

Street-level practice and the co-production of third sector-led employability services

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Published version

LINDSAY, Colin, PEARSON, Sarah, BATTY, Elaine, CULLEN, Anne-Marie and EADSON, William (2018). Street-level practice and the co-production of third sector-led employability services. *Policy & Politics*, 46 (4), 571-587.

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Abstract

Policymakers have promised a personalised approach to improving the employability of disadvantaged groups. The evidence suggests that contracted-out activation programmes in the UK and some other welfare states have instead sometimes delivered a standardised ‘work-first’ model. An alternative approach is exemplified in local employability services targeting lone parents in Scotland, led by third sector-public sector partnerships. Our research on these services suggests a link between programme governance (defined by flexible funding and collaborative partnership-working) and effective street-level practice (where caseworkers and users co-produce services to empower parents). The article concludes by identifying lessons for the co-production of future employability services.

Introduction

Many welfare states have adopted activation as a response to the consistent labour market disadvantage experienced by some citizens. The UK has long been viewed as in ‘the vanguard of activating welfare states’, introducing a raft of activation programmes since the mid-1990s with the aim of improving the employability of groups excluded from the labour market (Lindsay et al, 2015: 152). One such group – lone parents claiming welfare benefits – has been subject to a series of specific employability programmes funded by the UK Government Department for Work and Pensions (DWP); and while not a target group under the national ‘Work Programme’ (WP) introduced in 2010, the need to offer tailored support for lone parents has been acknowledged by WP providers (Rees et al, 2014).

Lone parents, like other potentially disadvantaged groups, may face complex barriers to work, and this has led successive governments to claim that their employability programmes offer personalised services to address these problems (Whitworth, 2013). However, an emerging critical literature questions the extent to which the ‘work-first’ activation measures that dominate UK policy can make good on government rhetoric around personalised services (Rees et al, 2014). Work-first approaches focus upon quick job entry as a goal, irrespective of the nature of individuals’ barriers, and impose this logic on service users through compulsion and the threat of benefit sanctions (Sol and Hoogtanders, 2005). Critics have suggested that such approaches are incompatible with genuine ‘personalisation’ that seeks to respond to the complex needs of vulnerable groups (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016). A related critique argues that some forms of contracting-out employability services to for-profit companies (central to the WP’s governance model) reinforce standardisation, rather than personalisation, as

contracted providers seek to minimise variability in services and therefore maximise efficiency (and potentially profits) under ‘payment-by-results’ contracting (Ceolta-Smith et al, 2015).

Concerns over the fitness of existing models of governance and programme content have led to an increasing interest in alternative approaches to delivering personalised services for excluded groups across a range of public services. Specifically, the last decade has seen the renewal of ‘co-production’ as a key concept in debates around the future of services (Bovaird et al, 2016; Nederhand and Van Meerkerk 2017). Linked to this, there has been continued interest in the potential role of not-for-profit, third sector organisations (TSOs) in personalising services (Pestoff, 2012), including employability provision targeting disadvantaged groups (Lindsay et al, 2014). For advocates of such alternative approaches, co-production in the management and delivery of services has the potential to deliver genuine personalisation, improved programme outcomes and empowerment for disadvantaged groups.

These debates provide the starting point for this article. We report on our research with lone parents and key stakeholders involved in voluntary local employability programmes in Scotland. The services are supported by the Scotland-based fund of a major UK non-departmental public body – Big Lottery Fund in Scotland – and delivered through third sector-public sector partnerships in five local government areas. Our research explores the extent to which an ethos of co-production defines the programme, and how this shapes the experiences of lone parents who volunteered to participate. The programme features examined here are not exclusive to this intervention, and indeed could be argued to characterise some other Big Lottery-funded programmes in the UK, but analysis of their application by TSOs in their work with lone parents provides important evidence on the

extent to which these approaches offer lessons for the development of employment support provision for other disadvantaged groups. Thus, the contribution of this article is to explore the potential added value of alternative approaches to employability provision, drawing on the inter-related concepts of ‘co-governance’ and ‘co-management’ (which capture collaborative approaches to planning and managing services) and co-production (where service users are empowered to become active participants shaping their own employability journeys).

The article first outlines the background to the research by discussing the literature on lone parents and employability. We then discuss briefly literatures on co-production in employability and the role of TSOs. We go on to review the policy context in Scotland and summarise the programme and our research methods, before presenting our analysis of lone parents’ and key stakeholders’ experiences of co-producing employability. The article concludes by identifying potential lessons for the governance, content and delivery of future services. We acknowledge below that co-production and TSO leadership are not synonymous. Nevertheless, we argue that the combination of a shared commitment to co-production, relationships of partnership shaped by collaborative governance, and the particular ethos of user empowerment and community engagement brought by the TSOs *in this case*, contributed to the emergence of high quality, co-produced services.

