

User Participation and Modernisation in Municipal Child Welfare Services

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What place does user participation have in the modernisation of Norwegian public administration? Arguments for increased user influence build upon other well known arguments advocating democratisation, but also upon newer ideas about adjusting public services to suit the needs of its consumers. This article presents findings from a single study that is a part of a larger research project on user participation and professional development in municipal child welfare services.¹ While the data in this article is taken from interviews with managers and middle-managers, a considerable amount of data has also been generated from interviews and observations of child welfare workers, clients and their relatives, which has not been completely analysed. The interviews with managers and middle-managers can be analysed separately because their focus has been upon changes within the overall administrative framework that affects the provision of municipal child welfare services.

Theory: Normative reasons for user participation

The reasons why users should actively participate in forming child welfare services are connected to the idea that children and their parents are *actors* or people who are able to influence, by their own actions, their own lives, the lives of others, and the conditions of society.² These ideas have consequences for the relationship between the state and the citizen, and the way in which users of public services are approached in contemporary administrative reforms. The reasons for user participation are inter-connected with ideas about being a fellow citizen and ideas about modernising public administration.

A societal perspective: The user as citizen and action-taker

Participation in society and co-determining decisions are seen as being good practices and represent basic democratic human rights in our society. Erik Oddvar Eriksen (1993) points out that the expansion of the public sector in modern societies has involved new relationships between citizens and public authorities. Citizens have, in many instances, taken the role of clients who are dependent upon welfare state provisions. More and more often, they are defined as being users of the services provided by public institutions, and they are increasingly seen as being consumers of the services provided by public authorities, more or less in line with relationships to private producers in the marketplace. Many participate in determining who the users are of the various welfare services: national political authorities, local political authorities, publicly employed professionals, the individual applicant and his or her relatives and friends. The development of client, user and consumer roles can undermine the role of citizen.

User participation can be a way to help clients re-claim their status as citizens. Citizens are seen as being competent and equal members of society who have a right to have and express their own opinions (Andreassen 2000). User participation is also justified by theories that posit the concepts “life-world” and “everyday life”. Based upon the writings of Habermas and his use of the concepts “system” and “life-world”, social work has been criticised for being

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² The section on theory includes contributions by Sissel Seim and Tor Slettebø.

part of the welfare state system and for representing a way in which the life-world of individuals and families are “colonised” (Otto and Schaarschuch 1999). In this perspective, users are seen as being competent action-takers, and professionals do not have the right to take away the user’s responsibility for his or her life-project (Folkesson 1996). The claim has been made that user participation in child welfare can contribute to less control over the lives of users, if user participation includes real influence. It has also been assumed that user participation can develop the participant’s ability to gain power over his or her life and increase self-respect and, as a consequence, develop the ability to participate in other arenas of societal life (Seim and Hjemdal 1992).

User participation at the collective level or “community participation” has often been associated with complex planning processes and strongly oppositional user interests, but the chance to effectuate co-operative decisions seems to be greater when small and readily defined groups that have clear norms for solving conflicts are involved (Ostrom 1990:90). At the same time, sociologists regularly point out that an element of power is an integral characteristic of human interaction. As a consequence, the powerless run great risks, whenever they pretend that the exercise of power does not exist and enter into formal relationships as though all parties were equally powerful, in situations where that clearly is not the case. The exercise of power can change from being an open and visible phenomenon and become a closed-off and hidden one. Critics point out that this entails the danger of misusing users (Ørstavik 1996). Not being represented in decision making bodies and not having the authority to make decisions creates situations in which user participation becomes an awry process which only contributes to increased dissatisfaction (Irvin and Stansbury 2004).

In the modernising work being done in public administration, one finds a divide between two distinct directions for increased user participation. The first direction aims at strengthening the client’s rights as a consumer of public services. The second direction incorporates activities that aim at the empowerment of otherwise dependent clients.

New Public Management: The user as consumer and fellow action-taker

Strengthening user influence is justified from other perspectives than one desiring to strengthen the client as a citizen enjoying power over his or her life. Strengthened user influence is also seen as being an important part of the reforms taking place within the public sector because user participation is seen as being a way to strengthen the quality and appropriateness of services and a way to reduce wasting resources on poorly planned or poorly executed activities.

