

Independence and the support broker role



This paper was written by Steve Dowson (NDT) specifically to assist the recruitment of support brokers for the *Life Planning* projects in Brent and North Somerset. However, it is being made more widely available as a general discussion on the issue of independence which may be helpful to others. Comments and requests for more information can be sent to sdowson@ndt.org.uk

In the individualised funding (IF) model, on which the *Life Planning* projects are based, the principle that support brokers must be independent is extremely important. It's one of the features that make IF clearly different from care-managed systems, and it applies a fundamental safeguard of ordinary commerce and public accountability to the context of social care. The learning from North American IF projects also strongly suggests that the effectiveness of IF, in enabling people to achieve better, more inclusive lives is also heavily influenced by the independence of the brokers.

However, the notion of 'independence' is more complex than it might seem, and harder still to apply in individual circumstances. For that reason, this paper aims to set out in more detail what is meant by 'independent' support brokers.

How is independence important?

The independence of brokers is a very important step towards achieving a system that has role clarity: a system in which each 'player' is driven by a single set of interests or responsibilities, and where the other players know what these interests are. Or, in plain language, everyone knows where everyone else 'is coming from'. A system in which there is total role clarity at all times is probably not achievable, not least because individuals within the system will be motivated by many factors - sometimes unconscious and often unidentified - including personal beliefs, past experiences, and pressure from elsewhere in their lives. Nevertheless, we can and should try to avoid a system where very obvious conflicts are built into the structure of the system itself. The present care management system has a serious flaw of that sort, because care management confuses the task of fund-rationing with the work of support people to achieve the lives they want.

In this context, we are mainly concerned to achieve the independence of the brokers from the council, as the 'player' that holds much of the money to pay for services and supports, and from service providers, who have an interest in promoting and preserving their own organisations. These interests – though legitimate in themselves - obviously have potential to conflict with the interests of individuals who use services.

It has to be added that there is also potential for conflict between the interests of the person and the interests of the family. The broker needs to recognise this, and remember that they are there, ultimately, to serve the individual. Experience from IF programmes suggests that while this certainly can be an area of difficulty, the clarity

of the broker role – and the trustworthiness it establishes – greatly reduces such problems.

The limits to freedom

It needs to be said at the outset that independence does *not* mean total freedom. There are limits on the action that a broker can properly take. Brokers are providing a service, and this constrains their activities in several ways –

- The nature of the role of broker puts boundaries on the range of activities that are appropriate. For example, brokers are not teachers, therapists, counsellors, or support providers; or leisure companions or friends. The legitimate work of a broker might well include small elements of these roles, of course. It could be entirely appropriate for a broker to get to know a person by spending some time with them doing a community activity, and in the process supporting the person to do the activity. But if these became the dominant activity, not evidently linked to the primary tasks of brokerage, then they would be inappropriate and open to challenge.
- The broker is accountable to the individual to whom they are providing the service, so the activities they undertake must be within the limits agreed with the individual.
- There are fundamental ethical standards that apply to the role of the broker, and which are extremely important in the context of work with vulnerable adults. The broker's involvement with the individual must be free of any hint of exploitation or abuse.
- The broker, even when dependent, is a part of the larger system. They will be able to act more effectively if they are recognised as competent, trustworthy, and useful people. So, while the broker should not be afraid to make use of their independent status to serve the individual, there is also good reason not to act unnecessarily in ways that will annoy other people.

Aspects of independence

In the context of support brokers, there are three aspects to independence:

1. Accountability

Brokers must be able to take action on behalf of the individuals to whom they are providing a service without having to seek permission from, or explain or justify their actions to, other stakeholders. This freedom will be undermined if they also have a contractual relationship with other stakeholders. Most often, people cannot provide independence of accountability because they are employed by social services or a provider agency.

2. Loyalty

Even when there is no strict obligation to account to social services or service providers, people may nevertheless feel that they need permission and

approval from these agencies. They may think that these organisations represent authority and expertise, and consequently be subservient to their views and expectations. They may hope to work for one of them, and so try to establish a good, non-controversial reputation. Or they may have friends who work for these agencies.

3. Perspective

The social care professions embody many beliefs and assumptions. These concern not only beliefs about the aims of social care and the needs of the people who are assisted – the ‘values’ which are explored in social work training and often mentioned in agency mission statements. There are also much wider, and generally unrecognised, assumptions about people and organisations – about how to get things done, and how people should work together. These assumptions contrast with the ones that people are likely to use in their personal relationships and in the informal activities of community life. When a broker lacks independence of perspective, they tend to see the community as if it were another part of the social care system. They will see each person they assist as someone with a set of needs to be met by professionals, rather than as a citizen. They will make formal referrals when it would be better just to ‘ask around’; hold formal meetings when a chat round the kitchen table would do; and assume that it’s not appropriate to make use of their own connections with the community.