Background to the research

Lone parents and employability

In line with the broadening of the reach of activation in many liberal welfare states, successive UK Governments since 1997 have sought to use changes to rules on entitlements

to benefits to activate lone parents. These changes are linked to broader objectives to increase the numbers of lone parents in employment and represent a redefining of non-working parents as ‘unemployed’, rather than ‘carers’. They are also part of an ongoing reconfiguration of welfare which emerged in the late 1980s, in which the provision of state support is conditional on recipients meeting certain behavioural conditions, and which has intensified in the programme of welfare reform implemented by the Coalition and Conservative Governments since 2010 (Whitworth, 2013).

For the majority of lone parents in the UK, entitlement to state support is conditional on active engagement with the labour market. Lone parents whose youngest child is aged 5 years or over are expected to actively seek work, and those with a child aged over one year but below age five are expected to ‘keep in touch’ with the labour market. This may include an expectation to attend work-focused interviews. Lone parents who do not comply with these responsibilities can be subject to sanctions involving the withholding of a proportion of benefit for a period, depending on the severity and frequency of non-compliance.

Lone parents who are not in work often identify a range of potential benefits to employment for themselves and their families but active engagement with the labour market can present substantial challenges (Whitworth, 2013), and arguably work-first activation policies in the UK disregard the complex circumstantial, structural and market factors which shape opportunities for this group. Lone parents’ aspirations for work are consistently driven by their roles as a parent with main responsibility for their children. When working conditions or local childcare offers do not support lone parents’ primary roles as carers for their children they can act as barriers to taking up employment or motivations to leave work. Lone parents experiencing long spells without work may also face a range of additional barriers, including

the consequences of poverty and/or housing problems; health-related barriers; and other gaps in employability or basic skills (Whitworth, 2013). There is some evidence that lone parents facing complex barriers who are referred to mainstream activation can be subject to ‘parking’, as street-level bureaucrats reason that they have scant resources to address these barriers and there is little chance of achieving a quick job entry (Rees et al, 2014).

The third sector and employability services

In this article, we adopt a broad definition of the third sector (Lindsay et al, 2014): we take TSOs (which includes ‘voluntary’ or ‘non-profit’ organisations) to be self-governing bodies that are formally organised, independent from the state, non-profit-distributing, and benefit from some sort of voluntarism in their activities.

Despite the efforts of TSOs to compete within the UK Government’s activation market, many have been increasingly marginalised in service delivery. The main activation programme for all unemployed people, the WP, contracts out services to ‘Prime Contractors’ (large-scale contractors that bid to organise services within geographical areas and manage supply chains of other specialist sub-contractor organisations). Of the 128 organisations admitted to the WP ‘framework’ of permitted bidders, more than four-fifths were for-profit, private sector bodies (Heins and Bennett, 2016). Of the 18 organisations that between them won all 40 Prime Contractor bids to manage the delivery of WP across the UK, only two were TSOs, a reflection of the UK Government’s requirement that Primes evidence substantial financial reserves and annual turnover. The third sector plays a sub-contracting role in most areas (Rees et al, 2014).

TSOs' involvement in the employability policy agenda provides opportunities but also challenges. Specifically, the content of work-first programmes may be at odds with the focus and ethos of TSOs (Lindsay et al, 2014). The acceptance of these programme objectives, and related performance targets, may undermine the ability of TSOs to deliver personalised support for disadvantaged groups. Initiatives such as the WP have arguably seen TSOs shift 'towards a more typical work-first delivery approach' (Heins and Bennett, 2016: 33), raising questions as to whether, under these circumstances, the sector continues to offer distinctiveness. Given these challenges, some TSOs have welcomed the opportunity to engage in alternative, localised models of employability services, which do more to recognise the potential added value of the sector, and which eschew narrowly focused payment-by-results contractualism and work-first programme content (Lindsay et al, 2014).

Co-production, the third sector and employability services

Verschuere et al (2012: 1085) define co-production as 'the mix of activities that both public service agents and citizens contribute to the provision of services. While the specific components of co-production remain a matter of academic debate, an emerging literature has sought to differentiate co-governance, in which a range of stakeholders participate in the design and planning of services; co-management, referring to collaboration across sectors in the resourcing and delivering services; and co-production at the frontline, where users produce and shape their own services in collaboration with street-level workers (Branden and Pestoff, 2006).

