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CO-PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL INNOVATION IN STREET-LEVEL EMPLOYABILITY SERVICES: LESSONS FROM SERVICES WITH LONE PARENTS IN SCOTLAND

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ABSTRACT

The UK, as an exemplar liberal welfare state, has been characterised as in the vanguard of "work-first" activation – deploying high levels of compulsion and standardised employability services that seek to move people from welfare to work as quickly as possible. However, despite the extension of welfare conditionality to excluded groups such as lone parents, Government-led, work-first employability programmes have often proved ineffective at assisting the most vulnerable to escape poverty or even just progress in the labour market. We argue that alternative approaches, defined by co-production and social innovation, have the potential to be more successful. We draw on a study of local services targeting lone parents led by third sector-public sector partnerships in five localities in Scotland. Our research

identifies a link between programme governance and management (defined by co-governance and collaborative partnership-working) and co-produced street-level services that deliver benefits in terms of social innovation and employability. We draw on 90 interviews with lone parents, and more than 100 interviews with delivery stakeholders and street-level workers, to identify factors associated with positive social and employability outcomes. The article concludes by identifying potential lessons for the governance and delivery of future services targeting vulnerable groups.

KEYWORDS

Co-production, social innovation, employability, lone parents, vulnerable groups, activation

INTRODUCTION

Employability programmes targeting lone parents in liberal welfare states such as the United Kingdom (UK) have focused on combining high levels of welfare conditionality with compulsory "work-first" activation in an attempt to move people into paid employment as quickly as possible. However, despite the claims made by UK Government policymakers that the contracting-out of these services would deliver personalisation and innovation in street-level engagement with welfare recipients, there is evidence that the specific needs of disadvantaged groups such as lone parents are rarely met by work-first activation, which has instead delivered increasingly standardised provision (Considine et al., 2017).

The failure of mainstream employability programmes to offer innovative solutions to the complex barriers faced by lone parents and others has led some to make the case for alternative forms of governance that might support genuinely personalised services (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016). Co-production has re-emerged as an important concept in these debates, capturing the potential value of mechanisms that allow for the pooling of the assets of organisations and street-level professionals delivering services and their service users to achieve better outcomes (Pestoff, 2012). A growing literature seeks to make connections between co-production and the related concept of social innovation. For our purposes, social innovation refers to a collaborative process of improving services for disadvantaged groups and delivering publicly desired outcomes (Bovaird and Löffler, 2016).

This article contributes to these debates by drawing on empirical data to explore how features of programme governance and management can contribute to innovation in the delivery of personalised employability support. We deploy the concepts of co-production and social

innovation to discuss the experiences of stakeholders, street-level workers and lone parents involved in Making It Work (MIW), a voluntary employability-building programme led by third sector-public sector partnerships that delivered services in five localities in Scotland. The concepts of co-governance and co-management are used to discuss collaborative approaches that engaged a range of stakeholders in the design, planning, resourcing and delivery of services and, we argue, facilitated social innovation through co-production between service users and street-level workers.

Following this introduction, we discuss the literature on social innovation and co-production, and its relevance to employability services. We then discuss the policy context: how various levels of government in the UK have sought to address barriers to employability faced by lone parents, and the significance of co-production to debates on the governance and delivery of services. Next, we describe the MIW programme and our research methods, before discussing our findings on how this programme emphasised co-production as a route to both enhanced employability and social innovation. We conclude by identifying lessons for the governance and delivery of future employability services.

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND CO-PRODUCTION IN EMPLOYABILITY SERVICES

Social innovation has been deployed in differing contexts and with reference to a variety of policy agendas. This has led some to claim that social innovation is weakly conceptualised (Bovaird and Löffler, 2016) – "a nebulous, amorphous catch-all concept" (Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2016: 666). A critical literature also attacks the social innovation discourse as legitimising a neoliberal project of shifting responsibility for social wellbeing from a retreating state to the individual (Fougere et al., 2017). For the purposes of our research, we

focus on an emerging literature that coalesces around a number of defining themes in social innovation. Social innovation involves "activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purposes are social" (Mulgan et al., 2007: 8). Social innovation provides "a novel solution to a social problem that is more efficient, effective and sustainable than existing solutions and for which value created accrues primarily to society as a whole" (Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2016: 666). Social innovations create "new social relationships or collaborations that are not only good for society but also enhance society's capacity to act… social innovations empower people by giving them a voice, allowing them to participate and increasing their capabilities" (Sirovatka and Greve, 2014: 81). At delivery level, social innovations are defined by the empowerment of communities and grassroots organisations, and finally users, to develop participative solutions (Sirovatka and Greve, 2014). In this context, users are "not simply passive consumers of services but active participants who co-create, trial and implement innovations and, through actively using these innovations, help to diffuse service innovations" (Windrum et al., 2016: 153).

