Article

Iterations of work inclusion beyond standard service: Personalised welfare services in the era of activation and innovation

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Abstract

Employment services are repeatedly criticised for building barriers to service user participation and decent employment due to combinations of conditionality, bureaucratic logics, high caseloads and scarce resources. However, a range of newer service approaches recognise some of these shortcomings, and aim for personalisation, service coordination, and/or increased connection to employers. In this article, we compare four programmes and their key worker roles, implemented in Norwegian postreform welfare and employment services (NAV) in the 2010s, as iterations of work inclusion beyond the standard follow-up service. These approaches are sensitive to gaps in the current service system, and they invest in the relationship between the professional worker and the service user, working both within and beyond social work approaches. Situated in the broader research literature on activation, personalisation and street-level organisations, we provide an analysis of how these approaches go beyond "business as usual" through strengthened key worker roles. We argue that the relational work approach adopted in these measures has the potential to foster the participation of service users, and to smoothen and sometimes tone down the conditional aspects of services, but that different organisational demands and accountability mechanisms produce a different space of action for key workers and users to shape the path towards labour and social inclusion.

Keywords: active labour market policies, personalisation, caseloads, supported employment, complex family interventions, street-level organisations, relational social work

Introduction

Strengthened active labour market policies were implemented in many European welfare states in the 1990s and 2000s (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001; Gubrium et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2023), and these were followed by organisational changes in employment and welfare services (Brodkin, 2013a; 2013b), and then later by an interest in co-creation and innovation in activation services (Larsen & Caswell, 2022; Breit et al., 2018). These changes have contributed to the development of policies and practices in this area that are multidimensional, ambiguous and changing.

In this article, we focus on four programmes, and their key workers' roles, implemented in public employment services (NAV) in Norway in the aftermath of the NAV reform (2007-2011). The NAV reform was a major organisational reform that had work inclusion, service integration across state-level and municipal services, and service improvement for users as top priorities (see Lundberg, 2012; Andreassen & Aars, 2015). The local NAV offices were structured as the key arena for serving users, and the shaping of a new NAV advisor role was intended to promote individualised and tailored services, as well as close and careful follow-up of service users (Helgøy et al., 2011). However, shortly after its launch as a new organisation, NAV was perceived by service users as a fragmented and bureaucratic organisation that was hard to navigate (Lundberg, 2012, 2018; Hansen et al., 2018; Andreassen & Aars, 2015). NAV advisors at the local NAV offices were working and coping with high caseloads and scarce resources. Local NAV offices reported capacity challenges, which led to a lower frequency of follow-ups for service users, variations in the quality of assessment and advisor work, and limited contact with employers (Andreassen & Aars, 2015; Gjersøe, 2016). NAV was also met with criticism in the public debate and later in policy and expert reports (Vågeng Committee, 2015). Key measures in the new organisation, such as the work assessment allowance scheme (AAP), were widely criticised for lacking relational, coordinative and tailored approaches, and for weak degrees of user involvement, high caseloads and limited time for NAV advisors to follow up with quality content (Terum & Jessen, 2015; Gjersøe, 2016; Øversveen & Forseth, 2018; Åsheim, 2018, 2019; Kane, 2020; Nerskogen & Kane, 2021; Røhnebæk & Breit, 2022). Service users enrolled in state and municipal benefit programmes alike have at times been locked into social

support, and shuffled around within the system (Lundberg, 2012, 2018; Åsheim, 2018, 2019; Volckmar-Eeg & Vassenden, 2022).