The (especially European) literature on co-production has increasingly focused on the third sector as a key stakeholder. The third sector is seen as embodying the values and potential benefits of co-production. It has been argued that some TSOs can add value due to their

‘proximity’ and connectedness to potentially disadvantaged groups and communities, their openness to feedback, and their capacity to offer personalised, locally-responsive services (Verschuere et al, 2012). It is this rootedness in (and responsiveness to) user groups and communities – which have often provided the context for the emergence of TSOs themselves from the ‘ground up’ – that has led to a growing consensus that the third sector can *potentially* play a key role in fostering co-production (Pestoff, 2012).

These arguments on the benefits of co-production seem relevant to the specific field of employability. As noted above, policymakers have struggled to make good on their promise of personalised employability provision. Could third sector-led co-production offer a way forward? Examining services in the Netherlands, Fledderus and Honingh (2016) argue that co-production has the potential to reduce selection bias and so the ‘creaming’ of more employable candidates – a problem that has undermined the impact of employability programmes since their inception. More broadly, it is clear that employability services may benefit from users contributing their assets and commitment to the process of facilitating their own and others’ transitions to work (Sol and Hoogtanders, 2005). Of course, it might be argued that contracted providers will have an incentive to co-produce if it helps them to achieve job outcomes for service users, but the evidence is that this has rarely been made real under the WP (Considine et al, 2017) – a sticking point is that users are often compelled to connect with delivery organisations as a result of the conditionality and sanctions regime of the benefits system. It has been suggested that, in the context of efforts to build co-production, the use of sanctions may be counterproductive (Pestoff, 2012).

Context for the research

The policy context

Scotland provides a particularly interesting context for research on third sector employability services. While most employment policy (including the funding and management of the WP and other activation measures) is formally a ‘reserved’ responsibility of the UK Government, the Scottish Government supports additional local employability services targeting disadvantaged groups and communities. From 2018, mainstream employability provision currently delivered through WP will be devolved to Scotland, with the Scottish Government currently expressing a preference for local partnership-working as a means of organising services (Scottish Government, 2015a).

There may also be scope for a ‘Scottish approach’ to TSO engagement in employability, building on an already distinctive relationship between government and the sector. For example, Lindsay et al (2014) argue that there is some, albeit mixed, evidence of a distinctive model of provision, where TSOs have partnered with Scottish and local governments to extend the reach of their services (but where there also remain strong new public management (NPM) themes shaping the third sector’s relationships with the state). Research on Scotland’s Local Employability Partnerships, which usually involve local government and TSOs in managing services designed to complement DWP provision, has identified a stronger emphasis on (and clearer structures to support) collaborative decision-making between all key stakeholders than is often reported under Prime Contractor-led WP arrangements (Sutherland et al, 2015).

Our use of co-production as a central concept in the discussion below also seems appropriate to the Scottish policy context. There has been substantial interest in co-production as a model of public service delivery in Scotland (Scottish Government 2015b). While there remains

debate, even within government, as to how best to drive co-production, there is an explicit (if still sometimes largely rhetorical) commitment to the principle: ‘The ‘Scottish Approach to Government’ ... places considerable importance on partnership-working, involving a focus on assets-based approaches and co-production’ (Scottish Government 2015b, 4). Thus, while we should not overstate the peculiarities of the ‘Scottish approach’, the Scottish Government’s interest in the potential value of co-production, the distinctiveness of state-TSO relations, and the imminent further devolution of employability provision produced an interesting setting for research on the Making It Work (MIW) programme, the characteristics of which are discussed below.

Making It Work

MIW provides personalised support for lone parent families with complex needs, defined by the programme funder (the Big Lottery Fund in Scotland) as those:

- with disabilities, or caring for someone with disabilities
- with a large family (three or more children)
- living in an area with 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 aims to increase the numbers of lone parents moving into sustainable employment and, in contrast to mainstream employability provision in the UK, is based on a model of voluntary participation, with access to support which includes signposting and accessing service provision, personalised support, delivered by street-level ‘key workers’ (KWs), and linking between employability and support services including childcare. It should be noted

that although participation in MIW is voluntary, service users also cited their engagement with the programme as evidence of meeting DWP conditionality requirements – lone parents can offer their participation in MIW as an example of taking action to progress towards employment (which, for some, is a condition of receiving welfare benefits). The programme is designed to help lone parents manage the jigsaw of childcare and family life and to facilitate access to services for lone parents who are furthest from the labour market and who are unlikely to benefit from mainstream support. The programme has received £7m funding from the Big Lottery Fund in Scotland and is being delivered between 2013 and 2017 by partnerships led by TSOs working in collaboration with providers in the public sector. It is being delivered in five local government areas: Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire. The Big Lottery Fund supports a range of other employability initiatives in the UK, most of which emphasise partnership-working but not always with a focus on TSO-public sector leadership – accordingly, the governance and content of MIW was of particular interest.

