MIW Edinburgh team bypassed the city's well-established local employability services, instead basing MIW KWs in local childcare and community centres more often used by lone parents. Basing KWs in local community hubs helped to establish a sense of trust and credibility with lone parents in target communities. MIW South Lanarkshire's close partnership-working with local community health organizations similarly helped to reach lone parents who were not engaging with mainstream employability services.

At a most basic level, the MIW partnerships supported extensive networking and engagement work to build relationships with key stakeholders and potential participants. MIW KWs described engaging with lone parents and potential partner organizations by attending jobs fairs, connecting with local community action groups, and even directly leafleting neighbourhoods or 'going door-to-door' in target areas. Such high levels of investment in, and proactive approaches to, raising awareness and building engagement were essential for a programme that sought the voluntary participation of vulnerable lone parents who were 'below the radar' of mainstream

employability providers. Such approaches contrast starkly with practice under mainstream activation programmes supported by the UK Government, where ‘engagement’ means waiting for JCP to direct unemployed people to attend employability programmes (and where users are compelled to co-operate under the threat of benefit sanctions).

Co-governance arrangements that emphasized inclusiveness in partnership formation also informed street-level practice, where partners worked hard to establish a joined-up approach, connecting distinctive, complementary offers within a seamless, co-managed service. In Fife, a debt advice counsellor employed by the local, third sector Citizens’ Advice Bureau (but co-funded by MIW) spoke of the importance of connecting her work with the engagement and intensive support offered by the grassroots TSO, Fife Gingerbread.

> “I think Gingerbread’s strong point is they’re very good at engaging with lone parents. So between the two of us we have this… Gingerbread has engaged with the client and gained their trust, and their confidence in the advice that [Citizens’ Advice] is providing, knowing what we do. When we first started, I invited them [Fife Gingerbread KWs] to shadow me on joint visits. So, they could get a feel for what I do, which I think helped them get an overview of the role. So because the client has trust in Gingerbread and Gingerbread are saying, ‘[Citizens’ Advice] will now be able to help you…’ and transferring on that helps the client engage with us better.”
>
> MIW Partner, Fife, 2014

Across all partnership areas, MIW service users appeared to appreciate the benefits of joint-working between partners and were aware of the hard work being done to bring together the assets of various service providers with the aim of delivering a seamless, personalized programme of support.

> “I think at the beginning it almost seemed like two separate people but now I think they're all working together and they all know one another so that really helps it. It makes it feel like you're not going to two different places, everything's just amalgamated and it's all very comfortable, it makes you feel better because you don't have to keep repeating yourself, telling people the same story over and over again, they all kind of know what's happening because they tell each other.”
>
> MIW Service User, Glasgow, 2015

Our survey research with lone parents identified that most had taken up multiple different MIW services, and in interviews we heard numerous examples of users accessing support with housing problems, debt management and benefits advice, childcare funding and provision, and a diverse range of other services. Interviewees seemed aware that MIW partners were seeking to develop holistic, multi-dimensional services.

> “It could be jobs, it could be health, it could be childcare, it could be finance. And I then realized that it's a sort of all-round service, all round help, everyday things that happens in people’s lives.”
>
> MIW Service User, North Lanarkshire, 2014

Genuinely personalized employability services tend to involve multiple components that allow flexible provision to be shaped to the specific needs of different users. While work-first activation programmes have often failed to deliver such personalization (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016), our research suggests that MIW’s co-management structures allowed for a collaborative, inclusive approach that supported the emergence of personalized services.

We can see from the discussion above that specific co-governance arrangements that supported and incentivized inclusive partnership-working and consensus on the content of provision were essential in providing the context for the co-management of services on the ground. This ensured that there was a collaborative effort to engage lone parents not reached by mainstream provision, and that resource-sharing enabled the establishment of joined-up, holistic services that were responsive to the complex needs of users.