Parallel to the welfare policy reforms that aim at changing the content and quality of welfare provision for groups of people who are at risk, independent reforms are being carried out in public administration that affect user possibilities for influencing services. During the past ten to fifteen years, new models for managing public services have gained widespread support. These models promote de-centralised public services, market adjustments, privatisation, de-coupling services from overburdened and oversized bureaucracies, management by objectives, and the simplification of the rules and statutes that govern the public sector (Christensen & Lægreid 2000, Johansen 1998, Meier 1999). These reforms involve a conscious break with former visions promoting centralisation, harmonisation and management by firmly relying upon an administrative code of rules. At the same time, these

reforms can be in conflict with other administrative changes that emphasise co-determination and equal treatment.

New Public Management (NPM) is the internationally used designation for efforts to modernise public administration. While traditional public administration emphasises the normative values that are embedded in the concepts *the rule of law* and *democracy*, NPM involves adjustments that are more in line with instrumentalism and offers a perspective for public administration that has been borrowed from the world of business. According to the NPM way of thinking, the public sector has a lot to learn from business, which is assumed to be; more willing to take chances, more flexible, and more goal and result oriented. Even though efforts seem to be focused upon simplifying public administration, by providing the individual citizen with a greater opportunity for choice and influence, NPM includes a great number of diverse initiatives that do not necessarily go very well together (Christensen & Lægreid 1999). Handler (1996:5) points out that de-centralisation, delegating authority and privatisation can impose changes in power relationships that do strengthen some forms of user influence, but that the changes can also create obstacles for weak or powerless groups.

Others are concerned about administrative reforms because of problems in the ways in which our democracy functions, pointing to the difficulties some users have in protecting their interests by using political channels (Sand 1997). De-coupling public institutions from bureaucratic controls implies converting clients into consumers with changed rights and channels of communication. Down-sizing leads to reduced user influence, because there is less time that can be allocated to individual users, by those public employees who are there to help, treat and serve them (see Brehm & Gates 1997). Another critic (Vigoda 2002) claims that NPM, on the one hand, presupposes that a citizen act like a sophisticated client, in a complex environment, but on the other hand, supports a passive role. Increased possibilities of choice provide the individual consumer with the option of rejecting services altogether (exit) rather than demanding changes (voice).

Evaluating developments in Norway, arguments have been made for the claim that NPM reforms have been without any real effects (Christensen & Lægreid 1999, Hansen 1999). This is probably true if one takes a top-down perspective that reflects the opinions of centrally placed bureaucrats. Seen from “below”, that is from the viewpoint of consumers of public services, and from the viewpoint of those employees who have undergone the changes that have been made, quite a number of reforms have been carried-out in Norway’s social welfare sector, particularly at the municipal level (Koht 2000, Slettebø 2000a, Blegen & Nylehn 2003).

Authors who have concentrated upon changes made in diverse social welfare sectors have pointed out how very different a user perspective based upon NPM thinking is, when compared to the social work perspective. John Harris (2003) is a British researcher who has been particularly critical towards the reforms that were carried out by Margaret Thatcher and by all the British governments that have followed, including reforms initiated by the Labour government of Tony Blair. His evaluation is that the changes have utterly atomised and individualised user groups. The top managers of Great Britain’s system of social welfare provision are gate-keepers who are tightly controlled by budgetary constraints. Their job is to produce rigidly standardised services. Caseworkers, who are professionally educated, see user participation as a way to increase user choice between differing services that are adjusted to meet individual needs (Harris 2003:149). Brehm and Gates are American researchers who have found a great deal of similarity between social workers and the other bureaucrats who

work in public administration. One area where they did find quite a bit of difference, however, showed that social workers had preferences reflecting a greater degree of solidarity with users and that they more easily acquiesced to user demands for fair treatment (1997: 128-9). While NPM oriented administrators are able to measure improvements for users by documenting reduced waiting lists and better ways to sort out diverse user groups, caseworkers prefer initiatives that can improve the adjustment of services and other provision to the needs of the individual client.