In the field of employability services, social innovation has emerged as a model that might help policymakers and street-level bureaucrats to arrive at the personalised approaches often promised but rarely delivered by mainstream activation (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016). It has been suggested that viewing the employability policy agenda through the lens of social innovation might lead us towards more responsive modes of local service provision, "new labour market integration processes" and "new forms of participation" (Massey and Johnston-Miller, 2016: 667). Ewert and Evers (2014) report on social innovation in employability services (including those serving lone parents) in a number of EU states, identifying recurring themes including:

- the production of tailored services that reflect complex and/or new social risks, rather than one-size-fits-all standardisation – "the innovative nature of tailored services stems to a significant extent from their ability to react continuously to changing life situations" (Ewert and Evers, 2014: 428);
- the establishment of coalitions of action – by fostering organisational arrangements that operate in a more embedded and networked way, establishing mechanisms to give voice to communities and groups, and building issue-related coalitions;
- innovative approaches to funding and ways of working – including the establishment of new street-level roles that combine previously fragmented knowledge; combining resources from different stakeholders; building working collectives;
- crucially, co-production with service users – approaches that invest in users' capabilities and tap their assets, rather than stigmatising them (Evers and Ewert, 2015); "within service arrangements trusting relationships based on co-production are more likely if the strengths and assets of service users are taken into account and used as a positive foundation that services can build on… enabling users, instead of blaming them for their shortcomings" (Ewert and Evers, 2014: 427).

Ewert and Evers's (2014) emphasis on the value of co-production as a key concept in building more responsive and innovative employability services connects with a growing evidence base on "what works" in street-level practice to support people with complex needs to escape poverty and/or progress in the labour market (Lindsay et al., 2017). Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) and Pestoff (2012) have differentiated 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 different 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 organisations and stakeholder groups. These inter-connected concepts of co-production, co-governance and co-management have been deployed to explore the design and delivery of personalised services for vulnerable groups such as the long-term unemployed (Pestoff, 2012) and lone parents experiencing poverty (Lindsay et al., 2018).

This understanding of interlinked co-production mechanisms as a route to social innovation (Bovaird and Löffler, 2016) provides the starting point for our research. Below, we follow Brandsen and Pestoff's (2006) framing of co-governance, co-management and co-production to report on an exploration of collaboration and innovation in employability services for a vulnerable user group, namely unemployed lone parents. We also discuss evidence of social innovation benefits in line with themes established by Ewert and Evers (2014). Our findings draw on in-depth research with service users, caseworkers and key stakeholders involved in the co-production of employability services for lone parents in Scotland.

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

The policy context

Policy interventions targeting lone parents in Scotland are a shared responsibility across local, Scottish and UK governments[i]. The UK Government has been responsible for substantial changes to the conditionality regime governing benefits for unemployed lone parents in recent years. From 2001, lone parents claiming benefits have been subject to increasing compulsory activation, initially through the requirement to attend work-focused

interviews, which since 2004 have been mandatory for all new and existing claimants. Since 2008, claimants have been subject to "lone parent obligations", which have effectively moved most lone parents onto the UK Government's mainstream unemployment benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance (thus exposing these claimants to many of the same conditions and job seeking requirements imposed upon other unemployed people). Meanwhile, the UK reports among the lowest lone parent benefit replacement rates of all OECD states (Campbell et al., 2016).