Methods

The research reported here was conducted as part of a broader programme of research involving both quantitative and qualitative assessment of the implementation and impact of the programme, and reported extensively elsewhere (Batty et al, 2016). The data discussed below were gathered through two blocks of fieldwork, undertaken in early 2014 and 2015. For the purposes of this article, our research questions were:

- What evidence was there for co-governance and co-management of services under MIW and what were the implications for street-level services?

- What evidence was there of co-production of employability among service users and key workers?
- What were the facilitators of, and barriers to, effective co-production?

Semi-structured stakeholder interviews were conducted (mostly) face-to-face and also by telephone with representatives of partner agencies across the five local authority areas. A purposive approach was taken, working with key stakeholders to identify relevant contacts involved in managing and delivering frontline services. These interviews explored a range of themes relevant to the development and implementation of MIW: working in partnership and engaging with mainstream provision; engaging lone parents; personalised support models (KW and group support); working with employers and in-work support. Sixty-two stakeholder interviews were carried out over the two years of research (29 in 2014; 33 in 2015).

Face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of service users across the five MIW partnerships. Seventy-one user interviews were carried out over two years (37 in 2014; 34 in 2015; in a small number of cases the same interviewees participated in both waves of the research). These interviews included users at different stages of engagement with the MIW programme drawn from the total of 2,051 lone parents who had engaged with the services up to March 2015. Again, a purposive, non-randomised sampling approach was taken, involving the research team working with intelligence from stakeholders in the MIW partnerships to identify information rich cases, and including only MIW users who were willing to participate in the research, and available for interview during the fieldwork period. These interviews were conducted using semi-structured topic guides and explored aspects of service users' personal and family circumstances, prior engagement with the labour market,

motivation to engage with MIW and experience of the programme, and perceptions of the degree to which involvement with the programme had contributed to improvements across a range of employability outcomes (including skills, confidence and self-efficacy, as well as training and employment).

There are potential biases in this sampling approach, in that the lone parent participants are essentially self-selected (participation in interviews was voluntary) and it may be that those that have chosen to engage in the research are inclined to positive views in relation to the support they have received. There is however, a remarkable degree of consistency in the data derived. Further confidence in the findings discussed below is derived through reference to analysis of quantitative data: although not the main focus of this paper, longitudinal surveys of ‘distance travelled’ conducted with 370 service users indicate that the delivery model reported on here is associated with positive change across a range of employability outcomes (Batty et al, 2016).

Findings

Following the framework for exploring co-production suggested by Brandsen and Pestoff (2006: 497), we assess progress on: ‘co-governance’ (i.e. collaborative planning and delivery of services) and ‘co-management’ (collaboration on managing and delivering services involving the public sector, TSOs and other stakeholders); and ‘co-production’, where users shape their own engagement with services to produce (it is hoped) better quality outcomes. 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 personalised employability provision.

Co-governance and co-management of services

A first notable finding related to how the funder had encouraged a process of collaborative partnership-formation at the start of the project, which encouraged co-governance in the planning of local services. As noted above, grant funding was provided for each area, with relevant stakeholder organisations supported to arrive at their own delivery partnership from the bottom-up; a model which is common across many Big Lottery Fund initiatives. Final partnership composition, roles and outcome targets were then agreed between local partners and the funder.

In all five areas, key stakeholders spoke of a genuinely collaborative process of co-governance that sought consensus on resource allocation and partner roles. Relationships between stakeholders were formalised in partnership agreements, with a Lead Partner in most areas agreeing ‘service level agreements’ with delivery partners. Such agreements tend to focus on articulating a minimum service level and justification of resources, without imposing the elaborate ‘payment-by-results’ systems and competition to claim outcomes that have led to problems of ‘creaming and parking’ under initiatives such as the WP (Rees et al, 2014). There was consensus about the benefits of governance arrangements that emphasised resource-pooling and collaboration, particularly given pressure on the finances of all stakeholders.