Støkken & Nylehn (2003:19) include user control and user participation as the last of eleven major elements in NPM, but they add that: “The last point is different from all the others and to some extent in conflict with them. There is no path that connects reliance upon the market and a desire for simplification that leads to user control. On the contrary, user participation and control are complicating factors and their appearance would reduce the influence of professionals. When users are given an important role to play, this can be understood as a desire to keep a watchful eye on professional practitioners, but also as a way to realise the individual’s ability to choose.”

Even though several authors (Christensen & Lægneid 2002:20-22, Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000: 174) warn against viewing NPM as a consistent and unified approach to administrative reform, there seems to be little doubt that user participation is the major element that causes the most difficulties. Those difficulties include how to define and how to implement user participation.

Empowerment: The user as a person having authority

Empowerment is generally used as a way to designate approaches that transfer power from professional practitioners and from the providers of social welfare services. A main characteristic is to legitimate the user as a political participant (Irvin & Stansbury 2004). The concept is often translated by using the Norwegian word “myndiggjøring”. The English word and its Norwegian counterpart have been criticised because both seem to imply that authority is “given to” clients by their social workers (Slettebø 2000b). Empowerment counters the user’s lack of control over his or her own life situation by promoting participation in local community activities, by strengthening ties to the local community and to social networks, and by promoting the belief that people can influence and to some extent control the conditions of their lives. In this way, empowerment can also lead to social and environmental changes (Rappaport 1987, Guitérrez 1990, Adams 1996). The concept empowerment is used here as a common designation for all approaches that transfer power from professional practitioners and from public services to users.

From subject to partner in decision-making

Thus far, empowerment and New Public Management have stood for alternative arguments in support of user participation. The first one, empowerment, is based upon a democratic vision encompassing co-operative equality between citizen and public authority. The second one, NPM, is based upon a more pragmatic view of the citizen as client and consumer. Vigoda (2002) argues that we should understand these two alternatives as different steps in the development of the relationship between citizen and public authority. NPM represents progress because past relationships between the two placed the citizen in a subjected role. The contemporary view is that citizens are consumers who have a reasonable expectation of being heard. The next step in a desirable development will position citizens and authorities as partners, who not only are mutually responsive, but who co-operate on an equal footing. For

Vigoda, this future co-operation will not only be limited to a two-sided relationship between users and public authorities, but other parties will also play a role, including the media, voluntary humanitarian organisations, and social researchers (p.543).

Much of the literature about user participation focuses upon different forms of collective or community participation. On the other hand, law and child welfare professionals have traditionally focused upon the individual's right to influence his or her case when decisions affecting the individual are made by public authorities. In this research project both forms of user participation are seen as being important. Since the concept user participation is used for a wide variety of phenomena, an essential task has been to find out what workers in the field understand by the phrase *increased user participation*.

There has been a tendency to describe user participation as unmistakably democratic. It is often seen as being an unquestionably good development within public administration. The advantages are usually connected to decision-making processes and to the achieved results both for citizens and for public authorities. Problems are only seen to arise when user participation is to be implemented. Irvin & Stansbury (2004) point out that user participation can have serious drawbacks. Decision-making processes can be unduly time consuming, expensive and lead to increased antipathy towards public authorities. Strong interest groups can influence decisions in ways that disfavour weaker groups. Sometimes funds cannot be found to carry out agreed upon decisions. As a consequence, the conditions that are needed so that user participation can be a low-cost, high-benefit enterprise need to be clarified. Irvin & Stansbury assert that costs are reduced when volunteers are easy to recruit, when participants are geographically close, when volunteers have adequate incomes, when the local community is homogenous, and when matters to be decided do not demand a large degree of technical insight. Benefits can be considerable when matters are deadlocked and when user participation can contribute to a solution, when distrust of public authorities is high, when volunteers have a lot of influence, and when the decision to be reached has a great amount of interest to all of the parties that are involved. Municipal child welfare services apparently seem to fill several of these ideal criteria. On the other hand, user participation can fail when matters to be decided are not controversial or when decisions reached are set aside (p.62). Failed attempts at user participation can be undemocratic and ineffective. As a consequence, user participation should be evaluated in relation to other possible administrative reforms. One main concern of this article is to show the level of investment in increasing user participation and to compare that investment to other timely modernising initiatives in the provision of municipal child welfare services.