At the UK level, the state's main employability interventions for lone parents are delivered through Jobcentre Plus (the Public Employment Service, which governs benefit conditionality rules and polices compulsory job search activities) and the Work and Health Programme (a recent rebranding of the Work Programme (WP), a contracted-out activation programme targeting all long-term unemployed people and some other job seeker groups). There has been consistent criticism of both elements of the UK employability regime. Research has found that Jobcentre Plus services are often viewed negatively by lone parents (Skills Network, 2014). The introduction of the WP from 2010 "marked a significant increase the marketisation of employment services" (Sainsbury, 2017: 56), and it has been suggested that the contractualism and competition that define the programme limit opportunities for collaboration among providers, and between street-level employability workers and service users (Lindsay et al., 2018). The WP has reported relatively poor job entry outcomes for lone parents – it may be that its payment-by-results model, which rewards contractors for job entries, in fact incentivises the "parking" of such vulnerable groups (Lindsay et al., 2014). Qualitative studies have found that WP services for lone parents are "narrow, focusing predominantly on job search and application processes" (Kozek and Kubisa, 2016: 121). For those entering employment, jobs are often characterised by low pay, poor progression opportunities and a lack of long-term sustainability (Skills Network, 2014).

From 2018, mainstream employability provision in Scotland currently delivered through WP and other UK Government initiatives will be devolved and fall under the responsibilities of the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government has adopted a rather inconsistent approach to the governance and content of employability services. Since 2006, it has funded Local Employability Partnerships – local government-level services that have targeted disadvantaged groups and communities, and which arguably emphasise collaboration and co-governance more than is found within UK Government-funded programmes (Sutherland et al. 2015). The Scottish Government (2016: 4) argues that from 2018 its replacement for DWP programmes will similarly be "designed and delivered in partnership", but early evidence suggests a strong degree of continuity with the UK model's payment-by-results contractualism. Nevertheless, the Scottish Government has instructed providers to encourage voluntary participation, rather than relying on compulsion and the threat of benefit sanctions.

Scotland also provides an interesting context for this research because ideas such as co-production and social innovation are gaining increasing currency in policy debates. Whereas these concepts have little foothold in NPM-dominated governance elsewhere in the UK, Scottish policymakers appear somewhat more comfortable with post-NPM approaches that focus on collaboration. While there is debate as to whether the Scottish Government's rhetoric is always matched by practice, there is evidence of the emergence of co-production-based approaches, especially in healthcare. The Scottish Government also funds local initiatives across a variety of social policy areas through a Social Innovation Fund, designed to "test social innovation ideas and prototypes to find out if they work in practice" [and support] "sustaining and/or scaling up and growing social innovations that work" (Scottish Government, 2017: 2). A number of third sector organisations (TSOs) have similarly sought

to influence the UK Government to focus on social innovation (e.g. NESTA, 2017), and local pilots have been funded to test small-scale projects, although under recent UK-level Conservative administrations social innovation has been somewhat subsumed within a largely vacuous 'Big Society' agenda (Bochel, 2011). As noted above, in Scotland, Scottish Government support for co-production and social innovation in the specific field of employability has been more erratic, but the policy context nevertheless made for an interesting testing ground for local partnerships co-producing services with lone parents.

Making It Work and our research

The research reported here was carried out as part of a commissioned evaluation of MIW. MIW was a programme of intensive, personalised support targeting lone parents facing substantial barriers to employability. The programme received £7m in grant funding from the Big Lottery Fund in Scotland ("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. The aim of the Fund's support for MIW was to engage lone parents voluntarily and assist participants to progress towards employment and other positive family and social outcomes.

MIW delivered services between 2013 and 2017 in five Scottish local government areas: Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire. During that period, 3,115 lone parents were supported by MIW, with approximately 30 per cent entering employment. The programme had a number of notable features:

- governance in the form of local partnerships of public and third sector stakeholders, in an effort to design local provision that was genuinely additional to mainstream services;

- personalised support provided through a keyworker[ii] model, with street-level workers based in local communities managing a small caseload and providing flexible, intensive and sustained support – the quality of the relationship between service user and keyworker was crucial (Parr, 2016);
- a range of services, including personal development (e.g. confidence building, financial capability) and pre-vocational and vocational training;
- transitional funding and other support for lone parents to access childcare;
- signposting to a range of other employability, learning and wellbeing services.

Our research covered all four years of the programme, but the data reported here cover 2013-16. The research involved semi-structured interviews with stakeholders engaged in the design and delivery of MIW. These included project managers, delivery partners and keyworkers. A purposive sampling approach was taken, working with MIW partnership leads to identify relevant contacts. Interviews focused on a range of issues covering the governance, management and content of the MIW programme, including: collaboration between partners and engagement with other employability services; approaches to engaging lone parents and the content of services; the roles and expertise of specific partners; and challenges engaging employers and matching lone parents to appropriate jobs. We conducted 104 stakeholder interviews (34 in 2014; 35 in 2015; 35 in 2016).

