

Kay Brereton
PO Box 23
Murchison

ph 021 2552553
email kayoss2@gmail.com

Submission re More Effective Social Services Issues Paper October 2014

I am an independent Beneficiary Advocate, I am co-coordinator of a national group of beneficiary advocates which consults with MSD and the Minister on a quarterly basis to raise issues from the W&I service delivery frontline, and to discuss the impacts of current and proposed policy implementation.

I coordinated the Benefit Rights Service at the Wellington People's Centre for 8 years, and I now teach advocacy skills to groups of community workers throughout the country.

I make this submission as a client representative, I work daily with clients receiving social services from MSD and particularly from W&I, I assist people to access their full and correct benefit entitlement, and to access their statutory review and appeal rights.

I submit from the perspective of the most important person in the delivery of Social Services, the end user or consumer of these services.

I was involved in the commissioning and support of the Alternative Welfare Working Group in 2010, although with limited financial resources this group of academics and sector leaders sought feedback from the service consumers in the researching of their report.

I recommend that this inquiry makes use of the information in the two reports produced by this group:

<http://www.caritas.org.nz/sites/default/files/Welfare%20Justice%20in%20NZ%20What%20We%20Heard.pdf>

<http://www.caritas.org.nz/sites/default/files/Welfare%20Justice%20for%20All.pdf>

A very strong and clear message that service users brought to the group as they consulted around the country, was that above all they needed to be treated with respect by service providers. The biggest barrier that people using welfare services face is a feeling of shame, and a lack of self esteem, this is generally amplified by the financial and emotional stress that comes with being unwell, out of work, living in poverty and often with dependants you must but can not afford to properly support.

The best results for positive long term change will come from a person having a meaningful respectful and trusting engagement with the service provider, it is very difficult to access whether a provider is going to be able to deliver such a service. This level of engagement is reliant on individual relationships, and the quality of the service provider's delivery staff. In my experience this will vary across different sites for the same provider and is not simply about governance and policies. Possibly the only way to measure such quality is by user feedback and even this can be unreliable.

The measure must however be qualitative rather than quantitative if the right behaviour by providers is to be driven, a higher number of less sustainable outcomes will not contribute to the long term positive goals sought, but may be rewarded by a quantitative measure of success.

An important safeguard for people using the social services of statutory agencies is the statutory access to review and appeal rights as well as to watchdog agencies such as the Ombudsman. It is essential to ensure the principles of natural justice are observed, and that all service users have ready access to a consistent and fair process to review decisions, along with a parallel process to enable concerns about service quality and delivery to be raised and addressed in a fair and consistent way respectful of the service user.

If social service delivery is to be contracted to a non government agency it is not fair for the service user to have access to their statutory review rights removed or made more difficult to access, rather the person should have enhanced rights to review, and access to both a statutory process conducted by the contracting government agency, and well as the right to pursue review through the providers own review and complaints processes.

While quality may in some cases be enhanced by contracting non government providers, in other situations; particularly those concerning statutory entitlements the service user should have clear and well defined access to a government service provider. The government agency has the statutory responsibility for providing a service such as access to benefit entitlement, and along with this the statutory review and appeal rights.

MSD has trialled contracting this statutory delivery to providers in its 'Youth Service', my experience has been that this puts a go-between between the service user (youth) and the statutory agency (W&I), although W&I still officially makes the decision they do so based on the recommendation of the provider, who has become the de facto deliverer of benefit entitlement, and benefit sanctions.

Youth service clients are not made aware of their review rights, and have less knowledge of and access to advocates than those receiving entitlement delivery through W&I, in fact in many cases the youth workers who would have helped them at W&I are now their de facto case managers.

While the measure being used by the MSD of future benefit liability based on past benefit receipt trends for different cohorts is an attractive and seemingly simple tool to predict future behaviour it is not a reliable predictor of welfare demand in the future, as it is not able to predict that most important influence on welfare demand; labour market demand.

Liability measure is based on trends and data which reflect outdated population behaviours, the behaviours of a population a decade different to that the predictions are applied too.

Thus it is not possible to measure the effectiveness of interventions using this prediction model, as the current cohort are likely to behave differently to the similar cohort of the previous decade.

This method of measurement also also labels sectors of the population such as those with health issues and disabilities as a liability measured by their lifetime cost to the system.

On the basis of this new approach decisions are made which look to the past rather than analysing present and future trends and particularly labour market and social trends. This is likely to result in skewed decisions which are apt to be measured in a framework which is outdated.

The best predictors come from our communities and the responses rise similarly from the community, funding needs to be administered in such a way that community responses to community issues, (be they local or national issues each community will have an individual best fit solution) can be recognised and supported for the time they are relevant and serve the need.

Kay Brereton
Benefit Advocate