Is personalisation just the latest catch-phrase for transforming the way services are delivered? asks Steve Morgan. If so, is it the aims or the message that we are getting wrong?

Personalisation revisited

The conundrum

The current driver for the transformation of all UK public services is the concept of personalisation. But haven't we been here before, and if so what have we failed to learn?

Case management, the National Service Frameworks, Valuing People in learning disability services, and recovery are but a few of the recent designs on service delivery sharing some common characteristics. They all lay claim to service user-focused or person-centred ways of working, and all are intended to transform the way services are delivered. Personalisation may just be the latest catch-phrase for the same messages. If so, is it the aims or the message that we are getting wrong?

At best we are saying to the workforce that they need to improve; but in reality we may be heavily implying that what they are doing is simply not good enough. Everyone knows that the only real constant is change. But what is to be gained by telling people already bewildered by the pace of change that there needs to be more, and at a faster pace?

There is a further contradiction in this bigger picture. At a time when we are creating ever larger institutional bureaucracies (including the flexible and creative third sector), we are claiming that the fundamental aim is to provide individualised and personalised services. Where is the evidence that underpins the assumption that larger bureaucracies can provide more individualised service? Transformation could become just another word for confusion.

The challenge

Personalisation is a grand vision that refers to the whole way public services are to be focused and delivered. It is not simply about the financial initiatives of direct payments and individual budgets.[1] It is not the process of reform but the outcome of a reformed service. The transformation that will be necessary is not just about making changes to what exists; it is about changing the whole system and ways of thinking.

Whether intentional or otherwise, the tradition has always been one of public services operating on service-centred designs. In order to manage volume, it would be argued that services are set up and people then fit into them in ways appropriate to their needs. False claims are often made for person-centred service provision, largely based on assessment of needs and responses to specific client groups. Truly person-centred services start from the individual at the centre and then build flexible service responses around the individual in relation to their needs, wishes and aspirations.[2] They are based on the open provision of information and support for the person to have more control over their own choices and decisions. Having access to financial means to purchase what you want is an added bonus to underpin the true nature of such a service design.

However, Bird and Wooster[3] rightly challenge the ability to meet practically the rhetoric of policy statements. Funding issues cannot easily be dismissed in any economic climate, and they raise the issue of having a full menu to choose from in the first place. These difficulties notwithstanding, there is a further fundamental that this article seeks to address. Are the workforce sufficiently geared towards delivering services in the ways envisaged in a true personalisation agenda? If previous initiatives, and my own experience, are anything to go by, then this issue needs addressing first before any further claims to transformation are made. Professionals who have largely been trained to 'manage' will struggle with the expected role of 'enabling'.

Challenging questions need addressing

- How can we manage the increasing expectations of change?
- How can we achieve radical transformation of the workforce to meet the challenges of the new agenda?
- Will the recent target culture help or hinder the next phase of change?
- Is the political will for the outcomes matched by the political will for the process? Is it all about destinations with little or no thought for the actual rigour of the journeys?

- How can we ensure safe services will continue to be delivered throughout the perceived process of change?
- What are the risks/safety issues?
  - Will people be supported to take the necessary responsibility?
  - Who will lose out? There are always losers, and we need to be more transparent about this.
  - Will interventions be delivered by less-qualified, skilled and experienced people?
  - Will the changes generate more confusion?
- What are the opportunities?
  - Radical transformation, meaning a new-look post-1948 public service settlement.
  - Services becoming genuinely person-centred (fulfilling the rhetoric by action).
  - Transformation not just of funding streams but also practitioners, teams and the wider community understanding of disability.

The manifesto

What is needed is a greater focus on developing the workforce by engaging and supporting them through the process. You can put the person into personalisation, but putting personalisation into the person is a whole different set of challenges. The following 10-point plan is offered as a guide:

- Take the long-term view when considering the need for cultural change.
- Carry people with your vision; consult and inform, including the importance of selling the need for change.
- Identify the local champions who 'already get it' (practitioners, service users and carers).
- Invert the idea of leadership; the service user becomes leader of the process, the practitioner becomes leader of the flexible responses.
- Focus on attitudes rather than knowledge and skills; the agenda requires more attention to individual and collective values and principles – attitudes do not change overnight, so the vision may need a generational timescale.
- Teams should reflect on the true meaning and influence of language; start with what a user/ person-centred/self-directed support really looks like from within a deeply ingrained service-centred tradition.
- Strengths-working is the underlying process that reflects the technical embodiment of the transformed service.[4]

- Take risks in a structured, reasoned, confident and positive way.[4]
- Flexible, creative and practical approaches, rather than traditional training and education, are essential (practice development) for learning through innovation.[4]
- Avoid the micromanagement of the target culture; it's not about managerial target-based micromanagement, it is about whole systems, sustainable communities approaches.

The journey

If the service is to become genuinely person-centred we need to re-capture Deitchman's reflection:[5] do you want a travel agent who points the way or a travel companion who helps to negotiate and navigate for the journey?

Personalisation is the fundamental basis of a 21st century public service, where transformation means services fit to the person rather than the person fitting into the services. The rhetoric may change but the needed responses of team-working, strengths-working, positive risk-taking within a context of practice development have been consistent ingredients through the Practice Based Evidence[4] philosophy to workforce development.

1. HM Government (2007) *Putting people first: A shared vision and commitment to the transformation of adult social care*, London: HM Government.
2. Carr, S. and Dittrich, R. (2008). 'Personalisation: a rough guide', *Adults Services Report* 20, London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.
3. Bird, A. and Wooster, E. (2008) 'Personalise this!' *Openmind* 153, 6–9.
4. www.practicebasedevidence.com
5. Deitchman, W.S. (1980) 'How many case managers does it take to screw in a light bulb?' *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 31(11): 788–9.