



# Now It's Personal

## Personal advisers and the new public service workforce

Executive Summary

By Clare McNeil

June 2009

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This paper was first published in June 2009. © ippr 2009

## About the author

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## Acknowledgements

ippr would like to thank the Learning and Skills Council, Pinnacle psg, Shaw Trust and learndirect for their generous financial support of this project.

Thanks to Sophie Moullin for input on previous drafts and to Lucia Durante. The author would also like to thank the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) Secretariat for their interest and assistance and Carey Oppenheim, Dalia Ben-Galim, Isabel Burton, Kayte Lawton, Tony Dolphin, Georgina Kyriacou, Mike Kenny, Chris Hodson (Pinnacle psg), David Massey (UK Commission for Employment and Skills) and Gary Watson (Jobcentre Plus).

## Now It's Personal: Executive Summary

### Background

The recession has led to a 90 per cent increase in the numbers of people 'signing on' to receive benefits, meaning more people are receiving back-to-work support from a personal adviser than at any point since the creation of Jobcentre Plus in 2002.

Providing tailored one-to-one support to help people back into work has been central to the UK Government's reform of the welfare system over the past decade. The goal of 'personalised support for everyone' is a key element of new reforms to the system.

The 20,000 personal advisers working across the welfare-to-work sector are largely responsible for the success of this goal through the one-to-one support they provide on the frontline of the welfare system. Personal advisers are also pivotal to achieving related goals such as reaching the 2020 target to end child poverty, which depends on higher rates of employment among parents.

Despite the tightening of public finances, employment programmes have received extra investment from the Government in the past year to tackle the rapid upsurge in unemployment since the recession began. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was allocated £1.7 billion in the recent Budget, in part to increase its network of Jobcentre Plus personal advisers.

*Now It's Personal* argues that a fresh examination is needed of the role of personal advisers in the welfare system. Current policy is failing too often in its intention of providing personalised back-to-work support and significant 'up-skilling' of the adviser workforce is needed for more effective services.

### 'Up-skilling' personal advisers in the welfare system

This report is based on focus groups with service users, in-depth interviews with advisers, surveys of personal advisers and employment providers and a review of the literature. It examines promising innovations in adviser practice, training and development in the UK and internationally. It argues for three key areas of reform for a future strengthened workforce, better equipped for a responsive and personalised welfare system.

- The use of more innovative approaches to training and workforce development to 'up-skill' the adviser workforce
- An ambitious agenda for career progression and professional development to encourage a more professional and skilled cadre of personal advisers
- A framework which better supports adviser practice in the context of greater discretion and more flexibility as well as wider policy developments.

### Key findings

#### The impact of the recession

New quantitative analysis is presented to show changes to the ratio of Jobcentre Plus personal advisers to the number of interviews they conduct since the recession began.

- In early 2008 before the full impact of the recession, there was a ratio of almost 40 interviews a month per Jobcentre Plus adviser for claimants of Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA)
- In February this year this rose to 65 as the number of benefit claimants surged
- June 2009 is expected to see a peak of just over 70 interviews a month per adviser as the cumulative effect of growing long-term unemployment is felt

- This is expected to ease in early 2010 to 50, but based on a variant projection showing a higher path for unemployment, it could still be as high as just over 60 interviews a month per adviser.

To maintain pre-recession levels of personal support by Jobcentre Plus, an additional 3,000–5,600 full-time equivalent (FTE) personal advisers need to be recruited, which would be a 30–60 per cent increase in the number of advisers currently in place. With interview rates likely to peak this month (June 2009), it may already be too late to meet a significant amount of additional demand caused by the recession.

### **Personal support in the welfare system**

Our research shows that although there were some excellent experiences of individual advisers, on the whole ippr's focus group participants did not feel advisers provided them with sufficient help or were able to 'push' them in the right direction and they described a lack of relevant support. Tasks involved in Jobseeker's Allowance interviews left some service users feeling daunted, with little time left for diagnosing need and job search assistance. Almost half of advisers surveyed (47 per cent) said they did not have as much time as they would like to support their clients. Overall, what matters to citizens – being treated with respect and given relevant advice and guidance to find work – is not available consistently enough.

### **Qualifications and career progression**

There is no minimum industry-wide qualification for employment advisers, with employment providers recruiting more on the basis of experience and skills-fit. There is evidence, however, that the absence of a professional qualification risks reducing the overall level of quality of job brokerage undermining its status as a sector.

Half (49 per cent) of advisers surveyed did not feel there were many opportunities for them to progress into a role with more responsibility or (54 per cent) to a better paying job. There was evidence that relatively low pay resulted in a loss of skilled staff and high staff turnover, with a negative impact on continuity of support for clients.

### **Training for personal advisers**

The most common forms of training for advisers were one to two weeks of in-house training and/or staff shadowing. Some private and voluntary sector providers favoured practical and experiential approaches as a way of developing adviser interviewing skills. There was also evidence that new training techniques such as Cognitive Behavioural Interviewing technique can encourage a more open and productive dialogue between adviser and client, enabling discussions to move onto employment-related goals more quickly. A major gap was in specialist training with half of advisers reporting not receiving adequate training in childcare, homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse or mental health problems.