Norms concerning user participation in municipal child welfare services

The Law Governing Child Welfare Services, enacted in 1992, is the common frame of reference for all who are employed in municipal child welfare services. The primary reason for carrying out any initiative that is in accordance with this law is that the initiative is in the best interests of the child. The law specifies the various initiatives that can be carried out and the procedures that must be followed whenever any decisions are made. According to paragraph 6-4 of the law, in so far as it is possible, information must be gathered in co-operation with those who are affected by a possible decision. This has been interpreted as supporting user participation. Paragraph 6-3 posits that the child must be informed and should participate in any initiatives. The level of the child's participation must be in sync with the child's age and development. The older the child, the more weight is given to the child's opinions and desires. Generally speaking, parents and other adult relatives have the right to be

heard, according to the Law Governing Public Administration. The rights of users are also strengthened by Norway's approval of various European and other international agreements, in particular, the European Convention on Human Rights.

The right to collective participation is not specifically referred to in the Law Governing Child Welfare Services. However, paragraph 3-3 does require municipal child welfare services to co-operate with voluntary organisations that work on behalf of children and adolescents. This does provide an opening for collective participation.

In addition to the legal norms that child welfare workers are required to follow, workers are also influenced by the norms and regulations that have been declared by professional bodies to which they belong. These professional bodies all have declarations supporting user participation.

Method: Interviews undertaken at three selected municipal child welfare offices

Selection

The study encompasses three municipal child welfare offices, two offices that serve neighbourhoods within the city of Oslo, and one office serving the entire city of Drammen. These offices were selected because they expressed an interest in co-operating in a research project that aimed at studying user participation and professional practice in child welfare. Even though all three offices had experience with user participation, they were interested in co-operating with social researchers on the development of alternative models for individual and collective user participation. In other words, these offices were not chosen to be representative for municipal child welfare offices in general. They can be characterised as being particularly willing to undergo change. They all had the extra energy and motivation that is necessary for undertaking tasks connected to developmental work. In addition, all three offices had co-workers with extensive experience in the practice of child welfare work at the office of their employment.

The two Oslo offices had between eight and eleven co-workers each, while the Drammen office had 37 employees and was one of the largest municipal offices of child welfare services in Norway. The Drammen office had one Director of Child Welfare Services and three people in professional middle management positions. The Oslo offices were less hierarchical, although one office did have an Assistant Director of Child Welfare Services. All of the offices had a large female majority of employees, although those holding management positions were evenly divided between males and females, when all three centres were viewed together.

The Study

This report primarily builds upon the information provided by eight people in management or middle management positions. They were selected because they all had administrative tasks in addition to having contact with users. For that reason we can expect that they all had special insights into the office's organisation and forms of management.

Data was collected from questionnaires having fixed alternative answers, and this was then supplemented by interviews with open questions and answers that provided reasons for choosing the selected and fixed alternative answers. The advantage of this manner of

approach is that answers can be tabulated for the group as a whole, and at the same time individual answers can be justified and deepened.

New Public Management encompasses a series of administrative reforms that can be categorised in various ways. In an overview of the field, Hays & Kearney (1997) select five primary categories: (1) Reducing public activities, (2) introducing management techniques from the world of business, (3) de-centralisation, (4) reducing bureaucratic controls and (5) privatisation. Christensen & Læg Reid (1999, 175) only use three categories: management, organisation and market. Within each category they list a series of initiatives, including initiatives that affect relationships to users. Their list of initiatives is the primary source for the questions that are asked in our questionnaire. This makes it possible to compare most of the answers with results from earlier studies. As a comparative measure, particular value is found in being able to compare our data with the data generated by Christensen & Læg Reid. Their study consists of a large survey of public servants in Norwegian ministries and central agencies conducted at the end of the former century. The use of corresponding study instruments makes it possible to ask whether or not the three municipal child welfare offices differ, in one way or another, or if there has been important changes in the past few years. Christensen & Læg Reid conclude that NPM reforms, particularly those that are the most market-oriented, have not had any substantial impact upon public administration in Norway, when compared to other countries (1999: 184). This author believes that the answers from this study of municipal child welfare services can be compared to results generated from a case-study of a completely privatised institution (Koht 2000). As a consequence, the results of this study have been compared to studies that traverse different boundaries in the examination of managers. Managers in state bodies and at the municipal level have been compared to managers working in a private organisation.