This collaborative model also fed through to the co-management of services, with street-level interventions designed so that the specific expertise and assets of different partners could be

tapped. For example, members of the Glasgow team (which included a local authority-based employability training provider, the third sector support organisation One Parent Families Scotland, and a range of other specialist partner agencies) described how early discussions had helped partners to understand one another's roles, expertise and added value. Meanwhile, the Fife partnership model deliberately sought to integrate the expertise of Gingerbread (the Lead Partner: a grassroots TSO specialising in support and advocacy for lone parents), with local authority-funded employability services (which has long-provided vocational activation programmes in local communities), and money and welfare advice expertise from Citizens Advice Scotland (third sector citizens advice bureaux have a long-standing record of providing welfare advice services in Scotland). A common theme in interviews with users was that each of these delivery partners were trusted and seen as experts. Individual delivery partners were also clear about the added value brought by their collaborators.

“...Gingerbread have always been a grassroots organisation, and have always been working with people in their own homes, and going out to the community rather than telling people to come to them. So that has worked really well. A lot of the cases that we're working with are very complex, and many of the parents do not feel confident on an initial engagement to be coming along to a job club, or to a corporate, office-type environment. So the fact that support workers are going to actually visit them in their homes has been really successful. And it also is good because it gives us a good understanding of exactly what is going on.”

Key stakeholder interviewee, Fife 2014

The partnership-based approach supported by the funder also facilitated the inclusion of some TSOs, run for and by lone parents, which were unlikely to have found a role in the delivery of

mainstream contracted-out services – for example, the support and advocacy group One Parent Families Scotland delivered engagement services at area-based hubs in Glasgow (as well as contributing to most other MIW partnerships). Such organisations bring both expertise and credibility to attempts to gain the buy-in of lone parents.

Co-management requires the engagement of relevant TSOs and other stakeholders, and we found evidence of achieve this. In all areas, MIW teams worked hard to reach out beyond mainstream employability services and to connect with the community hubs, services and areas where lone parents could be engaged. In one area, North Lanarkshire, a rolling community-based programme of activities, targeted at a number of disadvantaged localities in turn, allowing the MIW team to build social capital through area-based networks, establishing a legacy of engagement in successive communities. In all five areas, KWs described an extensive process of engagement and relationship-building, targeting childcare providers, local employability and healthcare services and other community organisations. KWs even directly leafleted and/or ‘door-knocked’ homes in target neighbourhoods.

“What we’ve done is gone out and built those relationships from everything from health visitors, community learning development teams, health and wellbeing services, social work departments - everything that we possibly can do to get ourselves integrated into the communities.”

Key stakeholder interviewee, Edinburgh 2014

This is arguably a very different model of relationship-building than would be found in many other parts of the UK employability marketplace, where relational contracting is the norm, and specialist ‘partners’ are sometimes included in the provision of services, but also often

frustrated in their efforts to add value to employability programmes (Ceolta-Smith et al, 2015). Yet, the commitment to co-governance and co-management in MIW may offer long-term added value, by networking a diversity of actors that together have the expertise to deliver genuinely personalised services.

Co-production of services: Key Worker and user experiences

Central to discussions of the potential benefits of co-production is the argument that there is added value in facilitating user voice in shaping services. For Burns (2013: 31) ‘co-production is the process of active dialogue and engagement between people who use services and those who provide them. It is a process which puts service users on the same level as the service provider’. Stakeholders consistently argued that the ethos of MIW was rooted in user co-production. KWs concurred that there was strong user voice in shaping both individual user journeys and the broader programme.

“The action plan that we do at the very beginning with them is the biggest part of it. When I meet with somebody I take wee notes and I ask them what they want. ‘What do you want? How would you get there?’ Then that’s when we start breaking it down... So it is about spending a wee bit of quality time with them, chatting and finding out what they really want and taking it from there. Some of them have never been asked that before.”

Key stakeholder interviewee, Edinburgh 2015

This emphasis on choice and empowerment was reiterated in MIW team members’ characterisation of their own practice.

“The service is one-to-one support based around them [MIW users]. The whole conversation is based around, ‘This is your journey, what do you want to do?’ We don't have maps and plans of: ‘This is what's going to happen to you’.”

Key stakeholder interviewee, South Lanarkshire 2014

All service users who agreed to be interviewed for the research told similar stories of opportunities for co-production (although we again acknowledge the potential for sample bias among a study group who volunteered to be interviewed). Unprompted, users volunteered a description of their engagement with KWs that was unusually focused on empowerment and choice.

