

Dominic Williamson

Dominic Williamson is the Chief Executive of Revolving Doors Agency. Dominic was Director of Policy, Practice and Campaigns at Homeless Link for four and a half years before joining the Revolving Doors Agency and before that held positions with Providence Row Housing Association (PRHA), Shelter, St Mungos, National Homeless Alliance and as a human rights observer in Guatemala. He has a special interest in services for people with complex needs and, prior to joining Homeless Link, spent three years as manager of PRHA's Hackney Road Project, a hostel for men and women with high support needs around drug and alcohol use. In 2008 he worked on secondment at Communities and Local Government, advising on the national strategy to tackle rough sleeping. He also has a special interest in service user engagement and served as a board member and Chair of Groundswell.



Will Reform Deliver Better Services for People with Multiple Needs?

Introduction

As we face the reality of deep and sustained cuts in public spending, what are the prospects for public service reform? This is a question that will affect everyone in some shape or form. However, my particular concern is for the many thousands of men and women with multiple needs, including poor mental health, who are in contact with the criminal justice system – what we term the ‘revolving doors group’. This essay considers how this group experiences public services, and how their need for – and access to – support has changed over the past decade. It also considers the extent to which any progress made is likely to be sustained in the coming decade, looking particularly at the impact of deficit reduction, the pressure for local devolution, and other specific developments, for instance mergers within the voluntary sector.

Experiencing frontline services

The 2009 Revolving Doors Agency report ‘Multiple Needs: Service Users’ Perspectives’,¹ asked people with multiple needs about their lives and specifically their experiences of contact with public services. Negative experiences included a lack of information sharing between agencies, poor communications, inadequate signposting between services and the negative attitudes and stereotyping by staff in some mainstream services. There were also specific, systemic problems with accessing benefits, GPs, accommodation and a lack of any support when leaving prison.

When asked about what had worked to help them change their lives and stop offending they said holistic, structured and focused support to break the interdependence of their problems, regular appointments with a keyworker who helped them to set goals and provide some structure to their lives, and, finally, staff with positive attitudes and expertise. The best services also put service user involvement at the heart of their approach, empowering people and building in genuine mechanisms for learning from users’ experience.

These insights were broadly accepted by the previous government, which acknowledged the importance of the ‘lead professional’ or key worker role as central to transforming the lives of people with multiple needs. They have also been recognised by the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith as set out in a recent article.²

And the good news is that this approach to working has become the norm in some services – particularly in some homelessness services and other voluntary sector bodies – and is supported by some structural changes at local level:

- In supported housing – holistic working and information sharing was promoted through the quality assessment framework under the Supporting People programme.
- In services for people with severe and enduring mental health problems – a greater appreciation of the need to address wider issues became the bread and butter of Care Programme Approach, community mental health teams and the recovery approach.
- The introduction of local strategic partnerships and community safety partnerships has brought together the key agencies including police, probation and health as well as the local authority.
- Changes such as the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, Integrated Offender Management pilots and the Diamond Initiative are promising.

So we can see advances – and there is plenty to build on.

But there remains a yawning chasm to bridge before this approach is adopted in parts of the public sector where it could make the most difference: in particular in the criminal justice system and among mainstream public services such as health and education. How difficult will it be to create that bridge given the environment we will be operating in for the next few years?

Deficit reduction programme

The government's Coalition Agreement could not have been clearer: 'The deficit reduction programme takes precedence over any of the other measures in this agreement'.

While the coming cuts are a concern for all, a problem for the revolving doors group is they often do not meet any statutory threshold for support. They fall below the radar for statutory mental health services and their patterns of offending means they often do not get probation support. So cuts to non-statutory services hit them hardest. And while the £29 billion general grant to local authorities has been protected for 2010–11, the first wave of cuts saw some specific Local Authority (LA) grants reduced, as well as significant reductions to the budgets of the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office, departments with a major stake in services for the revolving doors group.

Localism and devolution

The second driver that will determine access to services for people with multiple needs is devolution. The new government has promised a radical returning of power to local authorities and scrapping of central targets and ringfenced budgets. In recent years, some local authorities have demonstrated that they can take a lead and be proactive in relation to tackling social exclusion. There are examples of real leadership from officers and councillors of all parties – the cross-party support for the new Arclight hostel in York is just one example.