Our research also involved semi-structured interviews with lone parents participating in MIW. A purposive, non-randomized sampling frame was utilised here, involving the research team working with partnerships to identify service users at different stages of engagement with MIW and who were willing to participate in the research and available for interview during the fieldwork periods. We conducted ninety MIW service user interviews over three

years (36 in 2014; 34 in 2015; 20 in 2016). Our sample included service users reporting a variety of experiences, and a range of barriers to employability. It included some who had transitioned to work or training and those who continued to face barriers to progression. All but one of the interviewees was female, and they ranged in age from 20 to 47 years. Interviews focused on users' barriers to work, challenges in supporting their families and accessing childcare, and experiences engaging with MIW. We have discussed elsewhere the complex barriers reported by users, reflecting MIW's success in engaging those further from the labour market (Pearson et al., 2017).

FINDINGS

Our findings focus first on evidence of co-governance and co-management as a model for the funding, organisation and management of services with lone parents, before moving on to explore outcomes in relation to co-production and social innovation.

Co-governance and co-management for innovation

As a non-departmental public body, The Fund enjoyed substantial independence in establishing the parameters for funding awards under MIW. Its invitation to tender emphasised the need to evidence a practical plan for collaborative governance that would facilitate partnership-working, and a justification for the inclusion of range of partner organisations. Bidding consortia were required to demonstrate that they had formed inter-disciplinary partnerships that had wide expertise and could deliver services tailored to lone parents' needs.

There is evidence that partnering with the third sector can enhance the quality and reach of employability services (Lindsay et al., 2014), and accordingly TSOs are increasingly seen as key players in facilitating user co-production in social innovation (Windrum et al., 2016). The funder's encouragement of collaboration, indeed co-governance, with the third sector allowed for the inclusion of TSO partners with particular expertise in supporting lone parents, including grassroots charities run by and for lone parents such as Gingerbread (in the Fife partnership area) and One Parent Families Scotland (a national TSO whose local workers played varying roles in different MIW partnerships). Such TSOs brought expert knowledge to partnerships and won credibility among service users.

Rather than relying on payment-by-results contracting, the resources brought by and allocated to MIW partner organisations were governed by relatively flexible partnership memoranda and service level agreements. As we will see below, these formal mechanisms allowed for substantial flexibility in shaping and reshaping services to respond to service users' aspirations and needs. The sharing of grant funding based on consensus also guarded against some of the unintended consequences often reported under payment-by-results contracting, such as unnecessary competition between partners to "claim" job entries, and "creaming and parking", whereby efforts are focused on those closer to the labour market who are more likely to achieve a job outcome, at the expense of those facing more severe barriers. Stakeholders argued that a collaborative approach had allowed for consensus to emerge on strategies to target lone parents facing severe and/or multiple barriers to work.

> *We still go for the clients that are furthest away from the labour market. We've had clients referred to us who are very job ready, who might have fallen out of work within the last six months. We wouldn't take them as a MIW client, we would pass*

> *them on to the job brokerage service* [local employability services providing job matching for those close to the labour market], *who specifically deal with just putting someone straight back into work. That's not what we see our job as being.*
>
> Lead Partner, South Lanarkshire, 2015

The discussion above suggests that some of the defining features of successful social innovation were present in MIW. Supported by collaborative governance and flexible grant-based funding, MIW partners were able to establish new ways of working, and build coalitions of action based on a consensus on the need for innovative solutions; by combining resources and expertise from a diverse group of stakeholders, MIW established new multilateral networks of public and third sector actors (Ewert and Evers, 2014).

There is evidence that this collaborative governance model facilitated the co-management of innovative, street-level services. Mainstream employability programmes in the UK increasingly focus on standardised work-first provision (Considine et al., 2017), often marginalising (especially TSO) providers who offer a broader range of tailored services (Heins and Bennett, 2016). In contrast, the co-governance arrangements that bound stakeholders together within MIW partnerships also informed a collaborative approach to the co-management and delivery of multifaceted services on the ground. Our research with service users found that many had chosen to engage with more than one of the different services provided by a range of MIW partners, including, for example: keyworker support; confidence and self-efficacy-building activities; vocational training; wellbeing advice; debt management; work experience placements; and volunteering. So, MIW appears to have offered the "tailored, responsive services… rather than one-size-fits-all standardisation" that has been identified as indicative of employability programmes defined by social innovation

(Ewert and Evers, 2014: 428). MIW partnerships also provided and/or signposted lone parents to childcare during employability-focused activities and once in work. Previous studies of employability initiatives that have delivered social innovation and empowered parents note the importance of the employability-childcare nexus and the value of "linking access to jobs and day care… something especially important for single parent families" (Evers and Ewert, 2015: 115).

