

Qualitative Study into the Role of Partnerships in Mitigating Social Security Changes



The Scottish Government funds bureaux across Scotland to support clients in mitigating the impact of Social Security changes by developing outreach and working in partnership with other organisations to reach out to individuals who may otherwise be unaware of or have difficulty in accessing the bureau service.

Research was commissioned to increase understanding of:

- The main drivers of effective partnerships between bureaux and other organisations in reaching out to individuals
- The benefits to the organisations involved
- The added-value for clients supported.

The study also set out to capture the impact on individuals and the bureaux as a result of the changes to social security benefits and the roll out of Universal Credit.

This qualitative study was carried out by Dr Briega Nugent between November 2016 and February 2017. Interviews were carried out with:

- Ten bureaux managers: four urban, four rural and two 'mixed' bureaux
- Nine individuals from eight partner organisations
- Eight clients who work with bureaux and a partner agency, seven of whom were from a suicide prevention service.

Key findings from interviews with Bureaux Managers

Factors needed and added value of building effective partnerships

Bureaux are passionate about what they do and care about the communities they support.

It is important to invest time, provide outreach and link up with like-minded and motivated organisations that put clients first.

Partnerships are vital for clients to get the best support - good relationships with other services enable bureaux to get help quickly on the behalf of clients.

"This way of working has not come about by chance but a lot of work. We have recognised over the years that this leads to the best outcomes. There are occasions that we challenge other organisations. We have learned that partnership working is for the benefit of clients."

Consciously creating and widening connections

Managers create connections with other services by going to meetings, attending forums, conferences, events, using social media and where they had extra office space, creating community hubs.

Managers were connecting with a wider range of agencies and building relationships with those that previously would not have been considered, for example, bank managers to access those who may have issues with debt.

Outreach services were essential to access clients who are particularly vulnerable, and a vital way of making new partnerships and subsequently opening up more avenues to funding.

Differences in rural and urban Areas

Developing relationships in rural areas could take more time because of the distance between services; in some rural areas there was a more of a culture of partnership working.

Where there was a co-location, services felt that this made working together easier.

The impact of changes to Social Security

The changes have resulted in bureaux being inundated and confronted with more complicated cases and people in acute crisis. The rise in appeals has generated a significant amount of work, raising questions about the original decision-making processes.

The system was felt to not be fit for purpose, with the helpline having people waiting too long and costing money, and the move to the electronic system without adequate preparation, leaving those digitally illiterate or excluded exceptionally vulnerable to being 'lost' from all systems.

"The migration from DLA to PIP and the number of decisions that need to be challenged poses big questions. We have lots more appeals. Also lots of people who fail the work capability allowance and this poses problems."

Universal Credit, with the six week payment gap, was deemed to be ill thought out. The majority of people were now being paid less, and with the move to the electronic system, not accessible to all.

"You can get an advance but then have to pay that back. So you are always running to catch up. UC replaces some benefits and people have to apply online. There are no letters sent anymore, they need to access their journal online. We don't have access. The client has to share that with us. This is the new regime to empower clients to manage their own affairs and in the real world this is not happening."

Other gaps noted included the lack of facility to upload information so that people had to attend the Job Centre, a particular issue for those living rurally. Also, permission to access records is becoming more onerous and a significant barrier to bureaux providing support. Problems were identified in terms of decision making, whereby someone who was 'sick' could still be required to go to their work group. Time limits meant that applications had to be restarted anew if appointments had not taken place within a week.

All of these changes were not only challenging for clients, but had already lead to volunteers leaving the service, intimidated by what they were now expected to do.

Future challenges from the Manager's perspective

The service is overwhelmed and is needed more now than ever, not only because of the specialised knowledge.

"The last branch in town"

The loss of statutory support and services across Scotland means that bureaux are increasingly dealing with people in crisis, and in particular with mental health issues, who have nowhere else to turn.

Challenges for service provision

- Need for appropriate training;
- Increasing feelings of dissatisfaction as a result of changes in the benefits system;
- Early retirement increasingly unlikely for future generations, leading to challenges in recruitment;
- Bureaux could be more 'digitally switched on', by for example offering Skype appointments and referring people on to services digitally;
- There should be greater public awareness of the breadth of support bureaux offer.