Since Christensen & Læg Reid have placed relatively small importance upon user participation in their NPM instrument, the questionnaire used in this study has been expanded to include a wider number of user-oriented initiatives, and builds upon the categories proposed by Morten Øgård (2000: p 33). One of Øgård's three central concepts for classifying elements included in New Public Management concerns the focus given to citizens/users. The other two concepts are a belief in management and in the greater use of indirect controls. Christensen & Læg Reid and Øgård have all used their own definitions of New Public Management to carry out empirical investigations.

Results: Many, but poorly co-ordinated reforms

The results of 22 possible reforms are reported in *Table 1*. These include management, organisation and market adjustments at the three selected municipal child welfare offices. The Ryen office and the Schous office are small units that are responsible for serving limited districts within two Oslo city wards. The Ryen office serves a district within the ward called Manglerud and the Schous office serves a district within the ward called Grunerløkka-Sofienberg.³ Drammen's municipal child welfare services serve all 52,000 inhabitants of the city of Drammen.

³ The wards were re-organised on 1 January 2004. Their number was reduced from 25 to fifteen wards.

Table 1. Significance of Management Reforms at Three Child welfare Centres.

	Ryen	Schous	Drammen	
■■■■■	Consensus about the major significance of reforms			
■■■■	Major/medium significance			
■■■	Medium			
■■	Medium/minor			
■	Consensus about the minor significance of reforms			
--	No consensus about significance of reforms			
Management Reforms				
1.	Formulation of objectives	■■■■■	■	■■■■■
2.	Measurement of results, evaluation	■■■■	■■■■	■
3.	Follow-up of results	■■■■	■■■■	■■
4.	Operational planning	■■■■■	■	--
5.	Quality system management	■■■■■	■■■■	■■■■■
6.	Management development	■■■	--	■■
7.	New systems of agency control, budget guidelines	--	■■■■■	--
8.	Increased discretion in budgetary decisions	--	■■■■■	--
9.	Increased discretion in wage and personnel policies	■	■■■■■	■■
10.	Focus on increased efficiency	--	--	■■■■■
11.	Professionalisation of management role	--	■	■■■■
12.	Stricter productivity measures	■■■■■	--	■■■■
Organisational Reforms				
13.	Transferring of tasks and responsibility to the office from central agencies.	■■	■■	■■■■■
14.	Changes in the internal organisation	--	■	■■■■■
15.	Simplification of rules	--	■	■
Market Reforms				
16.	Contract systems	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■
17.	Internal markets/price mechanisms	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■
18.	Transferring tasks to private firms/interest groups	■■■■	--	■■■■
19.	Increased consumer/client participation	■■■■	--	■■■
20.	Introduction of service guarantees	■■■■	■	■
21.	Increased use of consumer surveys	■■■■	■■	■
22.	Increased use of hearings and user meetings	■■	■■	■

Management at all three offices are agreed that several large-scale administrative reforms have recently been carried out. The wide variety of the reforms that were undertaken did not create any clear agreement amongst managers regarding the meaning or importance of those reforms. Lack of consensus is marked by a line drawn in the table. Even though two of the offices are located in Oslo, the administrative reforms undertaken at those offices had very little in common. For those reforms categorised as *management*, only measures aiming at quality control were instituted at all three offices. Even though quality control is important for all three offices, views vary regarding whether or not the reform was initiated internally or externally. At the Drammen office, managers stated that the initiative for quality control was an internal development resulting from work done to create a handbook for routine case management, from the routine supervision of caseworkers, and particularly from the detailed review of difficult individual cases. At the Ryen office, quality control reforms were seen as being the consequence of the increased importance placed upon completed reports, but they were also due to the office's participation in a network that compared performance indicators, as well as the quality of intake procedures. At the Schous office, quality control reforms were

an ingredient in a required planning document, *The Schous Plan of Action for municipal child welfare services*.