In recent years, NAV has been characterised by large NAV office units and the centralisation of case management and digitalisation of services (the 'channel strategy'). Although digitalisation has freed resources and led to more effective casework, it has resulted in documented negative consequences for several user groups, with limited digital and bureaucratic competence and/or Norwegian language skills (Røhnebæk, 2016; Lundberg & Syltevik, 2016; Hansen et al., 2018; Bønnhoff, 2019; Synnes, 2021). Research has revealed that NAV's needs assessment system for how to support users, organised through four administrative categories of support needs ('standard support', 'situationally adapted support', 'specially adapted support' and 'lasting adapted support'), carries risks of incomplete or incorrect user responses on digitalised standard forms, poor information resources available to users, and time pressure and high workloads among employees (Øversveen & Forseth, 2018; Kane, 2020). Kane (2020, p. 46) concludes that these needs assessment categories are too narrow; hence, decisions are prematurely made without reflecting the users' real support needs. Many service users then encounter a standard follow-up service characterised by a bureaucratic follow-up process involving the work assessment allowance scheme and economic social assistance allowance. The standard service is characterised by high caseloads combined with scarce resources, and has a more generalist approach to case management. The standard service is also a *standardised* service, marked by routinised people-processing practices.

Nevertheless, in the decade following the implementation of the NAV reform, we also see a range of new work inclusion initiatives within the NAV system that apply methods and resources that extend beyond the standard follow-up service, and include coordination and collaboration with other health and welfare services, in addition to employers in the labour market. Brodkin (2013a) conceptualises the implementation of workfare and activation policies in the 1990s and 2000s as the global workfare project's first track and strategies for management, and governance reform as the second. We see Brodkin's conceptualisation as useful for the Norwegian case, with a strong focus on the implementation of activation policies in the late 1990s, followed by organisational changes in the early 2000s. In the post-

reform period (2011-), we see an increased implementation of more participatory and innovative programmes, and personalisation mandates for key worker roles.

Although variations exist, the development and implementation of such key worker roles have been characterised by changes in street-level workers' work conditions, new initiatives from cross-sectoral participation and broader orientations toward inclusion and social investments. Although there is an expanding amount of literature on a range of such approaches (see e.g. Spjelkavik 2012; van der Aa & van Berkel, 2014; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016; Mølland et al., 2021, 2023; Skjold & Lundberg, 2022; Bakkeli & Breit, 2022; Bakken & van der Wel, 2023; Lundberg & Danielsen, 2024), there is a need for more knowledge on the variations among them, and how they frame and enable the key worker role.

We selected four iterations of work inclusion beyond the standard service for comparison: two at the national level (IPS, Extended Follow-up), one at the regional level (New Patterns) and one at the local level (NorA). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to compare and look across different versions of supported employment (SE) programmes, and to include both SE approaches IPS, Extended Follow-Up and NorA), and complex family intervention approaches (New Patterns). The term 'supported employment' refers to a method of helping people with disabilities or other disadvantaged groups find and keep paid jobs in the open labour market, which is characterised by ongoing individualised support based on the needs of both the employee and the employer through partnership strategies (EUSE, 2010, pp. 9-12). We compare these programmes, as they claim to offer an expanded version of personalisation that: i) is public-led rather than contracted-out services, ii) give expanded discretion to key workers as a basis for delivering activation services rather than attempting to constrain street-level discretion, and iii) aim to build co-productive relationships with users and employers.

The article proceeds as follows: We start by locating our study within the broader social policy and social work literature on activation and street-level organisations. We then elaborate briefly on the data and analysis, and follow with a presentation of the empirical synthesis of the four measures. In the discussion that follows, we address how these approaches may be aligned with social work practices, whether

these measures challenge or represent an alternative to the basic contours of activation policy (Koch & Reeves, 2021), and how they contribute to the overall activation and work inclusion practices in the Norwegian welfare state.