Co-production of services: users’ experiences

There was strong evidence of relationships of co-production in all five partnership areas. All areas deployed a KW model: frontline workers, usually located within TSOs, provided intensive support for lone parents and signposted them to numerous

partner organizations to address a wide range of needs (an approach that was facilitated by the inclusive approach to co-governance and collaborative model of co-management discussed above). Caseloads for KWs were substantially smaller than would normally be reported by WP advisers working for private sector providers (Considine *et al.* 2017).

Lone parents unanimously described these relationships as empowering and, crucially, rooted in a sense of choice and control. They reported having control over the content of activities, the pace of work and the flexibility to build up to attending longer or more structured activities, and the frequency of contact with KWs. Elsewhere, we have reported the wide range of employability-building, learning, wellbeing-focused and social engagement activities undertaken by MIW service users, delivered by an extensive network of formal delivery partners and other stakeholders, suggesting a genuine attempt on all sides to respond to individual lone parents' needs (Batty *et al*. 2017). Many interviewees spoke of how their views, choices and priorities were valued by KWs, who then offered support based on users' needs and aspirations.

> "She [KW] is not saying, 'You have to go to college or I'm not helping you'. It's not like that. It's never ever been like that. It's always, 'Would you like to do this, this or this? You choose'. That's how it should be. It's for the person, it's their life..."
>
> MIW Service User, South Lanarkshire, 2015

> “He [KW] brought me in and he told me all about it properly and asked me what I wanted. I thought, ‘Hang on a minute. I've actually never been asked what I want’… I went, ‘I don't know. I've never really been asked that before. It's always been said, you either do this or you lose your money’. He was like, ‘No, this is completely different’.”
>
> MIW Service User, South Lanarkshire, 2016

MIW KWs and partners similarly consistently emphasized the importance of empowering service users to take control of their own employability journeys. The up-front funding model provided by the Fund meant that delivery partners were able to be flexible in their planning of employability, wellbeing, childcare and other interventions. This meant that KWs could shape their own work and facilitate access to services based on what services users wanted and needed. As importantly, there was clear evidence of high levels of engagement and buy-in among service users, as a result of the manner in which they felt valued and empowered by KWs and other MIW partners. Research with vulnerable lone parents in the US has pointed to the value of engagement strategies that ‘validate participants’ behaviours, knowledge and effort’ (Hand 2017, p. 15), and our findings support such an approach.

However, we should not overstate the potential for users to redesign employability provision that, while eschewing the most dirigiste elements of work-first activation, is likely to have been bounded by what KWs considered ‘do-able’. Martin (2011, p. 930), reporting on the co-production of health services, points to how attempts to

drive innovation by service users can be limited by the ‘managerialization of their deliberative efforts’ to align these to the ‘conventional preoccupations’ of professionals. We found little of such street-level managerialization, but clearly there were limits to the signposting options open to KWs (constrained by the availability of mainstream employability and other provision and the relatively limited discretionary budgets that could be used to support access to charged-for services). We should also acknowledge that many of the job outcomes achieved by lone parents were in entry level positions in low-paid sectors such as retail and childcare. Nevertheless, there was a clear sense that these parents had accepted such jobs voluntarily, having (with the advice of KWs) considered the financial and work-family issues associated with returning to work. More importantly, the point here is that lone parents described a sense of empowerment and control that was quite different from their experiences of the UK Government’s activation regime, which pressurizes benefit claimants to engage in standardized, low cost job search activities (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016). Indeed, some lone parents specifically contrasted the positive impacts of MIW with the pressure and distress experienced when engaging with the job seeking and benefits regime managed by JCP.

> “The Jobcentre is like, ‘Get a job, get a job’, and you're constantly pressured. I made up my mind to go and see Laura [KW]. She never came to me and said, ‘Come and see me, come and see me’, and that made all the difference… you don't feel pressured, which is really good. Every time I see Laura it's something new, and it's positive. It's never, I don't know, back at the Jobcentre or something. It's working towards a better future.”

MIW Edinburgh Participant, 2015

> "I couldn't cope with going with going there [JCP]. It just stressed me out so much… I hated it. Just the way that they speak to you and everything. I think that they speak to you like you're nothing. The way they address people… is completely different to when you come into something like, Making it Work, where they're making it more friendly and they make it positive. You walk in there [JCP] and it's just like you're the scum of the earth, type of thing."
> MIW Edinburgh Participant, 2014

There is inevitably some sample bias when engaging service users who volunteered to report their experiences. But it is important to note that positive stories of co-production were volunteered both by lone parents who had made good progress and/or transitioned into employment, and those who continued to face significant barriers.

