

Is a broker just someone who does brokerage?

by

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Introduction

The *In Control* programme identified a set of planning tasks and labelled them as 'brokerage'. It was, however, recognised that not everybody moving to self-directed services would be able to complete these tasks themselves, or have people in their circle of support who could do them. So *In Control* acknowledged that there would be a need for some people available to provide brokerage as a service.

In control regards support brokers as an unfortunate necessity – the option of last resort, rather than as an essential element of individualised funding systems that will deliver better outcomes at lower costs. Although the National Brokerage Network has begun to do some much needed work in this area, the role of the broker remains poorly defined. Brokers are still commonly perceived to be nothing more than people offering brokerage as a service. This is plainly resulting in much confusion, and in flawed arrangements for the provision of broker resources. This short paper aims to clarify the distinction between *brokerage* and *brokers*.

The comparison with plumbers

When thinking about *brokerage* and *brokers*, it may be helpful to make the comparison with *plumbing* and *plumbers*.

Brokerage can be defined *functionally*, as a set of tasks that needs to be done in the process of helping people move from aspirations to the implementation of paid supports and opportunities that will make those aspirations a reality. So this is like 'plumbing' – it's simply a set of jobs to complete, and it can be done by anybody who happens to have the right skills. That person might be a friend or a neighbour, or it could be 'do-it-yourself'. And when help is given like this, there's no need – or appropriate place – for rules about how the friend or neighbour will give their help. They simply offer what skills and time they can. They might, for example, help with the electrical or joinery work as well. On the downside, there's also the possibility that they won't prove to be very skilled, or that they'll decide half way through that they've had enough and go home for tea.

But brokerage can also be defined as a *role*: the role of support broker. The comparison here is with the professional plumber (which is to say, the kind of plumber we want when we call one in, though don't always get). Here, the expectations are very different. Whether plumber or broker, the role implies -

- A set of minimum competencies. Almost certainly these will be evidenced by some sort of training.
- A relationship which puts the person receiving the service in charge, so that the work is performed to the requirements of the customer, and the activities stay within agreed boundaries. (For example, the plumber doesn't talk to your bank, and the broker doesn't talk to your care manager, unless you agree.)

- An explicit contract, so that the terms of the relationship are clearly defined at the outset.
- A relationship that has an endpoint linked to the completion of the required service. This in turn means that next time the service is needed, the customer can choose to get it from the same person or someone different.
- Defined areas of competency that dovetail with other recognised and available professional roles (in building work, 'trades'). The plumber doesn't announce half-way through that he doesn't know how to do soldered pipe joints, but *does* leave the plastering to a skilled plasterer. The broker *doesn't* suddenly say she can't do a support plan, but *does* know when it would be better to involve a skilled advocate.
- There are safeguards in place if something goes wrong – including mechanisms to make sure that bad or unfinished work is put right; checks to prevent a dangerous plan being implemented, even when it's what the customer wants; and mechanisms for ensuring that poor quality work or unethical practices come to the attention of an effective regulatory body.

It's important to recognise that the *role* cannot exist in isolation. It only becomes meaningful when placed within a context that provides the regulatory functions, and training and accreditation; and where there is a clear understanding of the various roles that exist within the system (the domestic building trade, or the individualised funding system).

In the building trade the roles (plumbers, 'sparks', 'chippie', etc) have evolved over centuries. In contrast, individualised funding initiatives require people who work in the social care system to shift abruptly to very different ways of thinking and working. This makes it necessary to provide explicit definitions of the structure of the system as a whole, and of the responsibilities and boundaries of each role in the system, so that the roles do not drift back to their old positions.

In other words, the role of support broker can only become effective in a well-designed individualised funding system. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it can equally be argued that individualised funding systems need the role of independent broker (whether or not labelled as 'support broker') in order to be effective.

Finally, the argument in this paper for support brokers who deliver a professional service does *not* have to lead to another nationally defined and regulated profession. There is a very understandable resistance amongst people who use social care services to any proposal for a new profession. This populist dislike of social care professionals can easily be exploited by the policy-makers, and those who advise them, in order to argue against the provision of high quality, independent support broker resources.

But, almost certainly, the antipathy towards professionals is actually a dislike of professionals who are paternalistic, embedded in an opaque bureaucracy, and not accountable to the people that they supposedly serve. Good support brokers would not have any of these qualities. What we need is a system to regulate and support the work of brokers that will actively impede any tendency to become remote and unaccountable. The key requirement is to put the regulation (not the necessarily the delivery) of brokers under the control of local users, carers, and allies.