

Focus group on Direct Payments

19th November 2010, 10-12, St Mary's Church and Conference Centre

The meeting was attended by Amanda Hill (Team Manger, Children with Disabilities Service), Ellie Crawford (Officer for DPs, children and adults), Eva Juusola (Development Worker for the Sheffield Parent Carer Forum), and five parent carers. Four of these parent carers had already had a social care assessment, and three had experience of Direct Payments (DPs).

Amanda informed parents that she is currently reviewing of the DP system in Sheffield, with a view to introducing Individual Budgets in early 2011. She is keen to hear about parents' experiences of applying for and using DPs, and how the service can be improved.

Amanda explained that the legislation on Direct Payments is being interpreted differently by different Local Authorities.

In Sheffield, around 70 families of disabled children are currently receiving DPs from Social Care Services. The majority of these have obtained DPs via a social care assessment, which assesses how the needs of the family can best be met. If a social care need has been identified (e.g. a family might be assessed as needing 5 hours of support per week), then the family is entitled to request DPs and use these to make their own arrangements to meet that identified need.

Social care assessments

Parent A described her recent experience of a social care assessment. During the assessment, the parent talked to the social worker about several options that she was aware of (e.g. SNIPs, overnight respite), but made it clear that she was mostly interested in DPs. The social worker informed her that the decision about which provision she was entitled to would be made by a panel, and that the panel's decision would be final. The parent was not told what kind of panel this was, or who sat on it. She found it frustrating that she was unable to engage with the panel, e.g. via a written submission. It was also not clear whether the social worker who had done the assessment would be presenting information to the panel, or whether this would be done by the worker's manager, who had never met the family. The parent felt that decisions should not be made by anonymous panels.

Amanda agreed that this needed to change, and said that she would go and observe a panel meeting.

Parent A also felt that the assessment was very resource-led, and appeared to have an element of means-testing. She was asked about her family's finances, and felt that she had to justify how she spends her DLA. For her the assessment was an intrusive and upsetting experience. She subsequently emailed the worker's manager to ask for information about eligibility criteria, but never heard back. The parent suggested that parents should be informed about eligibility criteria before an assessment takes place. Parent A voiced concerns that competent parents are being penalised as social workers prioritise families who are in crisis; however, this leaves no room for early intervention.

Parent B reported that her case had gone to panel three times, yet she never received any paperwork, and had never seen her assessment report. She also felt unable to talk openly during the assessment as her child was present throughout, and no attempt was made to talk to her on her own.

Several parents reported that they were asked at their assessments how many hours of support they wanted - a question they found difficult to answer. They felt that they should have been given some guidance as to what would constitute a realistic figure.

Amanda pointed out that the assessment should identify need, and that the social worker should come to a common agreement with the family regarding the support required.

Parent A felt that the social worker who came to assess her family was not familiar with the criteria or the process for direct payments. The report written by this worker contained several errors, including getting the name and age of the parent wrong. It did include all the information provided by the parent, but this was not presented in a way that would have been meaningful to the panel. The outcome of the panel meeting was that the parent was offered overnight respite and a SNIPS placement, but the request for DPs was declined.

Amanda confirmed that families who have been assessed as being entitled to a social care service have a right to request DPs instead. She advised that parent A is entitled to request DPs instead of the service she had been offered. Amanda expressed concerns about the fact that families have such different experiences - she has received very positive and very negative feedback from parents in Sheffield. The quality of social workers seems to vary widely, and there seem to be no terms of reference for them.

Flexibility

Parent A reported that following her social care assessment, she had another assessment which was carried out by a worker from SNIPS. The parent found the placement which was subsequently offered by SNIPS to be unsuitable for her child, as it was too crowded and noisy. She was informed by the staff there that the placement had originally been set up for 6 children, but was now admitting up to 16 children at a time.

Parent B reported that she was asked during her social care assessment what kind of service she would like. When she told the social worker what her needs were, she was told that such a service didn't exist; later on, it was reported that she hadn't asked for anything.

Parent B criticised that over the summer, her son was offered a placement at Work Ltd. with a 1:1 assistant. The parent would have preferred to have just the 1:1 assistant, but was told that this wasn't possible. She also found that the Saturday club would sometimes ring her up to cancel at the last minute as they didn't have enough staff to meet the needs of her child. She reported that for a family who is under enormous stress, seemingly minor things like this can have a massive impact.

Parent B reported that all her child's services were withdrawn abruptly when there was a sudden change in her child's needs which required his usual settings to carry out new risk assessments and provide extra staff training. While this was going on, no alternative service was offered, despite the fact that the family was in a state of crisis.

Parent C had requested overnight respite at her social care assessment, but this was refused by the panel. Instead, she was offered 5 hours of direct payments, with no reasons given. When she questioned the decision, she was offered the opportunity to have another assessment, but refused this as she felt that her child's needs hadn't changed.

Parent D found her social care assessment a very intrusive and upsetting experience, but was then granted 5 hours of DPs per week. This has had a very positive impact on her family. She feels that the DPs have given her a new lease of life, and transformed the life of the entire family.

Information and support

All of the parents present complained about being passed from pillar to post and having to provide the same information over and over again.

Parents noted that services would often promise to get back to them, and then fail to do so. Telephone messages frequently went unanswered; the response to emails was better. Parents usually had to chase up the information they needed, e.g. they had to phone up to find out the outcome of their assessment, their child's start date at a playscheme, etc.

