

# **11 Questions and answers about brokerage**

**By Paul Key**

## **1. What is support brokerage?**

A good strategy, when developing new ideas, is to try and avoid using definitions for words that have an entirely different meaning to the meaning commonly attributable. One of the common features of 'specialised' services is the accretion of terms which become part of a shorthand, or jargon, which limits general access and creates barriers. One of the intentions in changing to individualized funding is to secure integration for services and inclusion for people. Brokerage is a different way of ordering social care so it is necessary to use it as a descriptor, whilst at the same time using an explanation that shows how it is the same as brokerage in any other context, and is not just a new term solely applied to learning disabled people.

Brokerage then is just a way of getting what you want by using a third party to act on your behalf. This works in the same way as an insurance broker or a travel agent, and it does not need to be any more complicated than that. In this context the 'traded' goods are insurance policies, holidays and support packages.

## **2. Can anybody be a support broker?**

The key to answering this question must be about outcomes. There is a divergence of opinion about whether anyone can be a broker, or whether the performance of the brokerage task should be restricted to people with specialized training, or with special individual skills or who meet a particular set of standards.

If a brokerage arrangement produces the outcome desired by the person who has hired the broker then is it important who the broker is? Neither the insurance broker nor the travel agent gets paid unless and until they meet the requirements of the person who wants the insurance policy or the holiday. The only measurement required is that they met the need. Their qualifications, attitude or other factors are just not particularly relevant. If they fail consistently to produce the outcomes that people want, they will not stay in their job very long. In this analysis the actual outcome is very clear. If the outcome can not be delivered then the customer will find another broker or travel agent and , of course, there is plenty of choice.

A difficulty in going directly to a qualification and standards-based service brokerage system is the potential danger of repeating the mistakes made in professionalizing and bureaucratizing adult care services over the last thirty years. It is the pernicious colonization of the disability industry over this period which has led to the position where vast sums of money are invested in services that most people, given the choice, would not want to use. Investment in professional staff who do not work in an outcomes-based way is a huge part of the industry, and does need to be addressed as part of a wide ranging review in which the logic of individualized funding and disaggregation of existing budget heads is allowed priority.

Outcomes-based work may best be achieved in a situation where the broker is entirely reliant on the customer, sometimes supported by her family and/or advocate. Where brokers are salaried and pensioned employees, and where there is no real performance measure, there is a very real danger that outcomes may not be achieved. Where brokers are paid based on outcomes, and where they are chosen by the person who has the requirement and the budget, from a choice of brokers, there is a greater likelihood that outcomes will be met, and that failure will be seen clearly and not rewarded.

At this early stage in the development of individualized funding and brokerage it would seem to be wise to accept that anyone could be a broker, with a number of caveats :

- The broker should not be connected in any way with the funding of the support package so as to avoid role conflict

- The broker should be funded directly by the person who has the individual budget, or their representative
- The broker should preferably be self-employed
- The broker should not be employed by a service providing organization because of role conflict
- The broker should only be working with a limited number of service packages at any one time
- From whatever background a broker comes from he should be offered training in the role

### **3. Can a support broker be an advocate?**

A very large proportion of people working in the disability industry do act as advocates for the people they are supporting in one way or another. This broad definition would be likely to fit anyone who has taken on the role of broker and would be likely to include situations where people might need help to express and assert their views in relation to their service package. More specifically though the role of advocate is very different to the broker's role, and it would be unhelpful to confuse the two roles in any other than the general sense.

Where advocacy agencies are interested in developing a brokerage role this would have to be developed as a separate service, and one which was not necessarily provided by people who had previously been advocates. There is a difference between the two roles and advocates wishing to change their roles and to take on the role of a broker would have to be clear about that difference.

Advocates represent people at all levels, regardless of their service, their background or any other factor. Brokers are responsible for helping people organize their supports and do not represent them in the same way, being more narrow in their focus and concentrating on the use of technical knowledge and skills. Brokers, in one sense are part of the system that configures the use of government resources, whereas advocates are outside of the system.

There can potentially be a role conflict between an advocate and a broker where the advocate, speaking for the person concerned, may want to support the person to reject the brokers proposed package of support as being inappropriate for the person.

## **4. Who pays a Support Broker?**

Any system that places the source of funding to pay the broker away from the individual who needs the support service is unlikely to meet the need for independence and self-direction. The individualized budget should contain the costs of the broker.