Organisational reform is a high priority at the Drammen office, but this is not true for either of the Oslo offices. Under the category *market reforms*, increased use of contracts (16) and the introduction (or change) of a payment scale for services rendered, were reforms that managers at all three offices regarded as being of great importance. It is worth mentioning that the simplification of rules, a banner element in New Public Management, was completely absent on all lists of important reform initiatives.

Contracts are of importance at all three offices. They are used to secure services from providers in the private sector and they are used to organise the work done with clients. Obligatory plans of action are to be constructed together with clients/users, for all cases under treatment. For adolescents, claims are made that contracts are a tool that promotes social learning. Co-operation with institutions, weekend homes, foster homes and supportive contacts are regulated by agreements specifying services to be rendered, legal obligations incurred and economic remuneration. These agreements are highly standardised “since data programmes have built-in schemes that must be used for some of the contracts”.

The introduction of a pricing system for services rendered is a process that has been initiated by higher ranking public bodies, according to the interviews in this study. In Drammen, municipal child welfare services have been given an economic stimulus to establish alternative neighbourhood initiatives and to avoid placing clients in expensive full-care institutions. As one manager said, “We are very much involved in a process of thinking that promotes experimentation and the undertaking of trial projects, but this mentality is a drastically different one from what is found in the field.” Municipalities have been required to increase their contributions from 11,000 Norwegian crowns to 22,000 Norwegian crowns for each and every placement made in a full-care institution. This has “worked to increase the psychological tolerance we have for allowing private initiatives to attempt to tackle burdensome problems of care”. Managers at the Oslo offices have also mentioned the twists and turns affecting the provision of services and have explained these changes by pointing to the centrally determined pricing policies in public administration.

This review of the interview data shows that reform initiatives that promote the use of contracts and an active pricing policy are often generated by central municipal authorities. On the other hand, quality control initiatives are, as often as not, generated by local level public administrative offices. This may be true because quality control is a reform that is well suited to maintain and strengthen the values and skills of professional groups.

Increased participation for users and clients

What do municipal child welfare service managers have to say about user participation as a reform initiative? The data recorded in *Table 1* shows that user participation scores low on the list of reforms that have had greater importance for public administration. Even so, at two of the three child welfare offices, Ryen and Drammen, there is general agreement that increased participation for users and clients do belong to the reforms that have influenced the work recently done at those offices. In Drammen, according to the interview data, the individual caseworker is seen as being the prime mover, but since the office was engaged in a project promoting increased user influence at the time the interviews took place, there was a system in place to promote user influence. “We have had a great number of conversations and

dialogues, we have done a lot of thinking about the matter and have had visions and goals about that kind of co-operation over a lengthy period of time, but, in fact, the only effects have occurred in the most recent past.” A middle manager said, “Each and every co-worker thinks about user participation when he or she is at work.”, but that same person admitted that user participation had not developed enough to have any impact upon the way the office was organised.

At the Ryen office, one of the managers pointed out that the Law Governing Child Welfare Services, enacted in 1992, contains a much clearer statement about the rights of users than the former law did. “There is much greater consciousness of the duty to involve the client in every aspect of child welfare work that affects his or her life.” One risk is that “one may be so concerned about user participation that it can become overbearingly grave to consider a drastic intervention in order to improve the child’s situation.” Another manager at the same office believed that increasing user participation became an agenda item because of a relatively current interview investigation, but that “from the standpoint of results there have not been any real changes yet.” At the Schous office, one of the managers stated that “clients enjoy a high degree of influence in decision-making.” Still, users of that office did not register any measurable increase in their own influence.

These comments say very little about the kind of user participation the offices practice. A wide range of practices can be subsumed by the concept user participation. These range from being asked to provide information about one’s situation in life, to being included when decisions are formulated and put into practice.