One of the complications of judging independence is that these three aspects are not necessarily connected. People who work in social care are very likely to have reduced independence in loyalty and perspective, but it isn’t certain. There are people working within the social care system who manage to keep their independence of loyalty and perspective, though the proportion is probably very small. (It’s likely to cause stresses and strains between employer and worker that will become intolerable to one side or the other.) Many more professionals would *claim* that they do. Equally, some people who do *not* work in services nevertheless have a bias in their loyalty and perspective towards the social system. This is especially common amongst people who used to work in services – a problem that has to be set against the strengths such people offer through their ‘inside knowledge’.

Of the three aspects, only one can be assessed from evidence that is readily available. If someone has a job working for social services, then we have hard information that is relevant to the issue of independence of accountability. Independence of loyalty and perspective can only be judged from getting to know someone or (more reliably) by observing their practice.

For this reason, the presence or absence of employment or contractual relationships is an important basis by which to judge whether someone has the independence to act as a broker. It’s not entirely reliable, but likely to be a fair guide.

Moreover, judgements about independence are not only made by people responsible for recruiting brokers. They are, firstly, also made by people receiving the service of a broker. A broker may tell a person with learning disabilities and their supporters that, while they work for services, they are nevertheless able to be independent. Just conceivably, this could be the truth. But the person would be right to be extremely

suspicious. (Compare this to the financial adviser who admitted to working for a financial services company but claimed nevertheless to be able to give impartial advice.)

Secondly, judgements about the independence of brokers will be made by other observers on the basis of information about whether brokers are working in social care in other capacities. A project which claimed to offer independent brokers, and yet authorised brokers who were evidently not independent, would rightly be subjected to criticism.

Employment grey areas

Judgements about independence are further complicated by the variety of working situations that may arise. These include the following:

1. working part-time in social care;
2. working for the council, but not in social services;
3. working for council social services but in an admin. position;
4. working in health or social care, but not with disabled people;
5. working in social care (council or provider services) but in a different area;
6. doing agency work in social care, for several and varying agencies.

All of these, except the second, imply that the person is spending a significant part of their lives immersed in the culture of the professional social care system. It isn't certain that they will have absorbed the values and assumption of the system, but there is good reason to suspect that they have – and that, as a result, their independence of *perspective* will have been reduced.

In all these situations except No. 5 there is likely to be some loss of independence of *loyalty*, and possibly also of *accountability*. In several of these situations (2,3, and 4) the person may not be directly accountable to the same part of the organisation that they would be dealing with as a broker, but they would be reporting to someone further up the same hierarchy.

Working in a role not directly concerned with service commissioning or provision does not ensure independence. It is very hard to imagine that, for an example, a person could work in an admin support role on Mondays and Tuesdays, and then be able to relate to the same team of people as a truly independent broker on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Compensating experiences

Some other life experiences can act positively to prevent people being drawn into complicity with the services system. These include –

- Experience of receiving health and/or social services for disabled people or people with mental health needs.

- Close personal links with a disabled person, especially as a parent or other family member
- Extensive experience of working as an advocate.

Powerful though these experiences may have been, however, they don't remove problems concerning independence of *accountability*. In other words, for example, being the parent of a person with learning disabilities doesn't make it possible to be an independent broker while also working for social services.

Conclusions

The range of factors and situations that have to be taken into account make it impossible to use a simple checklist to assess whether someone is independent. The best that seems to be possible is a guide, reflecting the issues identified earlier, and based on five categories:

Category	Assessment	Type of situation
1	<i>Not in a position to work as a support broker.</i> Independence is compromised in accountability, and probably in loyalty and perspective. Evidence of conflicting interests would undermine credibility of brokerage services as a whole.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Working locally for, or in close association with, social services commissioning (i.e. care management). ○ Working locally for, or in close association with, health service commissioning. ○ Working for an agency that provides specialist health services or social care to the same range of people who are assisted by brokers.
2	<i>Generally not in a position to work as a broker, though there may be rare exceptions.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Working for council social services, but with a different user group. ○ Working for specialist health services for the same range of people.
3	<i>Substantial cause for concern regarding independence.</i> Positive evidence required through training that these concerns are unfounded.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Recently worked for, or in close association with, social services commissioning. ○ Working for a social care provider agency that does not deliver to the same range of people.
4	<i>Identifiable factors that may reduce independence.</i> These will need to be addressed in training and monitored in practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Working for social services or a relevant provide agency in another area. ○ Has a background of professional work in health or social services. ○ Employed by the local council, but in an unconnected department.
5	<i>No apparent conflicts.</i> Independence of loyalty and perspective <i>still</i> needs to be explored in training and practice.	No relevant past or present employment in health or social care services, or in other council services.

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