Our interviews with stakeholders found a commitment to managing services collaboratively so that users experienced a seamless, joined-up offer. This was achieved through co-location of employees from different organisations, team-building and shared learning sessions, regular case meetings, and (as highlighted above) recognition of each other's expertise and added value formed during gradual processes of partnership formation and service co-design. Our research with lone parents suggested that partners were largely successful in communicating that a wide range of services were available (Pearson et al., 2017). MIW's flexible funding and collaborative governance empowered managers, keyworkers and service users to invest time and effort in building joined-up services and ensured that there was freedom to adapt the programme to meet lone parents' needs. This flexible approach appears to have been understood by delivery partners, who commended the funder for trusting partnerships to develop services in collaboration with lone parents.

> *…If you need something to change, it changes, it happens. They* [MIW leadership team] *always are constantly asking for feedback from us and from clients and, if things don't work, we don't do them again. We do something different. We make changes. So, if I've got a group of clients, I'll say, "What do you want?" and I'll go*

back to my manager. And these things have been put in place as a result of that, so I feel quite confident.

MIW Keyworker, South Lanarkshire, 2015

The co-management of collaborative street-level services in this case appears to have delivered the sort of provision sought by policymakers promoting social innovation – these services combined knowledge and resources from different stakeholders to build effective, collaborative ways of working and were flexible enough to respond to the changing situations and aspirations of service users (Evers and Ewert, 2015).

Street-level co-production as a route to social innovation?

Our research with MIW stakeholders and users also focused on the co-production of services. First, lone parents engaging with the programme consistently spoke of a sense of empowerment and control over their employability journeys. Whereas many had previously felt pressured – and sometimes even intimidated or humiliated – when engaging with Jobcentre Plus and/or compulsory activation (Davies, 2012), MIW encouraged participants to make choices about the services that they received, the pace of their progress towards paid employment, and the type of work or other activity that was to be their final destination. Lone parents valued the absence of any sense of stigma or judgement, and consistently referred to how street-level keyworkers supported them to make informed choices.

I didn't really have that many high hopes, to be honest… but she [MIW keyworker] *made me feel at ease straight away. There's like, no judgment whatsoever. She just wants to help you. And it was all about trying to build my confidence up and everything and speaking about what would be the best type of job for me. And what*

would fit me better and it was always, "Don't go for something that you don't think would suit you. Do something that you know that you can do".

Service User, Edinburgh, 2015

Evers and Ewert's (2015) research on social innovation and employability services pointed to the importance of avoiding stigmatisation if service users are to be engaged as active collaborators in co-producing positive outcomes. Clearly, this has proved problematic in the context of mainstream work-first activation in the UK, where lone parents engaging with compulsory Jobcentre Plus and WP services sometimes report "being treated in a way that made them feel like a non-person" (Skills Network, 2014: 20). In contrast, in this case the sense of choice and empowerment reported by service users facilitated the co-production of their progress towards employability. Service users volunteered numerous practical examples of how their choices, preferences or ideas had helped to shape both their own employability journeys and wider programme content.

The relationship between lone parents and street-level keyworkers was central to their shared experiences of co-production and the innovative, personalised employability journeys described by service users. Of course, claims to deliver "personal adviser" support in street-level engagements are ubiquitous in employability programmes, including under work-first activation (Van Berkel, 2017), although WP providers have been criticised as offering their staff little scope to offer genuinely tailored services (Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016). In this case, MIW keyworkers provided intensive support, assisted by a funding model that meant that caseloads were considerably lower than would normally be reported by WP advisers (Considine et al., 2017). It has been suggested that effective social innovation can involve the establishment of "new professional roles that combine previously fragmented knowledge"

delivered through mentors "well connected and trusted in their own communities" (Evers and Ewert, 2015: 114), and this was a defining feature of MIW keyworker services. As noted above, keyworkers were given sufficient resources and autonomy to connect lone parents with a range of services, and networked with other public and third sector stakeholders in order both to recruit and support service users. Many keyworkers lived in the (often disadvantaged) communities that they served, and had a background in community work and/or activism. The central role played by TSOs in delivering MIW (facilitated by co-governance and co-management arrangements) ensured that grassroots organisations and their workers were able to build upon their credibility and trust within local communities. Other keyworkers had worked previously on the WP and other UK Government-funded programmes, sometimes noting the contrast between their prior experience of imposing these forms of compulsory work-first activation with the genuine personalisation offered by MIW.