Active labour market policies, personalisation and street-level organisations

Active labour market policies embody both disciplining and enabling elements (i.e. Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Parsell et al., 2020; van Berkel et al., 2017; Wright, 2016; Howard, 2012; Gjersøe et al., 2020). Several studies across national policy contexts demonstrate how increased conditionality and blanket activation measures may disregard the heterogeneous nature of welfare recipients' lives (Wright, 2016; Larsen & Caswell, 2022). Parsell et al. (2020) noted that conditionality targets the behaviours of welfare recipients as a point of action, creating monitoring systems and eventual sanctions in case of deviation. Consequently, this affects the way unemployment is conceived as a policy problem, thereby guiding the policy solutions that become acceptable alternatives. Wright (2016, p. 236), for instance, argues that the dominant model of welfare policy reform attached to welfare conditionality reflects a policy problem definition that focuses on the individual as culpable in their unemployment state, and thereby assumes that conditionality will act as a deterrent from an overreliance on benefits, and as a motivator to seek employment. Within this 'incentive' paradigm, the welfare recipient is seen as inherently deficient, and in need of interventions to become active (Larsen & Caswell, 2022; Koch & Reeves, 2021).

On the other hand, research on personalised activation argues for the potential of social investment-oriented models of activation to deliver services in ways that empower service users (Lindsay et al., 2019). By focusing on both the procedural and substantive aspects of personalisation (Toerien et al., 2013), social investment-oriented models that focus on new relationship constellations between frontline workers, service users and other actors in the labour market may offer an alternative that realises personalisation in practice. The variations between social investment-oriented approaches and more conditionality may stem from empirical variations, which are sometimes related to different welfare regime contexts. However, this variation may also be related to differences in theoretical and analytical orientations

in empirical studies. Programmes may include both enabling and disciplining elements and, importantly, frontline workers play key roles in navigating between these policy domains.

Several empirical studies have demonstrated developments and refinements in the delivery of personalised services in conditionality settings. Previous research, mostly based on observations from within 'standard services', has shown how the coexistence of these contradictory demands is interpreted, and how practitioners balance and deal with it on the front lines (Gjersøe et al., 2020; Røhnebæk & Breit, 2022; Nielsen & Monrad, 2023, Nielsen et al., 2023). Lindsay et al. (2019) argue that approaches that prioritise frontline worker engagement with clients and employers as partners and co-producers enable the resource pooling necessary to integrate 'hard-to-place' users (Andersen et al., 2017) into the labour market. This includes working on strategies and models for the participatory involvement of practitioners and service users in generating and applying the necessary knowledge for developing active employment policy and practice (Andersen et al., 2017). In the SLB literature, the relationship between the street-level worker and the user is appended great importance. Beyond acting as moral agents (Zacka, 2018; Dubois, 2010), street-level workers also work to decouple the system from the user-worker relationship (Nielsen et al., 2023) in ways that may enable trust and personalisation. Frontline workers also negotiate hybridity beyond binaries of citizen-state agent (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022) in ways that reconcile organisational and user needs (Skjold & Lundberg, 2024; Fossestøl et al., 2015).

Hence, in this article, we investigate how measures that seek to invest in the relationship between the professional worker and the service user are framed and enabled. Our approach is inspired by Lipsky's (1980/2010) notion of front-line workers of the welfare state as 'street-level bureaucrats' who act at the interface between the state and citizens, turning policy into practice. We also draw on insights provided by Brodkin (2013a, 2013b) and Zacka (2017), who further developed Lipsky's approach. Brodkin (2013b) noted that street-level organisations are not only state agents, but also mediators of policies and politics; they "function as institutional locations in which political projects of change and welfare state transformation are advanced, contested, and, at times, realized" (Brodkin, 2013b, p. 17). Zacka

broadened this perspective by highlighting street-level bureaucrats as moral agents. The street-level implementation of public policy depends on front-line workers' capacity to remain sensitive to multiple demands (inherent in the structures and logics within which they operate) and to balance them appropriately (Dubois, 2010; Zacka, 2017, p. 11). Importantly, however, is the question of high vs. low caseloads as a structuring factor for street-level bureaucrats' work performance and discretionary work (Berkel & Knies, 2016), a concern that goes back to Lipsky's (1980) key points.