“I wasn't forced into anything and I don't think she [KW] would force anybody into anything at all... if I needed something extra I feel I could say that to her. She could help me out and put something in place and change something.”

User interviewee, Edinburgh 2015

“She [KW] made me feel really valued. I never, ever felt uneasy with her. Some people have that effect... she was willing to help. From the beginning she was basically about, ‘What do you want to do?’ ... she didn't say, ‘I think you should do this’. It was me saying, ‘I want to do this’, and she was like, ‘Right, let's get started’”.

User interviewee, Edinburgh 2014

For many users who had encountered mainstream services provided by the public employment service, Jobcentre Plus, the contrast was stark.

“Very different from the Jobcentre, very relaxed: ‘Come on we're here to help’. They are not there to boss you around. It's in your own time, it's at our pace it's not because they're telling you: ‘You have to’.”

User interviewee, Glasgow 2015

One important element of delivering user empowerment and co-production focused on a concerted effort to target the best possible employability outcomes for users. one KW stressed the value of placing the right user into the right job for the benefit of the individual and family.

“We could probably put ten of them in a cleaning job tomorrow... we could do that but... I don't want a reputation of putting people into work and it failing, we want a reputation of putting them into work when they're prepared and ready to go. They're skilled and they know what they're doing and their home is prepared.”

Key stakeholder interviewee, Edinburgh 2015

The same worker stressed the need to help lone parents to arrive at realistic job search targets (for example, those expressing long-term aspirations to go into nursing might be directed towards social care worker training as a potential first step), but there was a consistent emphasis on empowering users to make appropriate choices. Users consistently expressed their sense of empowerment – that they could work with their KWs to achieve a good quality job outcome, rather than feeling pressured to pursue unsuitable opportunities.

“It's not just about getting a job... It's about how you feel and making you feel better to get the best job you can get.”

It is important to acknowledge that there is inherent bias in any sample of service users who are willing to tell their stories to researchers (although there was wide variation in the progress that our sample of interviewees had made through MIW – stories of empowerment and co-production were shared by those still grappling with substantial barriers to work and those who had sustained positive job outcomes). It is also likely that KWs, whatever their commitment to empowering users, engaged in typical street-level discretion by rationing their energies towards those who appeared most ready to achieve progression – a form of ‘creaming and parking’ that is arguably common to most employability services (Rees et al, 2014). Nevertheless, these user reflections represent much more than the homilies of ‘happy sheets’ evaluation exercises. The research team did not seek to elicit the stories of empowerment articulated by service users; rather, these views were volunteered by interviewees.

Facilitators of and barriers to effective co-production

Key stakeholders across all areas identified a range of factors that helped to facilitate progress on co-governance, co-management and co-production. First, it was clear in this case that the decision to fund local authority-level partnerships, and the resulting proximity of stakeholders, was important in cementing strong relationships of co-governance and co-management. Geographical proximity also allowed the testing of some innovative programme content features, such as the dynamic rolling community outreach activities piloted in North Lanarkshire.

Verschuere et al (2012: 1090) agree that facilitators of co-production include the proximity and accessibility of service providers, but also highlight the importance of key stakeholders 'knowing the users' needs and motivations to co-produce'. Here, we can identify two important elements of the MIW approach: first, the national funder requested, and local partnerships delivered, collaborative models that included grassroots organisations with reach and credibility within the spatial communities and lone parent user group that were being targeted; second, as noted above, time and resources were allowed for an extensive programme of engagement and relationship-building at the start of the programme.

But given the diversity of expertise and experience within MIW partnerships, we might also argue that key stakeholders were required to demonstrate the commitment and skills to work collaboratively and maximise the added value of each other's assets. Baker and Irving's (2016: 394) work in public health services notes the need for 'actors involved in the co-production process' [to] 'self-designate as boundary-spanners'. There was a clear sense in our interviews with stakeholders – and in users' experiences of joined-up services – that KWs had effectively adopted the role of boundary spanner, i.e.: 'providing local coordination as an 'anchor point' between collaborating agencies... promoting innovation in policy solutions that reflect inter-disciplinary approaches; and (crucially) networking to share information and practice' (Lindsay et al, 2012: 514).