It is not the main purpose of this paper to provide detailed evidence on the relative costs and benefits of different models of employment support, and we have reported fully elsewhere on the impact and value for money of MIW (Batty et al. 2017). Furthermore, caution is required when comparing the costs and benefits of programmes with different target groups, activities and evaluation approaches, but on the basis of the available evidence MIW outcomes appear to offer value that is within an acceptable range for programmes targeting disadvantaged groups. The cost-per-job outcomes of MIW (presented as a direct cost-outcome calculation as

insufficient evidence is available to provide robust deadweight assessments) was £7,424 and the cost of those obtaining an accredited training outcome £6,284. Differences in the basis for calculations notwithstanding, these costs are comparable to other programmes targeting those facing challenges to labour market participation, including Working for Families, a predecessor programme providing employment support to (couple and lone parent) families in Scotland (Batty *et al*. 2017).

Crucially, the evidence presented here suggests that MIW delivered these positive outcomes in an innovative way, rooted in co-production with users and facilitated by approaches to co-management and co-governance that supported collaboration and resource-sharing. This is consistent with evidence from other programmes suggesting that personalized support offers an effective route to improved employment outcomes for disadvantaged groups. (See, for example, Hefferman, and Pilkington (2011) on the impact of the Individual Placement and Support model in improving employment outcomes for individuals with mental health conditions in both the US and the UK.) We now review key lessons and consider how and why MIW was able to chart a path so different from mainstream activation in the UK.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Deploying Brandsen and Pestoff's (2006) framework may offer a useful way into understanding the distinctive features and value of local, co-produced employability services. In this case, Brandsen and Pestoff's (2006) vision of co-governance was

reflected in a high-level planning and funding regime that emphasized collaboration and resource-sharing based on flexible, locally responsive partnerships. While more market-oriented forms of governance may have the potential to encourage personalization in specific circumstances, this has not been the experience under many of the UK's large-scale employability programmes (Considine *et al.* 2017). We suggest that specific co-governance arrangements agreed by the funder and partners under MIW established distinctive mechanisms for shared planning and decision-making that created the conditions for the design of collaborative, personalized street-level services.

The MIW co-governance regime was necessary for the establishment of co-management and delivery networks that included partners on the basis of their complementary expertise rather than their success in competing for contracts, resources and quick job outcomes. This was and is important, because it might be argued that such approaches to co-managing employability are more likely to produce the personalized services that policymakers have promised but sometimes struggled to deliver (Rice 2017). At street-level, co-managed services helped to provide a joined-up approach, with public and third sector partners combining their expertise to engage and support lone parents. For lone parents, the experience was not just one of more personalized, user-informed services defined by co-production, but also of empowerment.

As to factors facilitating co-production in this case, a number of lessons are apparent. First, the proximity of funders, partners, communities and users has been

suggested as an important facilitator of co-production (Verschuere *et al*. 2012). As Künzel (2012, p. 6) notes in his study of co-production in employability: 'it is at the local level where the different actors intervene to organize, administer and deliver targeted policies and services for active inclusion'. The local 'rootedness' and credibility of some TSOs may therefore have made an important contribution in this case (Pestoff 2012). More broadly, a funding and governance model that valued local partnership-working – which in turn informed energetic local community engagement and individual KWs' activities – appears to have been important in laying the groundwork for co-production.