Data and analysis

The article's empirical insights are collected from four separate research projects (timeline 2019-2025) on four different programmes with personalisation mandates for key workers: Extended Follow-up, IPS, New Patterns and NorA. Although the scopes of the research themes, questions and data vary among the projects, they share some common ground, which makes them feasible for a merged analysis. All four projects are concerned with how specific programmes are situated within the larger organisational and policy landscape of welfare and employment services and active labour market policies. They also engage with the respective key workers' perspectives and reflections on their own working practices, including what influences their relationships and collaboration with service users. Our studies explore how individual and team-based professional follow-up is implemented and contextualised in local settings. Data were collected through interviews with key workers and leaders/managers of the programmes, as well as through ethnographic fieldwork (from 12 locations in New Patterns, four locations in IPS and three locations in Extended Follow-up, whereas NorA is a programme with a single location). Three of the four studies (IPS, NorA, New Patterns) include interviews with service users as well, but insights from these datasets will be presented in separate publications.

The starting point for the present study was the potential to examine iterations of work inclusion approaches within the postreform NAV organisation. We wanted to explore how, and to what extent, these programmes would be an answer to the persistent critique of high caseloads, user alienation and top-down management. By combining programme documents with data from interviews and observations, our

analysis focuses on the meso level, which is the intersection between programme design and the street level where key workers encounter service users. In essence, this means that although we do not present each programme's findings separately, the results are informed by a combination of programme documents outlining programme design, aiming for a deeper insight into how the intended objectives from these programmes play out (differently/similarly) at the service level.

Following this starting point, we conducted the analysis in several workshops by scanning commonalities in our empirical material. We identified a range of themes that marked distinctions in the approaches, and developed an overview of programme characteristics (see Table 1 below). In the later stages of our thematic analysis, we chose to concentrate on the programme designs, the key workers' roles and how key worker roles are structured by caseloads, prescribed programme methods and approaches, in addition to accountability mechanisms and requirements. These findings were then discussed considering the overall landscape of current active labour market policies and services.

Empirical analysis

Variations in Personalisation: Ideas and Implementation

To situate the implementation of these specific programmes within the postreform NAV context, we present the basic ideas upon which they were built. The first of our programmes, **Extended Follow-up**, was established as part of a 'quality reform' in NAV, following an expert report (Vågeng Committee, 2015) and a subsequent white paper (Governmental paper no. 33 (2015-2016)) that highlighted weaknesses in the NAV system, especially for following-up persons on the margins of the labour market with extensive support needs.

In the same period, a more explicit need to develop coordinated efforts between the health and labour services was developed. In 2012, an Official Norwegian Report recommended testing and adopting the individual placement and support model (**IPS)** as an approach to work inclusion that allows work and health integration (NOU, 2012:16, pp. 311-313). Moe et al. (2023, p. 614) outlined a three-part timeline that led to- and characterised+ the broad implementation of IPS in Norway: (i) seeking a

way to meet unmet needs in work and health practice (2005-2011), (ii) gathering knowledge and national evidence (2011-2015), and (iii) embedding IPS in routine practice (2016-2021). Extended Follow-up and IPS are state-level programmes. In both, a new professional category, the employment specialist, is the key role tasked with adopting the European Union Supported Employment (EUSE, 2010) framework, or the more rigid version of individual placement and support (Drake et al., 2012), as a way of personalising user follow-up and building external contact with employers.

A third iteration of work inclusion, **NorA,** is a municipal initiative directed towards work inclusion for persons with immigrant and refugee backgrounds. This programme is inspired by SE, but with less strict adherence to SE methodology than **Extended Follow-up** and **IPS**.

The Bergen municipality launched **NorA** in 2019 to counteract rising municipal costs due to the increasing number of social assistance recipients. Organised within NAV, **NorA** specifically targets long-term unemployed migrants/refugees to increase their employability. The stated ambition is to radically reduce and disrupt the increase in welfare recipients among the immigrant population, particularly those who have completed the introduction programme. **NorA** is organised as an underlying unit at one of Bergen's five local NAV offices; however, the recruitment of participants is city-wide.