It is again important to recognise that organisational structures and culture are significant in facilitating co-production (Verschuere et al, 2012). In this case, both the national funder and the specific TSO delivery partners involved arguably brought with them an ethos that encouraged autonomy in local decision-making, placed collaboration over competition, and (crucially) valued the empowerment, contribution and voice of service users. While these

values are not unique to TSOs, they may be stronger in organisations that have grown from the bottom-up, and whose strategic aim is to serve their grassroots communities rather than to grow market share or produce profit. The ethos of empowerment and voice brought by such organisations can be helpful in securing the last element needed to facilitate co-production – a willing user community. It is again important to acknowledge that engaging the third sector need not automatically result in the empowerment of service users and the co-production of employability – evidence from elsewhere suggests TSOs can easily find themselves adopting top-down, work-first approaches when required to act in instrumental ways to secure funding (Lindsay et al., 2014). Rather, we appear to have identified a virtuous circle in this case – the funding and governance structures established by the funder encouraged collaboration and co-production; there was consensus among partners on the need for flexible and co-produced interventions to engage this vulnerable group; and the *specific* TSOs recruited to the programme brought with them a strong commitment to empowering lone parents.

For Bovaird et al (2016) service users' self-efficacy (their belief that they can make a difference) is central to making co-production real. As we have seen, such self-efficacy was strong among the users who we interviewed, and was supported by the practice of KWs who consistently supported users to take ownership of their own employability journeys. The sort of trust-based KW-service user relationships identified above are less often found in compulsory work-first programmes (Lindsay et al, 2014).

Our discussion with users and key stakeholders identified relatively few barriers to co-production. Some interviewees acknowledged that the process of partnership formation eventually involved a narrowing of focus to (and resourcing of) an agreed group of organisations, to the exclusion of some others. But these processes were characterised as

consensual, and over both years of the research, few stakeholder interviewees identified areas of expertise that were absent from by the programme. That said, some interviewees consistently emphasised the need to further strengthen broader partnership-working with (for example) local authority social work teams and the National Health Service (reflecting the high prevalence of mental and other health problems reported by service users). There was also evidence that partnership-formation was smoother in those areas where TSOs (and umbrella councils for voluntary services) had deeper and longer-established engagement in local employability agendas.

For some service users and KWs, an additional barrier to individuals' progress often came in the form of the work-first conditionality regime imposed through Jobcentre Plus and DWP 'partner' organisations. KWs sometimes spoke of two different job roles: first, helping lone parents to co-produce employability journeys towards work that was sufficiently paid and fitted with caring roles; and second, helping lone parents to manage the conditionality demands of Jobcentre Plus and WP staff, who tended to be more concerned that people conduct a set quantity of jobsearch activities, and sometimes deployed benefit sanctions to enforce this behaviour.

Discussion and conclusions

The discussion above provides evidence that the multi-dimensional model of co-production proposed by Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) may offer a useful way into understanding the distinctive features and added value of local, TSO-led interventions in the field of employability. Brandsen and Pestoff's (2006) vision of co-governance was reflected in a high-level planning and funding regime that emphasised collaboration and resource-sharing

(in sharp contrast to the complex and competitive welfare market encouraged by successive UK Governments as the governance mechanism for mainstream employability services). There is evidence that co-management was made real in a partnership-based approach to planning services and distributing resources. This then allowed for the establishment of collaborative delivery networks that included partners on the basis of their complementary expertise rather than their success in competing for contracts. This was and is important, because it might be argued that such models of co-managing employability are rather more likely to arrive at the holistic, personalised services that mainstream activation measures such as the WP have struggled to deliver (Rees et al, 2014).

We found very clear evidence of user co-production – KWs and service users were unanimous in their emphasis on the importance of the latter having ownership over the services that they received. Street-level workers and managers offered numerous examples of how users' preferences had shaped the services offered; service users deployed a language of empowerment, voice and choice in describing their own experiences. The extent to which co-production is 'inherent' in public services – an essential element of the interaction between *any* service and its users at the point of delivery – has been a long-standing theme in the literature (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016). But for those who argue that voice, choice and empowerment are distinctive features of genuine user co-production, it is important to differentiate this from the dirigiste and depersonalised approach offered by work-first models of activation. A comparison of the findings above with research on the experiences of mandated WP participants in the UK appears to support the view that genuine co-production can be distinguished in this area of services, but that it is unlikely to be found within programmes that rely upon to impose standardised work-first activation on service users, irrespective of their personal circumstances (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016; Considine et al,

2017). A key contribution of this article is therefore to illustrate the potential value of new approaches to (and new ways of thinking about) the planning and management of services for vulnerable groups. In particular, we have explored how collaborative approaches to governance and management can lead to more effective provision, and crucially facilitate co-production, with users shaping the content of services, adding value through their contributions, and taking control of their employability journeys.