We should also reiterate that the programme was (purposely) generously funded in recognition of its ambition to engage a group facing substantial challenges to labour market participation. As Bovaird and Löffler (2012, p. 58) note 'co-production may be value for money, but it usually cannot provide value without money'. The level of resources provided and, as importantly, up-front grant funding meant that partners could spend time and energy building partnerships and networks (and so credibility within communities and among lone parents) and reaching out to potential service users who would not otherwise have engaged with these services. Critics might raise questions of 'scalability' – can such personalized, co-produced services be scaled-up into national programmes? The answer is that there will inevitably remain a tension between localized choice and co-production and (some) policymakers' prioritization of achieving economies of scale through standardized provision (Alford 2009). As Bovaird and Löffler (2012) argue, perhaps a more productive focus would be on *economies of scope* and shared learning – policymakers need to acknowledge the

limits to which lessons from locally responsive, personalized services can be standardized and scaled-up, and instead support 'learning from difference' and sharing of good practice across local contexts.

While the findings reported above are largely positive, we do not advocate co-production as a panacea for the problems of employability services targeting disadvantaged groups. We have provided extensive evaluation reporting elsewhere, noting the challenges faced by MIW partnerships in managing user demand, sourcing childcare support, and helping lone parents to sustain and progress in employment given the precarity of some of their chosen job outcomes (Batty *et al*. 2017). We have also noted some differences in the effectiveness of partnership-working and service delivery across the five MIW areas. Of course, we acknowledge that there will also remain a tension between local programmes that value choice and co-production and national policies that have strengthened welfare conditionality to encourage participation in work-first activation. These institutionalized norms are likely to limit opportunities for co-production as a route to employability in liberal activation regimes such as the UK (Rice 2017).

We also acknowledge the limitations of our research – a mainly qualitative study, focusing on a limited number of geographies and a programme targeting a highly specific user group. We should note that attempts to promote co-production can impact on organizational and policy outcomes in complex (and sometimes contradictory) ways (Zambrano-Gutiérrez *et al*. 2017). There is also evidence that where the context is not right, and co-production is promised but not fully delivered,

there can be negative impacts on the quality of, and trust in, public services (Bartenberger and Szescilo 2016). And even where there are opportunities for effective user co-production, it is important that the central role of street-level professionals, and the challenges that they face in supporting co-productive approaches, are acknowledged (Tuurnas 2016). There is a need for further research on the potential benefits and limitations of co-production in the specific field of employability and other public services contexts.

However, whatever the limitations of the MIW programme and our research, there appear to be potential lessons for alternative approaches to the planning and delivery of employability services. There are viable alternatives to the contractualism and marketization that has dominated the governance of activation in the UK and other liberal welfare states. Bold decisions by public funders can incentivize, and demand, collaboration at the local level. The inclusion of TSOs and other stakeholders – based on their expertise in addressing service users' needs – can lead to tailored and holistic programme content. And an ethos of co-production can deliver experiences of empowerment for, and draw on the energy and assets of, disadvantaged groups such as unemployed lone parents. Policymakers would be well served by efforts to identify transferable lessons on how co-production with vulnerable user groups can enhance the impact of future employability services.

Table 1 Features of co-governance, co-management and co-production

Form of collaboration	Key features
Co-governance	• Appropriate stakeholders from public, private and third sectors participate actively in the governance and planning of services • Consensus-based approach to identifying broad programme aims and priorities • Processes to support shared decision-making and responsibility for outcomes among stakeholders
Co-management	• Collaboration across stakeholders in the resourcing, design and delivery of street-level services • Processes to support resource-pooling and information sharing among stakeholders • Collaboration to build joined-up, multi-faceted services responsive to evidence of users' needs and aspirations • Emphasis on flexibility in programme design and clear signposting processes between partners
Co-production	• Frontline professionals and citizens collaborate as equals on shaping services engaged with by users, based on relationships of trust • Emphasis on users' choices and preferences in shaping own service options and broader

	programme content • Services co-designed to draw on users' assets (e.g. existing skills, knowledge, social capital and mutual support networks) • Emphasis on individual and community empowerment

Table 2 Sample for research in MIW areas

	2014		2015		2016	
	Lone parents	Stake-holders	Lone parents	Stake-holders	Lone parents	Stake-holders
Edinburgh	6	12	8	8	6	7
Fife	8	9	8	9	5	8
Glasgow	11	5	4	5	2	8
North Lanarkshire	5	3	5	7	2	6
South Lanarkshire	6	5	9	6	5	6

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