> *I've never actually worked on a project where I felt like I did make such a difference… I worked for… four years on Work Programme and FND* [Flexible New Deal]. *FND was slightly more flexible, but still big contracts, big companies. You were just a body and a number and processing, whereas this is so much more personal and… the numbers aren't so big and so vast that you are making that difference to each individual.*
>
> MIW Keyworker, South Lanarkshire, 2015

We should, of course, acknowledge that the choices open to MIW service users were bounded by: the resources and networks available to keyworkers; the availability of local learning, wellbeing and employability services; lone parents' caring and other responsibilities; and (for those seeking to enter work) labour market conditions. Nevertheless,

as noted above, service users described engaging with a combination of different support services, again suggesting a measure of choice and personalisation. Crucially, lone parents felt that they were "in control".

A final theme from the social innovation literature to emerge from our research relates to the benefits associated with measures that "establish coalitions of action" and "give voice to communities and groups" (Ewert and Evers, 2014: 428). Put simply, if co-produced employability services can activate, support and strengthen networks among user communities, then broader social benefits may accrue. Lone parents and keyworkers reported a number of examples of social network-building. Social isolation was common among service users when first engaging with MIW, and growing mutual support networks was a key benefit reported by many. MIW invested heavily in engagement activities to reach out to lone parents, and many described a journey from social isolation to engagement with support networks, personal empowerment, and then progress towards employment.

> *I was really isolated and I was quite down and stuff, but now I just feel like... I feel like I've got a purpose. I felt like before I was just existing and now I'm living. I'm going to work, and my daughter's at nursery, and I'm getting new friends especially through Making It Work, because I met all the people there and I'm still in contact with them. I'm out doing things, and I'm off benefits… I'm providing for my daughter and I'm going out working. I'm getting money because I'm working for it, and even that just makes such a difference. It makes me feel so much better.*
>
> Service User, South Lanarkshire, 2016

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A number of local MIW projects established group-based, employability-building activities in a specific attempt to strengthen mutual support networks. As a direct result, there were examples of new community-based collaborations (such as MIW parents working together to form their own childcare "play-group" networks), community activism and volunteering by MIW participants, increased use of local facilities such as community centres and nurseries, and the growth of informal networks.

> *The social networks that are being formed, and the way that you see someone say: "Well, I'll go and pick up your little one, if you want, and I'll drop them off…" I think that's a huge part of the groupwork… they're getting to know each other. They live in the same area. They're befriending each other, and they're supporting each other.*
> MIW Keyworker, Edinburgh, 2016

Our analysis suggests that co-production between keyworkers and service users was a defining feature of MIW, facilitated by collaborative funding and organisational structures that allowed for the co-governance and co-management of innovative local services. Many of the benefits and outcomes of social innovation previously identified by Ewert and Evers (2014) and others also appeared to be present. We have acknowledged elsewhere that MIW faced substantial challenges in achieving its objectives: the jobs entered by many lone parents were relatively low-paid; there remained problems in accessing affordable and appropriate childcare; and gaps in local services meant that signposting options (for example to mental health services) were sometimes limited (Pearson et al., 2017). Local MIW partnerships also faced challenges in designing programmes that responded to the diverse needs of this group, and in managing the demands on keyworker resources. Nevertheless, service users described an experience that was defined by empowerment and the opportunity to co-produce. Their

reflections, and our analysis, provide a sharp contrast with commonly reported experiences of compulsory work-first activation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Governments in the UK and other liberal welfare states have sought to justify the extension of conditionality and compulsion in welfare services by claiming that vulnerable groups such as lone parents have access to personalised employability support delivered through tailored street-level engagement. Yet the evidence suggests that compulsory work-first activation, with participation demanded under the threat of impoverishing benefit sanctions, has failed to respond to the needs of lone parents, while doing considerable harm to the wellbeing of many (Campbell et al., 2016). Our research concerns a limited number of geographies and a highly specific user group. There may also be sample bias associated with engaging service users who volunteered to report their experiences, although the positive reports outlined above included testimony from lone parents who continued to face significant challenges to labour market participation as well as those who had made good progress and/or transitioned into work.