## **5. How can providers help?**

Organisations which provide services to people are crucial to the effective rolling out of the individualized funding changes if only because of the proportion of the £17 billion social care budget currently invested in them. Nonetheless it seems clear that such organizations original aims and objectives, and their existing practices and culture would not be likely to lend themselves easily to helping people set up and run their own support services. Whilst this appears to be a sweeping statement, given the variety that exists from very small person-centred services to massive organizations run on 'corporate' lines, the introduction of individualized funding ideas must make a virtue of the development of clear and separate roles, and that the many role-conflicts in the present system must be ironed out.

People will have the power to decide who provides the services that they need, so the involvement of service providers in any sort of brokerage or commissioning role is problematic. A few of the ways that providers can help in the new system are:

- Listening to 'customers' and learning to be more responsive to people's needs
- Adapting to the role of the 'cared for' person becoming the purchaser of services

- Re-designing large organizational forms which are using 'business growth' models to small community-based franchises with low transaction costs and no hierarchy
- Not having a local operation serving more than 40 people
- Accepting that the users are the best judge of service quality
- Developing Personal Assistant schemes
- Hiring self-employed professional carers to work at higher rates of pay across different shift formulations
- Making sure their management boards include users and other disabled people
- Investing more in training, and supporting service users to retrain staff
- All members of the organization knowing personally every single service user
- Being prepared to work closely in partnership with other organizations as part of comprehensive packages of support
- Reducing costs that have no bearing on outcome requirements established by users, advocates and brokers
- Removing practices designed to maintain contract security
- Be creative, produce more for less, think outside the confines of the existing services
- Reducing overmanning practices and reducing staff numbers whilst increasing pay
- Avoiding colonizing and controlling meetings with users
- Assuming that change and planning are continuous, and that a final solution or plan will never be reached
- Spending time and resources on community development
- Thinking about relationships rather than services
- Thinking about change, pricing and competition and making serious decisions about whether the organization can stay in business

## **6. What influence does a broker have?**

The only areas where brokers should have influence are with the organizations or individuals who are involved in attempting to meet the specifications for the service package. This influence arises from the technical and knowledge skills of the broker, and their privileged position as the agent of the end user of the support service.

## **7. Where do I get one from?**

At this very early stage brokers are not universally available. There are a wide range of models in use, and being tested. As the Individualised Funding system develops, Local Authorities should signpost local agencies which can give access to brokers.

## **8. Who is training brokers?**

There is now a number of agencies involved in training programmes for brokers however there are as yet no agreed standards for brokers, nor any nationally agreed elements for a training programme to ensure the delivery of particular standards. As more is learnt from the various projects about how brokerage is going to work best, then the more likely it will be that standards and training will be developed further. There remains a danger that this in itself will create a new 'professional' identity which could lead to a repeat of some of the problems associated with the hegemony of professionals in the present system which, among other things, has been associated with the 'professional gift' model of service provision.

On the other hand it seems unlikely that the idea that anyone can be a broker can be sustained on a permanent basis. It is important that the broker can actually do the job, can actually create outcomes that people want and that she should have the rights set of skills and a good knowledge base.

## **9. How would I know if the support broker was any good?**

One of the models for the delivery of brokerage is where a local independent organization looks at the accreditation of independent brokers and maintains a list of those brokers who are self-employed, and can be called upon to respond to requests to help people set up and run their own services. The person who wants a broker, possibly along with family and/or advocate, can then choose from a selection of people suggested by the organization, in the context of an interview.

There is protection here by independent accreditation, although, as noted in question 8 above, the standards against which to judge whether somebody may be accredited are probably not yet robust enough..

Secondly there is a strong element of choice, by virtue of there being a number of brokers from which to choose.

Thirdly there is a strong pressure on each independent broker to not only present themselves well in interview, but also to subsequently perform in such a way that the desired outcomes are met, under pain of being replaced if they fail.

## **11. How are the practice and skills of the Support Broker monitored?**

In connection with the two answers above this should come about as part of the continuing accreditation process in the form of regular evaluation by the independent agency. Much more important, however, is the position of the person who uses the brokerage service who can comment directly on whether the desired outcome of the process has been met. It is no good producing trained and accredited brokers who can't produce outcomes. The existing system is full of people who are not oriented to actual outcomes that people want.

## **12. Does the support broker work for the family or others?**

The support broker can only work for the person who needs a support service. Many people will be already supported by family members who may try to assert their own views about what the support arrangement should look like. This is inevitable, however family members may be motivated by other issues. There is no guarantee that family members will not be in conflict with the wishes of their family member who wants a support service. The skills that need to be brought in to play to resolve conflict, and to work positively with both the user and the family, are an important part of the broker's toolkit.

The broker is not outside of the system but nonetheless can have no relationship with the processes of finance allocation and can not work for care managers, or for providers of services.

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