Findings from interviews with partner organisations

Driving factors to creating partnerships

Most importantly, that staff and volunteers genuinely care and want to make a difference. By working together this was made more possible. A partnership with bureaux enables provision of a more holistic service. Partners felt more reassured about the most vulnerable when referring them on.

“I think bureaux staff actually care about what they are doing and this makes the material difference. It is not just being involved because they have to...members have spoken volumes about how well they have been treated by the bureau. The consideration of care they bring to this makes the difference, the members really feel as though they matter, are being listened to and being heard.”

What is needed?

For effective partnerships time, funding and good communication are vital.

Added Value

Bureaux provide a highly specialised and increasingly needed service, with outreach work really valued. By working together, not only could clients get the best support but also opportunities for funding and more innovative ideas were likely to come to fruition. Bureaux are both independent and national in the way that the other services were not, and they were therefore seen as an important contributor to policy, practice and holding other services to account.

Changes to social security benefits had generated concerns for all involved and they were worried about the potential cuts to services in the future. Bureaux could help to meet the increasing demand placed on services partners provide.

Findings from interviews with clients

Impact

For all clients interviewed, the impact of the support received from bureaux had been profound, with all saying that it had meant that they were no longer suicidal; highlighting that the stress created by debt or financial problems can be devastating. In all eight cases, the situations had been resolved but support was being given on an ongoing basis in response to the changes in the system. Bureaux are regarded as experts in this field and the workers trusted and relied upon.

“I think the most important thing for me with the bureau is having someone who I trust to help me to deal with things. They can also refer you on to who can help. They give you advice on all things.”

Added Value of Partnerships

Six clients had come to the bureau through the outreach offered within the local community and two others referred through another service, thus highlighting the importance of bureaux working in partnership with other organisations and especially in offering outreach within local communities.

“I might have made the journey into the office but it was easier. The centre is closer and a safe space for me, whereas, if you have never been to a bureau, it is a strange place. At that point, there weren't many places where I felt comfortable and secure. It was a known space for me. I think I was more likely to open up to someone there.”

Conclusions

This small study highlights the importance of partnership working and the outreach service from the views of managers, partner organisations and clients. Through working with other services, bureaux are able to combine their expert knowledge and tacit knowledge in how to support clients with other specialised services, and in doing so, not only have a greater reach but more positive impact on individuals and communities.

Managers are acutely aware of the benefits and as well as making connections at events, were also using social media and offering office space to be used by other services and the community. As a result of these networks, not only could clients benefit but it also meant that the agencies had more access to funding. There were no notable differences in how bureaux made connections or viewed connections, but it was accepted that because of the distances between agencies, it was more

challenging in rural areas to make initial contacts.

Bureaux have made a conscious effort to get to know more about the agencies they work with and have a named contact, especially within the local Job Centres and DWP. These informal and formal connections mean that managers can try to remain ahead of the changes and this is all for the benefit of those they support.

The changes to social security have meant that bureaux have more people coming to them now than ever and with more complicated cases, in increasingly acute crisis. Universal Credit is regarded as part of a confusing and ever changing system that is stressful, with many gaps. Those digitally excluded, digitally illiterate and most vulnerable are at a very high risk of slipping through the gaps and managers and organisations alike were worried for the future and particularly with the cuts expected to services.

Case Study

Dan had been a manual labourer all his life, until an accident at work left him unable to work. He became depressed, having gone from being the main breadwinner to not being able to get around without help. Over only eight weeks he was in arrears with his rent and had been sent an eviction notice. Dan attempted suicide and as a result of this came in contact with mental health support and the 'men's service' in the community. Through the bureau outreach, Dan made contact with an adviser.

The adviser was able to help Dan to get his benefits in place, and his rent arrears and bills managed. Dan looks back on this time and believes that without the adviser he may have attempted suicide again and the relief of having his financial situation in order was indescribable. For someone who had never had debt, this unknown situation had been unbearable. Dan's condition is chronic and he has to go to medical assessments every few months. At his last assessment they put him in the wrong group and he was able to go to the adviser to get help resolve this.

Dan finds it difficult to speak to people and said that when he became disabled he thought of himself as worthless, and having people like the adviser helps him to realise his self-worth and build self-belief. He has another medical assessment within the next few weeks and the adviser is supporting him to link up with an advocate who can go with him on the day, as well as helping him with the paperwork. Dan finds it hard to complain and tell the full truth of the extent of his condition, so the adviser plays a key role in helping him to access what he is entitled to.