However, my own experience of observing the development of social exclusion issues over the years causes me some concern when it comes to this agenda. Back in 1991 I was volunteering at Shelter when a spell of severe winter weather hit the country. Shelter started receiving reports of hundreds of people sleeping rough in towns and cities across the country. At that time the government's Rough Sleepers Initiative was focused solely in London, where the problem was most concentrated. The response to this crisis from many local authorities was to say that they had no statutory responsibility to help people who were at immediate risk of dying on their streets.

What I have seen since then is that, where there is a local focus on socially excluded groups beyond where there is a statutory duty, this has often been in response to a central government initiative, perhaps along with the offer of a specific ringfenced grant or other centrally driven initiative or pilot scheme. The reasons for this apparent lack of local response are complex, but I suspect have their roots to some extent in a still prevailing attitude that some people are less deserving of help, perhaps because they have brought their problems on themselves. When it comes to people who have also attracted the label 'offender' or 'drug user', this view can be even stronger.

This can mean that in most areas people are left without an effective response and left to spiral into chaos and crime. They become a problem for many but the responsibility of no-one.

Of course, there is another side to this argument. This says that it is precisely the continual attempts by central government to micromanage through targets and ringfencing budgets that get in the way of local areas taking responsibility for local needs. Freeing councils and others from this burden will open space and potential for agencies and commissioners to work across traditional boundaries to improve

outcomes. This is possible, as our own National Development Programme has demonstrated, and we will do our best to support local leaders in moving in that direction. But, without central government setting expectations or outcomes, experience suggests that positive changes will be far from universal.

Big society

The third area to consider is the evolving concept of the Big Society and the desire to increase community activity, social innovation and enterprise. Working out how the concept of the Big Society will impact on our target group is still tricky. As we saw under the previous government, when it comes down to commissioning decisions the desire to support a thriving voluntary sector in public service provision dissipates as contract price trumps commitments on ‘locally run’ voluntary sector services and other niceties such as ‘full cost recovery’. In the market place, where voluntary sector organisations are competing for contracts with each other and the private sector, experience suggests that these good intentions tend to quickly fly out of the window.

Other developments

Given these realities how will the organisations that offer support to people with multiple needs respond?

One thing is certain: further consolidation across the voluntary sector. The trend of local voluntary sector-run services being taken over by larger organisations following re-tendering will continue. New partnerships, as we have already seen in the prison sector between private companies such as Serco working alongside specialist voluntary sector providers, may help blend specialist skills and knowledge with economic pulling power. Mergers and acquisitions will pick up in the voluntary sector, with larger organisations successfully competing to take over the delivery of local services, often far from their original area of concern. Big is by no means bad, but consolidation may work against innovation and collaboration. But with less money around efficiencies must be found or services will close.

The rest is uncertain. It is hard to see how ideas like the ‘right to bid’ for local communities or enabling voluntary groups, mutuals and cooperatives to ‘have a greater involvement in running public services’³ will be implemented on the ground unless there is a real willingness to tilt the playing field significantly in that direction. The proposed Big Society Bank, using dormant bank accounts, is suggested as part of the solution, but we await details.

Conclusion

I have argued that a consensus has started to emerge among many policy makers, service providers and, most importantly, among service users about what works in helping people escape from the revolving doors trap of crisis and crime. However, while this approach can be found in a growing range of services working with clients who have multiple needs, we are far from seeing it as a mainstream activity in public services as a whole. In the light of the record budget deficit and the intentions of the coalition government, I have also considered how resilient these advances are and the prospects for further progress.

It is clear that the challenges are enormous. But there is also a real opportunity: the lack of money gives us a real chance to win the case for change based on the economic need. That is why we have been working with the Department of Health to develop a cost-benefit model to highlight the savings from effective interventions for our target group. Early findings are promising, showing substantial savings across a range of government spending streams that are generated by making this form of help available.

As we look forward to meeting with new ministers we have one overarching message: that cuts won't always produce savings, but changing the way public services work could make a significant contribution to reducing the deficit. With a Comprehensive Spending Review in the autumn which will make the emergency budget seem like a walk in the park, this message could not be more relevant or urgent.

- 1 Braithwaite, T and Members of the National Service Users Forum, 2009. Multiple Needs Service Users,
- 2 *Perspectives*. Revolving Doors Agency, London. Available from www.meam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Hardest-to-Reach.pdf
- 3 The Coalition: Our programme for government, 2010.