### **Wider systems change**

A key challenge facing the welfare system is the unequal nature of support provided to those from disadvantaged groups and for whom the impact of the recession is likely to be hardest. Localised networks of outreach support are proven to be effective in reaching those furthest from the labour market but current provision of outreach is patchy. One recent promising scheme, the Partner Outreach for Ethnic Minorities programme (POEM), was abandoned by Jobcentre Plus, despite having outperformed other welfare-to-work programmes within its first year.

The recession presents opportunities to shape a more assertive approach to outreach at a local level. Local partnerships are being set up in the recession as employment support

becomes a higher priority for a range of organisations to link into. These partnerships present opportunities to form longer-term arrangements to bring together provision of support at a local level.

Finally, there has been a proliferation of advisory roles, described here as forming part of a growing adviser workforce. Employment advisers are just one of a number of adviser roles across public services such as health advisers, family support workers, legal advisers and debt advisers which are increasingly converging in community settings. Integrating adviser roles more closely offers opportunities for improving the quality of advice through shared training and development as well as the potential to generate cost savings as public spending is cut.

## Recommendations

### 1. Impact of the recession

- To maintain pre-recession levels of personal support by Jobcentre Plus, between 3,000 and 5,600 additional full-time equivalent personal advisers need to be in place to meet the demand caused by higher unemployment as soon as possible.
- The personal adviser role should adapt to reflect evidence showing the negative impact the transition to unemployment has in the first six months by using new group sessions and targeted support at three months and onwards to signpost to relevant counselling support.

### 2. Workforce development

- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should publish a comprehensive workforce development plan setting out steps for developing training and professional development opportunities for a more skilled adviser workforce. This should include extending the use of 'training coaches' for a more flexible and interactive training system and trialling new training techniques such as Cognitive Behavioural Interviewing to evaluate their impact on client engagement and labour market outcomes.
- Advisers across all public employment services should be given better training in specialist areas such as mental health and drug and alcohol misuse to improve confidence and skills in diagnosing the needs of a wider range of groups for earlier and more effectively targeted support.
- A best practice exchange should be set up to broker information and the sharing of best practice and innovation across sectors bringing together prime subcontractors, public sector and voluntary sector organisations and service user groups. A hub set up by ippr as part of the *Now It's Personal* project could act as a catalyst for a more permanent exchange.

### 3. Professional development

- The adoption of a core qualification for advisers should be supported by DWP, such as a newly developed Vocational Related Qualification (VRQ) in Job Brokerage, to standardise practice across providers. This would ensure that key core competencies needed for employment advisers are better recognised. Existing Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) qualifications should be reviewed to see if these qualifications are meeting the needs of advisers and employers.
- Debate is needed within the welfare-to-work sector about how clearer progression routes can be built for advisers to improve staff motivation, performance and retention. A 'natural progression' approach building on entry-level adviser roles and leading up to 'advanced practitioner' roles is proposed in this report as a starting point for this.

#### 4. Welfare reform and a framework for adviser practice

- Comprehensive criteria and guidance should be issued to advisers and training provided on how to identify claimants for mandatory fast-tracking into specialist support in the JSA regime. Claimants should also be given clear information in interviews to assess whether they are eligible for voluntary early entry to the Flexible New Deal.
- The additional support from a personal adviser at Stages 2 and 3 of the JSA regime should be ring-fenced to ensure that it is not squeezed out as a result of extra pressure on services.
- Better use of Job Search Review staff knowledge of claimants should be made through greater joint working between Job Search Review staff and personal advisers. This would improve understanding of clients' progress and ensure additional support is targeted at those claimants who need it most, reducing the likelihood of deadweight costs.
- Greater opportunities for advisers to benefit from reflective practice through case conferences or peer support should be introduced where not already available.
- To counterbalance increases in adviser discretion, structures should be put in place to ensure that staff are supervised against outcome targets and that they have the opportunity to discuss complex cases with managers or peers as part of a more structured approach to case management.

#### 5. Wider systems change

- The challenge of growing long-term unemployment should be used as an opportunity to reach out further to engage with disadvantaged groups to prevent entrenched worklessness. A more assertive and coherent national policy of outreach should provide power for local Jobcentres to set up localised networks to broker support by linking up with partners in the community.

### Conclusion

Personalised employment programmes are the most effective, including cost effective, way of providing active employment support. They are also highly dependent on a proactive and motivated adviser workforce. Over the next couple of years, tackling unemployment will arguably be one of the greatest challenges the country faces. There are now more compelling reasons than ever to invest in high quality strategies to train and retain skilled staff and ensure that advisers can play their vital role in supporting people back into work.

Findings from this paper will develop and evolve as a result of working with delivery partners in the next phase of the *Now It's Personal* project, a programme of action research. With partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors, this will test different aspects of the adviser role through a series of demonstration trials. A best practice 'hub' will form the centre of a research network, which will take forward some of the issues raised in this paper. A final report will be published in 2010.