Nevertheless, our research shows that alternatives to contractualised work-first activation are possible. MIW was defined by co-production and delivered a range of beneficial social outcomes. These positive outcomes were facilitated by processes of co-governance and co-management. The funder awarded grants that provided local partnerships with financial stability through five year funding agreements and up-front resources to focus on partnership-formation and user engagement – such funding models are likely to be important given that "co-production may require community capacity building, which takes time, effort and

requires resources" (Löffler and Bovaird, 2018: 418). MIW's collaborative governance and delivery structures, with a strong co-leadership role for TSOs as a requirement, produced services that were able to draw on the complementary expertise and credibility of a diverse range of partners.

Crucially, these processes of co-governance and co-management provided the context for co-production between MIW's stakeholders and service users, and the emergence of a number of distinctive outcomes that connect with previous studies of social innovation in the field of employability (Ewert and Evers, 2014). For example, MIW delivered social benefit by offering co-produced, tailored services that were responsive to lone parents' changing life situations. The programme's flexible funding and collaborative approach facilitated new coalitions of action at the local level, strengthening social networks and solidarity among community stakeholders and lone parents. Street-level keyworkers were effective in joining-up fragmented knowledge and resources, strengthening access to services within communities and among a user group not well served by existing public services (Evers and Ewert, 2015). And the process of co-production empowered lone parents to make choices, bring their assets to bear on collaborative activities, and shape both their own employability journeys and wider MIW services.

Despite this positive evidence, building on the lessons of programmes like MIW may prove challenging. Social innovation is impossible where the right to "act, organise or provide differently" is denied (Evers and Ewert, 2015: 120). The dominance of NPM governance legacies within the UK public management regime (which, despite political devolution and some distinctive features of a so-called "Scottish Approach" to employability, also infect policymaking in Scotland) mean that norms around centralised state control and

privatised/contractualised service delivery have proved difficult to challenge (Lindsay et al., 2017). Policymakers sometimes also claim to be unconvinced as to the efficiency and scalability of co-produced social innovations. Indeed, much of the debate on lessons from social innovation for public policy has been "restricted to matters of scaling up small-scale innovations" (Ewert and Evers, 2014: 424), and we have noted above that scalability is a key priority for Scottish policymakers interested in co-production and social innovation (Scottish Government, 2017). Yet, there is an inherent tension between the added value of locally responsive, co-produced social innovations and governments' desire for evidence of scalability. As Bovaird and Löffler (2016: 162) note, social innovations at the local level "are intrinsically less prone to capture by professionals or experts". Economies of scope rather than scale should be the focus of efforts to transfer lessons from co-produced social innovations. Different approaches need to be tailored to the needs and assets of user groups and communities (Löffler and Bovaird, 2018), so policy transfer should focus on identifying effective principles that support innovation in public services, but which can be applied flexibly in response to local circumstances.

There are viable alternatives to the NPM and work-first norms that have dominated the governance of activation and street-level employability practice in the UK and beyond. Public funders and policymakers can choose to support, and indeed to demand, collaborative approaches that deliver innovative street-level interventions. A commitment to co-production can empower, and draw on the assets of, excluded social groups such as lone parents. Policymakers who are serious about addressing "wicked" problems through new, innovative solutions would do well to learn from local experiments rooted in ideas of co-production and social innovation – collaborative processes that bring about new ways of working to deliver broad social benefit.

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[i] The Scottish Government is the devolved administration of Scotland, one of the constituent nations of the UK. Since the establishment of a Scottish Parliament in 1999 the parliament has legislative competence, and the Scottish Government has implemented policy, in a number of areas of social policy, including health and education. Employability and welfare legislation and policies have been largely reserved (retained) by the central UK Government (with the exception of some complementary local anti-poverty and employability initiatives supported by the Scottish Government). From 2018, further devolution will see the control of some welfare policies (although not the main unemployment benefits) and all employability/activation budgets become the responsibility of the Scottish Government.

[ii] Throughout this article we have used the term keyworker to refer to street-level workers performing these roles. A variety of terms were used by MIW partnerships to describe these functions including development workers, support workers and keyworkers.