

Choice and Control

Discussion attended by over 100 carers and professionals, (approx 65% carers) at the Worcestershire Association of Carers AGM in Worcester on 16th October 2009

Assessments and recognition of needs.

Carers were unanimous in their view that many service users, and the carers acting on their behalf, would find the long self-assessment form difficult to fill in. If applicants do not have knowledge of the significance of questions, their entitlements and the help available their answers could be inadequate, resulting in them missing out on services. It was considered essential that there should be well-trained advisors available to help with form filling, but concerns as to whether provision would meet increased demand. Also concern that advisors should be independent of the budget providers.

Help would be needed for children, those who lack mental capacity or are too ill to participate. Objective advice is needed when the cared-for or carer underestimate, deny or fail to recognise their needs. Carers' tasks can be taken for granted. There needs to be good monitoring of the accuracy of assessment forms. There can also be conflicts of interest and differences of opinion between cared-for and carer, when what seems necessary and beneficial to one may not be beneficial and practical for the other. The assessment focuses on the service-user and there were concerns about the Carer's views and situation being taken into account and given equal importance. Reviews of assessments are important as the health of both cared-for and carer can change.

WCC RESPONSE:

We have now revised the pathway and the documentation based on feedback from service users, carers and staff. The Self Assessment questionnaire is now not linked to the allocation of resources. It is now designed to give service users an opportunity to state their own needs and the outcomes they wish to achieve. It is now more straightforward to complete and forms the first part of the assessment process. The form is sent out to service users prior to the professional assessment. Some people fill this in themselves but some are assisted by staff when they begin the assessment. Carers assessments are offered as appropriate at this stage also. The assessment process takes into account needs, risks, and outcomes service users wish to achieve. Mental capacity issues are considered during this process.

Following the self-assessment and the professional assessment a budget calculator is then completed with the service user and carer and this is then considered by the funding panel (the Resource Allocation Panel). The panel consider the assessment, the carer's assessment as well as the budget calculator in determining the funding to be allocated. If funding is required urgently, interim packages of care can be set up prior to panel. All efforts are made to ensure the carers assessment is completed before the funding panel approves the final allocation. Once funding is agreed the social worker assists with preparing a support plan.

Financial implications of the system.

Carers questions included: Will there be a choice as to whether the cared-for or the carer holds the budget, e.g. when for children or those lacking mental capacity?

WCC RESPONSE:

Individual budgets may be taken as Direct Payments or the Council can purchase service on behalf of the service user (fully supported route). If taken as a Direct Payment and there are Mental Capacity issues, carers can act on service users behalf – this is the same as with current Direct Payments guidance.

How is the budget level decided?

WCC RESPONSE:

See above – the budget calculator is completed. During the learning phase, the Resource Allocation Panel approves the level of funding – work is underway to consider the most appropriate way to allocate funding in the longer term.

How is spending monitored and who is audited?

WCC RESPONSE:

Auditing arrangements for those who take the Individual Budget as a Direct Payment are likely to be similar to current arrangements and will be proportionate it should not be too onerous while at the same time as ensuring the money allocated is being used effectively and appropriately.

Will the budget affect other benefits?

WCC RESPONSE:

This is an allocation of Adult Social Care funding. It does not directly affect other welfare benefits, but service users will still be subject to a financial assessment and charges or contributions may be required.

Can carers pool funds to purchase services together?

WCC RESPONSE:

The allocation of funding is for the service user rather than the carer, but we have experience within the current Direct Payments of people pooling their funding for example for day activities. This would need to be agreed on the support plans, which are signed off by the social work team manager

If a carer needs to get administrative help, (e.g. bookkeeping) does the budget pay?

WCC RESPONSE:

Some one off costs can be provided if necessary.

Does the budget pay for brokerage fees?

WCC RESPONSE:

There are no charges for brokerage services.

It would be important to have rescue systems if things go wrong, e.g. if an unsuccessful choice of service-provider is made, or money runs out before the allocation period ends, or a self-manager cannot cope, or there are unpredicted crises or changes of circumstances. There should also be safeguards against financial abuse or exploitation.

WCC RESPONSE:

The support plan is put in place and reviewed after four weeks or as frequently as necessary. Ongoing risk assessments provide safeguards in the same way as at present. If circumstances change reassessment takes, place and support plans are amended as necessary.