Amanda confirmed that someone should always reply to any message.

Parents observed that it is very hard to constantly chase things up when the family is in a state of crisis. They suggested that there should be a brokerage service (like in adult self-directed support) and a one-stop shop for information where families should be told about the

options available to them. Parents suggested that the Parent Carer Forum could be commissioned to provide an advocacy and support service for families seeking DPs.

Parents reported that they had not routinely been offered a Carer's Assessment. Amanda pointed out that a Carers' Assessment should be incorporated into the child's assessment. However, parents can request a separate Carers' Assessment if they feel that their needs are not being fully addressed through the child's assessment, e.g. because they have mental health problems.

Parents reported that many people are frightened of social services, as they worry that they will take their children away. This fear only intensifies as a family slips further and further into crisis.

Complaints procedure

Parents reported that they were given a feedback sheet at the assessment, but found it difficult to find the time to fill this in. A parent suggested that it might be more useful if a manager were to follow up an assessment with a brief phone call the next day.

One parent had put in a formal complaint, but had not heard back within the timescales.

Amanda felt that parents should have someone to go to if they get "stuck" in the system. In the interim, she proposed that parents who need help with DPs should contact her directly on 07791959536.

Procedures

Ellie Crawford (Officer for all DPs, both for children and adults) informed parents that her department deals with the setting up and monitoring of Direct Payments, but NOT with the assessment/allocation process. She has found that a lot of adults and relatively few children in Sheffield receive DPs.

Parents pointed out that the prospect of having to become an employer and all the responsibility and paperwork that this entails is putting many parents off applying for DPs.

Ellie explained that there are ways around this: there are now several companies who can organise DPs on parents' behalf. She outlined the different options:

Payroll service: This is currently provided by organisations like the Penderell's Trust. Parents set up a bank account and fill in timesheets, which they send back to the Trust. The Trust then calculates National Insurance and salaries and sends the parents a payslip. Parents then pay their child's carer directly.

Managed account: Under this arrangement an organisation holds and manages the money on behalf of the family. Parents still have to fill in a timesheet and assume responsibilities as an employer. There is a fee attached to this, but this is paid by the Council.

A third option is currently being developed, whereby an organisation would employ the carer on the family's behalf. Again, fees would be paid by the Council.

Parents can also use agencies which employ carers; however, this means that parents have no control over who supports their child.

Parent C had received a letter 3 weeks ago informing her that DPs had been agreed. She enquired when the actual payments would start, and whether they would be backdated to the date of the letter. Ellie stated that the start date for DPs is when the support starts.

However, in order for support to start, the carer employed by the family must have a CRB check. CRB checks are handled by Capita and currently take around 3-6 weeks to come through. Fees are paid by the Council. Parent E enquired what would happen if she employed a worker from another country - would the Council request a CRB check from the country of origin? Amanda stated that if the foreign worker was already a UK resident, then a British CRB check would be required. The Council currently has no policy for CRB checking workers who are not yet UK residents. Ellie promised to look into this.

Ellie invited parents with any queries about the setting up or monitoring of DPs (NOT the assessment/allocation process) to get in touch with her by ringing her on 0114 2735461, or by contacting the team number 0114 2735985.

Direct Payments for childcare

SNIPS currently provide DPs for working parents of disabled children over the age of 5 which cover the "additionality" required by the child. In practice, this means that the DPs equal the cost of 1:1 support (£7.35 per hour) minus the average childcare cost for a non-disabled child (£3.25 per hour). Parents were concerned that this service has not been widely advertised, and asked Amanda to find out how many families in Sheffield have accessed this service to date.

Amanda said that she is due to meet with Karen Hazlehurst, Pat Kluczewski and Kit Moran next week to get a clearer picture. In her opinion, DPs for childcare are different from DPs for social care services, as the latter are not intended to enable someone to work.

Direct Payments for short breaks services

Amanda felt that DPs for short breaks services which have been arranged under the Aiming High for Disabled Children programme have caused some confusion, as the idea of giving a family a short break from caring is different from DPs for a family in need. 350 families in Sheffield have so far accessed DPs for short breaks services. However, there may be no funding for short breaks next year.

There are currently several tiers of short breaks services:

Tier 1: universal provision, e.g. holiday clubs, after-school clubs, Brownies; these can be accessed by all children, and are often fee-paying.

Tier 2: SNIPS services, either at a basic or at an enhanced level. SNIPS are not part of the social care service. Parents can request DPs from SNIPS in lieu of a service.

Tier 3: Overnight respite. This is funded by social care services.

Tier 4: Residential care, fostering etc.

Parents felt that the different levels of service, access routes and eligibility criteria should be widely publicised. Parents from the Forum were involved in a working group which produced a draft document, but have not heard any more about it.

Next steps

Amanda summarised the messages she is taking away from the meeting - the need to improve the quality of assessments, to provide better information for families, to have a central point for parents to register complaints, and for more transparency, more consistency, and better partnership working with families.

Amanda will feed parents' views back to the service manager and assistant director, and to multi-agency meetings on DPs which will take place in December. She will also follow up the individual issues raised by the parents who attended the meeting.

Amanda promised to feed back to the Parent Carer Forum in January.

Matthew Sampson (Deputy Director of Fieldwork) is keen to speak to parents.