While the above three iterations are anchored in the SE framework, our fourth measure, **New Patterns,** is anchored in the framework of *complex family interventions*. Complex family intervention frameworks target families with multiple challenges, in addition to sustained low income. In Norway, child and family poverty was on the rise in the 2000s. A summary of knowledge from 2014 revealed that few existing measures were coordinative, addressed both parents and children, were non-stigmatising and multifaceted, and lasted long enough to make a difference (Fløtten & Grødem, 2014; Mølland et al., 2021). Since 2014, a few new initiatives have been developed and implemented (see Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2022), including the regional programme 'New Patterns – Safe upbringing' (2015-present; see Mølland et al., 2021; Lundberg & Danielsen, 2024). The development of 'New Patterns' was led by Kristiansand Municipality, and later implemented in 12

municipalities in the counties of Agder and Rogaland. Central to this family intervention framework is the role of the family coordinator, who develops a close relationship with the family over time, and acts as a bridge builder between the family and the various public services involved. The first family coordinators started working in the autumn of 2015. Since then, nearly 200 families have been enrolled in the programme, with an equal share of native Norwegians and families with immigrant backgrounds. This comparison of programme design reveals investment in the key worker role as a common denominator.

These investments are backed by much lower caseloads, expanded room for discretion and, at least in theory, pronouncements of voluntary participation of users. At the same time, as we show in the following section, there are different structures and practices around these roles that work to inform how the interactions of work inclusion unfold. In the following section, we examine how the key worker role is structured in each programme.

Variations in key worker roles

Although all four approaches invest in the relationship between the service user and the key worker, the organisation, form and duration of these relationships vary, as do the aims and methods applied and the guidelines for the recruitment of users. Key workers' caseloads are generally much lower in these measures, ranging from 12-20 job seekers per key worker for Extended Follow-up, IPS and NorA. In New Patterns, each family coordinator serves up to 10 families. In contrast, the caseworkers providing standard service follow up with between 40 and 100 service users.

Building on lower caseloads, in the two national programmes, **Extended Follow-up** and **IPS**, the employment specialist is a central resource whose role is to carve out a route to meaningful employment for the job seeker. The programmes presuppose close and meaningful interactions between job seekers, their employment specialists and potential employers. Through regular contact, job seekers and their employment specialists draw up a workable plan for employment. Employment specialists maintain an open communication channel with job seekers through access to personal telephone numbers, meetings outside of physical NAV offices and regular

visits to potential employers. Hence, the programme employs strengthened user participation through collectivising responsibility and support towards employment.

IPS shares common ground with **Extended Follow-up** in the ways in which employment specialists build relationships with service users and employers but has, in addition, formal streamlined and close connections to health services. In our study, each of the four shadowed employment specialists in IPS belonged to one mental health treatment team, and participated in at least one weekly meeting with the rest of the team. Across locations, **IPS** employment specialists described their ways of delivering **IPS** as 'methodical, but not slavish'. The maximum of 20 active cases in the portfolio was noted as one of the important prerequisites for making and implementing well-tailored plans, and for having room for adjustments along the way. Similarly, **NorA**, the municipal programme targeting people with immigrant backgrounds, focuses on more frequent communication and in-depth knowledge of users' situations and preconditions, to help increase participation in employment or qualifications for employment over time. Service workers are organised into two separate teams. The qualification team organises short courses that service users take part in, such as 'Health and work', 'Digital competence' and 'Personal economy and work', and a weekly collective 'Walk and talk' to varying destinations is also organised. The 'Market team' has a proactive role in identifying established and new employers for users. They build and maintain contacts with employers for *'work practice'* or employment. They also invite potential employers and employment agencies to conduct job interviews. These jobs usually have few formal criteria, such as education or previous experience (i.e. factory work, cleaning, work in large shops, etc.).

Across the three SE programmes, contact between the key worker and the job seeker extends beyond formal meetings to include short encounters, deeper conversations, and even casual everyday talk about topics other than job hunting and life challenges. The key workers often act as a link to other service providers, or as a coordinator and organiser for clarifications or meetings with other parties.

