The integration of employment services at sub-national level: a case study of the ‘City Strategy’ in an English sub-region

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This paper will examine the organisational dimension of integrated employment policies through a case study of the ‘Cities Strategy initiative’ in the UK, which aims to empower sub-national institutions to develop local solutions to issues of employment and poverty. The paper is in four parts. First, is a discussion of the national policy context regarding activation, the very great emphasis on supply-side measures in UK employment policy and the intensification of such measures. This includes consideration of organisational change to national agencies responsible for employment and welfare. Second, the paper will consider sub-national governance arrangements in the UK. Key points include the dominance of central government, the complexity and fragmentation of sub-national governance, the large number of agencies with an interest in employment policy, and the prominence of ‘partnership working’ based on synergy, budget enlargement and transformation models. Third, the paper will examine the introduction of the Cities Strategy initiative, within the context of the integration of employment policy and services. Fourth, the paper will present findings from empirical research into the development of the City Strategy in one sub-region: Birmingham, Coventry and the Black Country (which is in the West Midlands region). The empirical investigation is based on analysis of documentary evidence including strategy papers and more ‘grey literature’ such as minutes of meetings and internal briefings. In addition are in-depth qualitative interviews with key actors from local agencies. This allows for examination both of formal organisational arrangements between agencies, and how organisations work together in practice. Evidence is provided of agencies seeking to deliver provision more effectively, and introduce new programmes: but also of difficulties and tensions in aligning policy and organisational arrangements. The theoretical underpinning for the paper is provided both by Sen’s capabilities approach as it applies to situated public action and the importance of voice for local actors, and the notion of partnership working and its specific application in the UK. The paper concludes by arguing that a highly interesting example is provided of the integration of employment services, but also of organisational tensions (between local actors and central government, and between sub-national agencies themselves) thereby raising issues as to the rhetoric of policy and service integration, and the reality of organisational arrangements.

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