Concerns were raised about those who do not meet the eligibility criteria and about the different rights for those born with disabilities and those who develop them later.

WCC RESPONSE:

Eligibility criteria are still in place under the Fair Access to Care Services (FACS) guidance. The County Council provide or arrange services for those with critical or substantial needs. All service users and carers are entitled to an assessment of their needs. For those people who do not meet eligibility criteria they are provided with information and advice and signposted to other services or agencies.

There were concerns that the system might be more costly (and time-consuming) for carers, with hidden costs to facilitate services. However, a wider range of services might now be included in the funding remit, which could reduce costs for some.

WCC RESPONSE:

We are continually reviewing the pathway and processes during the learning phase to ensure it is as streamlined as possible for all concerned. This will continue into next year also. It will be important in the current financial climate to ensure all systems are as cost effective as possible.

Using the individual budget.

In practice, the work of managing the budget and care provision would often fall on the carer not the service user. The majority of carers did not wish to take on complete control. They felt the level of responsibility, risk and expertise required would add too great a burden to already stressful and busy lives. Some would not have sufficient ability or health. Some felt that being so personally involved could be difficult.

WCC RESPONSE:

No service user or carer will be obliged to take on the Individual Budget as a direct payment. Once the allocation of funding is agreed people can opt to be fully supported in purchasing services or can take only part of the funding as a direct payment and the rest as supported. Arrangements can be as flexible as necessary. The important element is that people are aware of the funding allocated and the council are purchasing on their behalf.

Would self-managers be disadvantaged if they needed emergency services from ACS? Would there be flexibility to change track?

WCC RESPONSE:

Part of the support planning process involve looking at contingency arrangements should circumstances change. In emergencies, services could be provided, but it is always helpful to consider these contingencies in advance. If a support plan does not seem to be working a review can take place and amendments made.

In particular, carers were daunted by the prospect of becoming employers of care-providers. Most would need very good training, information and support to take on the legal and financial requirements of employment law, recruitment & dismissal, holiday cover, insurance, etc. Would this be funded and available? Would the needs of different categories of service user be addressed? Who would provide this since social workers might not have the time or expertise?

WCC RESPONSE:

Support can be provided for people who wish to become employers in a similar way to that support provided to people on the Direct Payments scheme. A support agency is contracted by the Council to provide this support.

Information & advice would also be needed to help carers find and choose services (with or without internet access) and know what services (for advice or care) were available and of good quality.

WCC RESPONSE:

A web-based database is under development with information about different services and agencies – this will be available to many voluntary sector agencies as well as statutory agencies and service users and carers.

How would quality be monitored and published, for users and for ACS? Would there be redress for poor quality? A system of Choice only works if there are sufficient good services available throughout the region, to get what need not just, what is available.

WCC RESPONSE:

If services are under contract with the County Council, they are subject to our normal contract monitoring arrangements. The Care Quality Commission (CQC) monitors some services such as home care and residential care and information about all registered services is available from the CQC website

There were concerns about service users being in direct competition for services and about how the brokerage system will work.

WCC RESPONSE:

The brokerage team will source services for service users as required. The market place will need to be continually developed to meet the changing needs of service users and carers. The Joint Commissioning Unit is working with providers to help them develop flexible services as demand changes.

Choice & Control – benefit or burden?

Some carers felt that statutory services wanted to move their responsibilities to carers and expect them to be unpaid, untrained professionals.

WCC RESPONSE:

The situation with regard to carers is not directly impacted on by the new government policy agenda, in respect to there being no additional resources available. The agenda is about using those resources in as flexible a way as possible to enable people to have more choice and control. Indirectly, carers may benefit from service users having more flexible support plans that are tailored to individual circumstances.

Most felt that the system could be of benefit to those who wanted more choice and control in arranging their own services, and that the three options of complete control, part control or ACS control gave greater flexibility. It is vital that these three choices remain genuine and equally resourced, with no pressures on which is chosen.

WCC RESPONSE:

It is our intention to ensure that people continue to have choice over how they access their funding.

The system will only work if there is sufficient money to maintain and monitor a choice of good services, give realistic levels of budgets, and provide training, advice and support services alongside.

WCC RESPONSE:

Agreed but it must be remembered that local authorities are operating with tight financial constraints in the current climate and the emphasis will continue to be to provide as cost effective services as possible.

NOTE: The Choice & Control team have a Carer & User reference group whom they consult regularly.