The effects of reform initiatives

Have the administrative reforms led to changes in the way the offices operate? From the perspective of the managers in charge of those offices, were there noticeable results? The data presented in *Table 2* shows that managers and middle managers agree that the reforms have contributed to increased emphasis upon communicating goals and results (#1), but beyond that there is a great deal of disagreement. At the Schous office, managers agree that the reforms have strengthened employers in their efforts to control child welfare services (#2-3), but the reforms have not necessarily led to better services that meet the needs of users (#5). At the two other offices, the opposite is true. Managers there believe that the reforms have led to an improvement in the situations of users, but the reforms have not enabled employers to control the provision of child welfare services.

Table 2. Possible Effects of Management Reform. Consensus Levels at Three Child Welfare Centres.

■■■■■	Consensus regarding effects as high			
■■■■	High/medium effects of reform Fully/somewhat agree			
■■■	Medium effects			
■■	Medium to no effects			
■	Consensurs regarding effects as negligible			
--	No consensus regarding effects			

		Ryen	Schous	Drammen
1.	Increased emphasis on the communication of goals and results.	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■
2.	Improved central administrative control	--	■■■■■	--
3.	Improved political control	--	■■■■■	■■■■
4.	Improved cost control	--	■■■■■	--
5.	Improved services for clients and other users	■■■	--	■■■■■

Better services for clients and other users

As already mentioned, managers at two offices agree that the administrative reforms, all in all, have contributed to securing better services for clients and other users. However, there is no consensus in either office in regards to what the improvements consist or how they can or should be measured. Should one make an evaluation based upon internally constructed criteria or should one simply rely upon the reputation the office has in the community? In Drammen, one manager said: “I believe that our child welfare practices are better than they were before. I have been working here for a long time.” Service provision is better and child welfare services get into contact with a greater number of children who are at-risk. Another manager said: “We are struggling with organisational problems and trying to reduce expenditures. Our economic concerns and the new demands to be more effective, end up by affecting our results, which are not improving.” A third manager believes that the reputation of the office in the surrounding community, but also amongst co-operating partners, like the county government, the county commissioner and neighbouring municipalities, declaim that the professional work done by the office is of high quality. A fourth manager believes that child welfare services at the office have improved because competencies have been increased. Improved competencies result in faster service and an expansion in the variety of services being provided.

At the Ryen office, one of the two managers there claims that any improvements in the services provided to users is a result of the changes made in the Law Governing Child Welfare Services, enacted in 1992. “I am quite sure that the enactment of the new law has been a very good thing for a great number of people. The new law clearly obliges municipal child welfare services to speedily investigate and treat those cases that are brought to its attention. There has been an unmistakable improvement.” That being said, this manager is not at all sure that the other administrative reforms have improved matters for users.

The other manager at the Ryen office believes that the improvements exist because, “we are able to form our services to suit individual users who we define as having a greater need for that particular service.” On the other hand, this ability to tailor-make some services may mean that other users feel that they have needs that the office is unable to address. At the Schous office, one manager was concerned that action alternatives were drying-up. The challenges had become greater because there were not more, but fewer alternatives for users to choose. Another manager reflected upon the consequences of changes for users and claimed: “No one was worse off now (because of the changes). I won’t complain.”

Municipal child welfare offices compared to others

The results of this study cannot be generalised to include other municipal child welfare offices or any other services performed by public agencies. One may, however, evaluate whether or not the answers to our questions deviate or concur with findings from comparable investigations. In this way, one can find out whether or not particular reforms have general effects or if the selected offices have an exceptional response. The main tendencies of data from three separate studies are provided in *Table 3*. The first column consists of data from the three selected municipal child welfare offices in this study. The second column consists of data from a case-study of an institution which has formally always been privately owned, but which had formerly been under the scrutinising control of the central managers in the municipality of Oslo’s central administration for services provided to developmentally challenged (or retarded) individuals. The third column consists of data from the major study of public servants that was undertaken by Christensen & Læg Reid and published in 1999.

Table 3. Significance of NPM Reforms as Viewed by Management. Comparison of Results from Three Norwegian Surveys.