In **New Patterns**, the key workers are family coordinators. They work to build relations that extend beyond the service users and employers. They add to existing

services, aiming to coordinate services, including public services, and NGOs to address *the whole family*. Furthermore, the families are key players in the relationship, with a high level of user participation involved. The efforts may include a focus on not only employment as an objective for family members, but also wider issues related to the family's situation and needs beyond employment, with an awareness of how families are caught up in structural and social inequalities. Family coordinators provide a combination of practical help, administrative assistance and emotional support. They seek to build a relationship of trust, which is vital for providing effective support to all family members in the present and later in the intervention process, including children in their transition to adulthood. As is often the case with service users in SE programmes, families in **New Patterns** often perceive a sharp divide between the family coordinator and the NAV system. They see the family coordinator as an ally against a system with which they often have had a difficult relationship. The family coordinators also see themselves as making a difference to families, and may often go beyond traditional professional roles to provide practical tips and information to service users, negotiating systemic barriers to enable users to access the benefits to which they are entitled.

While close relationships are important for personalisation in all four programmes, the scope, duration and depth of the relationships vary, and seem to be the most comprehensive in New Patterns.

Accountability in key worker-roles

As the four programmes range from the municipal to the national level, they are anchored in different parts of the partnership structure in NAV, and are governed in different ways. We focus on the various accountability mechanisms and requirements of the different programmes, and how they are structured around the key workers. By accountability mechanisms, we refer to modes of account giving (Dubnick, 2005), connected to what forms of expectations the programmes' workers must fulfil.

Extended Follow-up and **IPS** exist within a largely hierarchical system, with a strict reliance on rules and guidelines. These include, but are not limited, to accountability requirements (Skjold & Lundberg, 2022). In **Extended Follow-up**, examples of

accountability requirements are related to time out of office ('utetid' 40%), employer contacts (six new per week) and an annual work transition requirement of 65% (NAV, 2020).

In **IPS**, in addition to measurement indicators linked to the participants' status/situation (age, end goal, reasons for programme termination, level/service content of the IPS course, etc.), the number of active participants (target numbers 17-20) and exit to work/education per man-year is reported. Overall performance targets for the calendar year are that 50% of the participants should be in work/education when leaving the programme, and that each employment specialist should have a minimum of 12 participants starting work/education. In our empirical data, we observed varying strategies at the team level with respect to how to approach the accountability requirements. In **Extended Follow-up**, this ranged from strict adherence to mitigating measures and reframing (Skjold & Lundberg, 2022). In our **IPS** locations, the employment specialists conveyed that they strive to reach the target figures. However, they underscored that the IPS label requires that different players and services contribute to ensuring joint service provision. Hence, the responsibility to meet performance and quality indicators does not rest solely on the individual employment specialist's shoulders. In addition, although generally expressing confidence in the IPS model's advantages, they emphasised that individual needs and aspirations trump principles and fidelity scores if consideration of the candidate's unique situation dictates doing things differently.

In **NorA**, service workers have some leeway in defining the activity expectations of service users, but there is regular managerial control through weekly staff meetings and monthly reports. When service users leave the programme, 60% of them should be employed with > 50% engagement, with or without *wage subsidies.* It is estimated that up to 20% of users leaving the programme do so owing to health-related issues and/or the need for health clearance, whereas the quotas for education or other issues are 10%. Efforts and 'results' are monitored through weekly meetings among employees and team leaders, where the status and processes of clients are discussed, as well as through monthly reports concerning the status of the larger group of employees.

Accountability mechanisms have a more vertical structure in the state-level programmes (**Extended Follow-up** and **IPS**) than in the municipal programmes, and are more vertical in all SE programmes than in family intervention programmes. In **New Patterns**, family coordinators are oriented towards making the system accountable to the families they follow up with. Their role is guided by agenda-setting in collaboration with the families. These collaborative strategies are documented annually in each family's 'family plan' and through a family coordinator manual, providing general guidelines for mapping the family's situation and advice on how to work with a range of pressing issues, e.g., to stabilise a debt situation that is out of control; avoid eviction or work toward more appropriate housing; or to contact health services to investigate undiagnosed health issues and apply for health-related benefits, to mention but a few. These guidelines are framed to assist in improving long-term objectives across generations in the family rather than monitoring specific activities and short-term results, as is the case within the accountability mechanisms in the SE approaches described above.

