

Is community support always the answer?

Placing all our eggs in the basket of community support could be a risky enterprise for people who need skilled help, says Andrew Holman who recently attended Paradigm's provocatively titled conference:

'Should we ban brokerage?'

Should we ban brokerage? A provocative little title for Paradigm's recent conference in London. It's taken from the title of a new pamphlet of the same name by Simon Duffy, ex-head of In Control, and Kate Fulton, one of Paradigm's senior consultants.

We are living in challenging times and as conference attendances are getting smaller I was keen to see if this was just an attempt by the organisers to get more people to shell out for a conference seat or whether it offered some new moves we should all be addressing.

Community Living has reported with interest the rocky ride of brokerage over the years since its inception in British Columbia, Canada in the 1970s. This stemmed from the dissatisfaction of parents of children with learning difficulties who managed to grasp the opportunity of using institutional funding to buy very different services with very different styled help and very positive results.

As ever, we are suckers for listening to people who manage to combine a good holiday in far flung places with some research into a new way of working that will change the world and thus brokerage was brought to the UK. It all seemed to make perfect sense – a worker who was independent from services, able to spend time really listening to what people wanted and needed from their support and who was free to purchase a service.

And this at a price that was cheaper than the previous institute's costs. How could it possibly go wrong? Working with the campaigning organisation Values Into Action, I presented these ideas at a conference in Bristol in the 80s only to be challenged by a group of physically disabled protestors keen to know why on earth a new system had to be created.

As they saw it, a new layer of non-disabled professionals was unnecessary. It was easy to argue the case for people who were less able to talk for themselves, less able to buy their own services and who needed help and advice on these matters – indeed, they were the very people who were banned from joining some

of those early independent living centres by disabled people fed up with being labelled 'stupid'. That was, of course, before Direct Payments became available. Riding out such criticism were VIA's Steve Dowson and the late David Brandon, *Community Living's* original editor. Following a trip to Canada looking at different brokerage schemes, David wrote extensively on the subject in this magazine.

Other conferences followed with presentations by Canadian pioneers, such as parent Jo Dickey and broker Brian Salisbury. In 1989 David reminded us that: "Brokerage is the technical arm of an autonomous planning mechanism that is community based and consumer controlled... the second component is the personal network which consists of the family and friends of the individual using the service... the final component is individualised funding" {Brandon, 1989(i)}.

Sill lacking were examples of good brokerage projects in the UK. Perhaps this was not surprising with the prerequisite of freed up funding and the Direct Payments Act still a little way off. We had one brokerage firm doing some sterling work up in Aberdeen, but needed more, and the talk from Steven Rose at the conference reminded us of one he had established in the early 90s with Simon Duffy.

This small two-person service in the London Borough of Southwark, based at Choice Support, worked with people who had been resettled from the large London hospital closures and offered some innovative and successful alternatives for people.

Lack of clarity

Yet the idea still didn't really gain ground – there was something missing. Perhaps it was a lack of clarity? We all like something clear and simple that we can get our heads around, yet Dowson's writing and brokerage model became more and more complex. Brandon commented in this journal, "Like the Holy Grail, pure brokerage doesn't actually exist anywhere, neither could nor should it. I didn't see one 'whole' example anywhere in my eleven thousand mile trip"

{Brandon, 1989 (ii)}.

David went on to say, rather prophetically, "Where brokerage is and whether it is being done right is of no great importance. It will be adulterated, exploited and misused just like normalisation, citizen advocacy and individual programme planning". Not surprisingly then brokerage went into another decline for the next few years. Until, that is, it became clear that some people with learning difficulties

needed good help and support in arranging the more complex support packages made possible by 'in Control', Individualised Budgets and Personalisation. It is no coincidence that the main speaker at this conference, Simon Duffy, was involved in this resurrection in the early 2000s and our organisers, Paradigm, offered training on the subject.

We heard how brokerage was making a comeback and was included in various policy documents, despite the lack of clarity. Quietly swimming with the tide at this time was work in Essex. As leaders in the Direct Payments movement they were also providing a brokerage service that, significantly, was cross client group. Pilot programmes were established in Essex and other areas to test models further. Essex had some great successes, but managed to end in what seemed like disarray as various internal power struggles and political dynamics took hold.

At the conference, Duffy made it clear that brokers, by which he means independent professional brokers, were not an essential part of the self directed support model. I'm not sure that anyone has ever said otherwise, although he fears independent professional brokerage "could become a dominant model of support".

He is also concerned about confusion over the term, yet I believe that with the work done by people such as the National Brokerage Network we are starting to gain clarity about the range of activities that can be included under the term brokerage. Personally, I have found the Network's analogy with the range of activities that can be included under the term 'advocacy' most helpful.

Interestingly, this seemed to be where the day ended. Most people agreed that some people with their own budgets may sometimes want and need help and support to sort out a service. This could range from the provision of information, peer or community support to professional brokerage advice. What is clear is that many of the examples I have heard about or seen in practice have arisen from having a skilled person to facilitate the process in one way or another.

Not all of us, of course, live near such a resource and I was left empathising with the gentleman who had seen the title of the conference and worried whether he was at risk of losing the person who had turned his life around. Placing all of our eggs in the basket of community support could be a risky enterprise for people who need skilled help.

For some people, an independent professional broker will be just the job.

References

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