We do not argue that co-production is a panacea for the challenges of delivering effective employability services for lone parents or other disadvantaged groups. Elsewhere, we have provided extensive evaluation reporting on this programme, which highlights continuing implementation challenges in terms of: meeting increasing demand for KW services within existing resource constraints; signposting lone parents with health problems to appropriate services; identifying childcare solutions that will facilitate returns to work; and ensuring the sustainability of job entries (Batty et al, 2016). The programme was also relatively well-resourced, which allowed KWs to maintain relatively modest caseload numbers, ranging from 30-50 users (far fewer than are often found on WP adviser caseloads) (Ceolta-Smith et al, 2015). Accordingly, MIW reported a higher cost-per-job outcome than found for many WP client groups, although value-for-money comparisons are difficult given that few mainstream activation programmes explicitly target lone parents (and most certainly do not encourage delivery organisations to engage those furthest from the labour market on a voluntary basis). Such challenges around value-for-money matter, because policymakers will only prioritise co-production in employability if we can evidence that it delivers transitions to work. We acknowledge that the broader evidence base on employability is inconclusive – ‘what works’ in terms of the governance and content of services depends on labour market context and user characteristics (Bredgaard, 2015). However, whatever the limitations of this

programme and our research, there appear to be lessons, *if* policymakers are interested in co-production as a model for future service delivery.

As to factors shaping the emergence of co-production in these cases, a number of themes are apparent. As discussed above, TSOs appear to have been important in fostering both collaboration in the co-management of services and user voice in co-producing street-level interactions. The scope for TSOs to contribute to provision and facilitate collaboration was in turn encouraged by the high-level governance and funding model established by the commissioning body – one that called for partnership-based approaches rather than contractualism and competition for outcomes. At street-level, user co-production was facilitated by flexible funding and service delivery models, which allowed for the inclusion of a diverse group of credible delivery partners, and which empowered boundary spanning KWs to co-ordinate personalised services. This in turn strengthened the self-efficacy and commitment of both service users and KWs – a key component in making co-production work (Bovaird et al, 2016).

That said, there are likely to be substantial barriers to promoting co-production with the third sector and local communities in broader employability services. For Johnston (2015: 21), collaborative governance involving the third sector requires the state to ‘relinquish its hegemonic role’ which may be viewed as ‘unlikely given financial and performance accountabilities and the politics of public services’. While the devolved Scottish Government (2015b) has acknowledged the benefits of co-production as an approach to public policy, in the field of employability commissioning top-down NPM norms continue to dominate (Lindsay et al, 2014). Risk aversion among public sector commissioning managers (who prefer to link funding to clearly quantifiable outcomes), and a broader culture within

contractualism of designing narrowly defined performance indicators, act as barriers to the co-production of public services (Bovaird and Löffler 2012). The institutional legacies of NPM often prove resilient (Nicholls and Teasdale 2017), and in this case may continue to throw up barriers to moving away from work-first provision, and the idea that providers should be incentivised to push lone parents and others into any job, irrespective of the long-term quality of outcomes.

The third sector may also face a continuing battle to build upon or maintain its role in this policy arena. For Pestoff (2012: 17) ‘co-production in the UK context appears to imply a more limited service delivery role for voluntary and community organisations, that is, they are simply service agents or providers’. There is a need to move beyond what Bode and Brandsen (2014: 1056) see as the ‘NPM logic [whereby]... TSOs are just one of many agencies bidding for public contracts, and they are judged by the same criteria when it comes to the delegation of service provision’, instead acknowledging ‘opportunities for citizen participation or the potential for innovation’. Once again, while Scottish Government (2015a) policymakers have expressed interest in supporting third sector involvement in future employability services, there remains uncertainty as to whether governance and funding models will be designed to facilitate TSO involvement and promote co-production.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that we have discussed qualitative data from relatively small-scale intervention, targeting a specific user group. But even if our research is limited in its generalisability, it remains valuable in the distinctiveness and clarity of its findings. The stories of collaboration, functional matching and co-production told by a range of stakeholders involved in the governance and management of MIW provide a sharp contrast with the contractualism, competition and target culture that has long-dominated state-funded

employability provision in the UK. The ethos of empowerment and co-production that defined the experiences of users is distinctive when compared with the critical literature on the impact of welfare reform and work-first activation on vulnerable groups such as lone parents. This and other studies of emerging public sector-third sector partnerships point towards the potential added value of co-production as a model of service delivery. Further research may help us to confirm whether these models are more likely to deliver the kind of personalised services so often promised but rarely delivered by policymakers.

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