The above elucidation indicates that while the programmes develop and strengthen the key worker role and the relationship between key workers and service users, they specialise in different ways and are based on different service designs. In addition, these different iterations are marked by contrasting governing principles, ranging from large-scale, top-down, state-level implementation with strict accountability criteria to the development of more small-scale, bottom-up approaches at local levels. Herein lies the potential and limitations of new frontline worker roles for personalisation in the context of public sector-led activation services.

Table 1: Overview of the main features of the included programmes, and the characteristics of the participants and key workers.

	Extended Follow-up	**IPS**	**New Patterns**	**NorA**
Geographic coverage	Nationally	Nationally	Twelve municipalities in the counties of Agder and Rogaland	Bergen municipality
Initiated by whom, when	Central NAV, 2016	Directory of Health and Central NAV, 2012 (Pilots 2012-2016)	Kristiansand Municipality and partners, 2018	Bergen Municipality, 2019-2020
Programme objective	Employment in ordinary jobs on competitive terms for service user	Employment in ordinary jobs on competitive terms for service user	Countering negative, social inheritance between generations	Fast-track job participation or short-term educational activities that will increase employability
Programme inspired by	Supported Employment	Supported Employment	Complex Family Interventions	Supported Employment
Target group	Unemployed persons at risk of long-term welfare dependency and social exclusion	Unemployed persons with mental health or substance abuse issues	Families with complex assistance needs who live on a persistently low-income	Adult migrants who have completed the introduction programme and other unemployed migrants registered with NAV
Duration of the measure for the user	Up to 3 years. Up to 4 years for users < 30 years of age	Up to 3 years. Up to 4 years for users < 30 years of age	5 years	Maximum 2 years ("the faster the better')
Benefits for subsistence	Work assessment allowance (or other social insurance benefits). Social assistance allowance. Employment scheme benefits.	Work assessment allowance. Disability benefits. Employment scheme benefits. Supplementary social assistance allowance.	Social assistance allowance. Work assessment allowance.	Social assistance allowance. Qualification programme support (KVP)
Key worker	Employment specialist	Employment specialist	Family coordinator	Advisor
Educational background key workers	Diverse	Diverse	Mainly social work	Diverse, predominantly higher university degree (master's level). 50% social work

Concluding discussion

In this article, we pursued a comparative exploration of four measures addressing unemployment and poverty issues that extend the boundaries of NAV's 'standard service' to service users. The aim of this comparison is to examine the potential for new key worker roles to offer personalisation and work inclusion beyond the standard service. We analysed variations among the programmes concerning how they frame and enable key worker roles. As described in the empirical presentation, the four approaches were developed and implemented within current active labour market policies and the postreform NAV organisation. They are, however, rooted in distinct representations of policy issues related to integration, poverty, health and unemployment. More specifically, **Extended Follow-up** is anchored in an evaluative critique of flaws inherent in the NAV system. **IPS** aims to link efforts between health services and employment services. **New Patterns** was developed as a _response to policy unease connected to increases in child poverty and inequalities, whereas **NorA** emerged as a local response to the increasing municipal costs of social assistance, especially for persons with non-Western immigrant backgrounds. The four iterations resonate well with Brodkin's (2013a) idea of activations' second track, which reflects reforms in governing activation. These iterations, we can argue, represent hybrids of New Public Governance thinking based on collaboration, while also retaining remnants of New Public Management ideas of accountability and control. The iteration's policy design emphasises the former, while practical implementation is in some cases shadowed by the latter. This places key workers at the centre of negotiating this hybridity (Nielsen, Dall, & Madsen, 2023) in their attempt to build relations with users, while also keeping the organisational objectives in view.