	Child Welfare Centres	Privatized Day Care Centre ^a	Civil Servants ^b
■■■■■	Consensus about the major significance of reforms		
■■■■	Major/medium significance		
■■■	Medium		
■■	Medium/minor		
■	Consensus about the minor significance of reforms		
--	No consensus about significance of reforms		
Management Reforms			
1. Formulation of objectives	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■
2. Measurement of results, evaluation	■■	■	■■■■
3. Follow-up of results	■■■	■■■■■	■■■■
4. Operational planning	--	■■■■■	■■■■
5. Quality system management	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■■
6. Management development	■■■■■	■■■	■■■■
7. New systems of agency control, budget guidelines	■■■■■	--	■■■■
8. Increased discretion in budgetary decisions	■■■■	■	■■
9. Increased discretion in wage and personnel policies	■	■■■■■	■■
Organisational Reforms			
10. Transferring of tasks and responsibility to the office from central agencies.	■■■■■	■■■■■	--
11. Changes in the internal organisation	■■■■■	--	--
12. Simplification of rules	■	■	■
Market Reforms			
13. Contract systems	■■■■■	■■■■■	--
14. Internal markets/price mechanisms	■■■■■	■■■■■	--
15. Transferring tasks to private firms/interest groups	■■■■■	--	--
16. Increased independence in generals	--	■■■■■	--
Increased consumer/client participation	■■■■■	--	--

Notes:^aPrivatized day care for mentally handicapped users. Data from Koht (2000) ^b Data from Christensen and Læg Reid (1999) has been transformed from percentages to show majority views.. N=2,397 (average). ^cQuestion directed at child welfare managers and civil servants. ^dQuestion directed at management at privatized day care centre.

A comparison of these three studies, which includes three distinct administrative levels, the state, the municipality and the private sector, shows considerable divergence resulting from the implementation of a catalogue of NPM inspired reforms. This is true even when only those opinions that have the greatest support are compared. There is a great deal of agreement regarding the importance of management by objectives (#1), quality controls (#5) and programmes that support personal development and the development of leadership skills (#6). There seems to be no agreement at all about reforms that affect organisational structure and market reforms. The three child welfare offices and the private institution have all expanded their practice of delegating authority (#10) and this has played a decisive role in the management of those institutions, and they have implemented as many as four market reforms (#13-17). Public servants, in the study published in 1999, have not experienced any of those things.

Table 4. Possible Effects of Management Reform. Comparison of Results from Three Norwegian Surveys.

	Child Welfare Centres	Privatised Day Care Centre ^a	Civil Servants ^a
<p> ■■■■■ Full consensus regarding effects ■■■■ Fully/somewhat agree ■■■ Somewhat agree ■■ Somewhat agree /disagree ■ Disagree -- No consensus regarding effects </p>			
1. Increased emphasis on the communication of goals and results.	■■■■■	■■■■	■■■■
2. Improved central administrative control	--	■	■■■■
3. Improved political control	■	--	■■■
4. Improved cost control	■■■■■	■■■■■	■■■
5. Improved services for clients and other users	■■■	■■■■■	■■■

Notes: ^a See notes in table 3.

Management by objectives has been emphasised at most administrative levels, and as a consequence, there has been an increase in communication about organisational objectives and results (#1), and this is true apparently everywhere. Once that has been said, it is important to point out that external agencies have primarily been the ones who have registered the workings of administrative reform. First and foremost, the reforms strengthen central administration in its efforts to control costs (#4). This achievement does not seem to have improved the ways in which clients are treated (#5).

Conclusion

A tentative conclusion can be drawn from this study. Municipal child welfare services have experienced several wide-ranging, but fragmented administrative reforms. All in all, these reforms have positively affected and strengthened the managerial control of services and the service provision to users. Since the reforms have been fragmented, it is difficult to argue that the initiatives are the result of a systematic and centrally led policy of modernisation. The increased and extensive use of contracts and a conscious pricing policy are reform initiatives that have been made by central administrative authorities. The direct investment in user participation is found farther down the list of administrative reforms that have been recently undertaken.

One can argue that the investment in user-friendly reforms, like quality control, are ones that are often initiated by professionals working in the field. The source for increased user participation appears to be essentially derived from professionals working in municipal child welfare services. In any case, this is a view that is often shared by local managers of child welfare services. Strengthening the influence of users, by empowerment, may have more credence and be a more forceful argument for professionals who work in the public sector, than ideas that emphasise the user role of consumer.

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