From the empirical analysis, the measures place personalised service and the relational aspects of social work and people processing at the core of service delivery through strengthening the service user—key worker relationship. A prerequisite for personalisation is lower caseloads than what is practised in standard follow-up service (Fuertes & Lindsey, 2016; Heidenreich & Rice, 2016; Skjold & Lundberg, 2022). Lower caseloads are a part of the service design of all four programmes in our study. Reduced caseloads are a precondition to building trust, as they free up time

for relational work (Dall & Danneris, 2019; Casswell & Dall, 2022). For example, in **New Patterns**, the family intervention measure focuses on child poverty, and the family coordinator role is focused on building trust, providing practical and emotional support and navigating organisational barriers for the families. The focus is on the whole family and on building the capacities of parents as a preventive measure against poverty in the next generation. This approach suggests public services recognise the relational nature of poverty, in the sense that the experience of poverty is determined by others, and not only the self (Lister, 2016, p. 141). The strengthening of the relational aspect of follow-up has commonalities with work methods and principles in traditional social work. This relational focus has the potential to enable key workers to advocate for users and strengthen worker-user relationships (Nielsen et al., 2023), even in the face of conditionality.

At the same time, it varies to what extent personalised service and the core ideals of relational work are enabled by the accountability mechanisms that govern the key worker roles. With regard to the national cases (**IPS** and **Extended Follow-up**) that have been rolled out into mainstream service, the findings from our own and other studies offer mixed signals regarding the local implementation of personalised services, especially in relation to the context-specific nature of interpretations that follow personalisation, which produced varying degrees of service user inclusion. In some **Extended Follow-up** study locations, there is a genuine drive to involve and encourage service users in finding solutions to work and social exclusion; in other locations, the focus is on activation, producing minor variation from the standard service (e.g. Breit et al., 2018; Bakkeli & Breit, 2022; Skjold & Lundberg, 2022). Similarly, some of the activities in **NorA** related to matching participants with employers and quick turnarounds to work practices, and other work-related activities, share commonalities with practices in standard service follow-up. In this sense, 'work inclusion beyond the standard service' should be seen as a continuum rather than a fixed entity, both within and across programmes. In this way, reduced caseloads alone may not be enabling for personalisation, if accountability mechanisms work in such a way as to constrain relational work.

The strengthened key worker roles through lower caseloads and expanded discretion have the potential to enable tailored services that also include a whole-of-life

perspective of users. Yet, we also note that these services are offered at the discretion of NAV, and the individual service user cannot freely choose between the different versions of follow-up services. There is a danger then that expanded discretion may be used to push users in a direction that meets the organisation's objectives, which can be further exacerbated by the system-generated accountability needs attached to key workers within these measures. One of the consequences can be creaming; that the most employable individuals are prioritised for follow-up at the expense of people with the greatest challenges (Gjersøe & Strand, 2021). Creaming is also pointed out as a potential downside linked to **IPS's** development from vocational rehabilitation organised within health services to a welfare employment scheme in NAV (Moe et al., 2023, p. 619). We suggest that the risk of creaming could also be of concern if the **New Patterns** model is implemented nationally and linked to NAV's managerial norms.

This concern demonstrates that the promise of personalisation should be evaluated considering the organisational setup of employment services, and how conditionality and voluntariness intersect to enable or constrain action (Larsen & Caswell; 2022, Koch & Reeves, 2021). In that way, models that work for personalisation, such as SE and IPS, can only be evaluated as they come to life through patterns of action and institutional interactions (Dall & Danneris, 2019; Bakkeli & Breit, 2022; Larsen & Caswell, 2022). Thus, while these iterations of personalised service are welcome innovations in addressing work and social exclusion, policymakers and other stakeholders should not lose sight of the methods, the resource situation and the organisational structures of standard services that cater to most welfare recipients. Efforts to improve standard services may well be as valid as designing and implementing new programmes that address only a portion of the population that experiences unemployment and social exclusion.

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