

Voluntary sector shows strengths in helping people to decide how to spend personal budgets

Our project shows the sector follows up well and helps people to get an established support plan to work properly. For greater efficiency, these groups should be involved earlier.

“Good shopping is about much more than just having enough money,’ explains Dr Val Williams. ‘You do need enough cash, and you also need to know how much you have got. But sometimes it helps to have someone along with you, to help you make decisions. That can make all the difference.’

That’s the principle behind research looking at how older people, those with learning disabilities, and those with mental health problems make decisions about their personal budgets for support services.

Traditionally social workers have done that job, but the Government wants the voluntary sector and user-led organisations to help out more. The big question is: what works best for those who may have difficulty in deciding things for themselves?

‘We quickly realised that, in reality, local authorities are reluctant to let go of this role,’ says Dr Sue Porter, research fellow at the University of Bristol’s Norah Fry Research Centre. ‘So, our research is refocusing more on assessing ad hoc help from voluntary and user-led groups.’

She adds: ‘We’re finding that they have a lot of strengths; following up, helping



people to get a support plan to work properly after it is already in place. However, it may be more efficient if these groups were involved at an earlier stage’.

The project won’t complete until 2013, but it is already questioning some conventional views.

‘Some may expect to see a picture of people going to user-led groups for a sympathetic ear, but using local authorities for real expertise,’ says Dr Williams. ‘However, in previous research, we found that user-led organisations have the expertise and information that disabled people need to make key decisions for their support planning.’

Some of the learning is also already being transmitted – and is changing practice – even as the research is on-going.

Steve Strong, from the National Development Team for Inclusion, is working with the team in order to promote better partnership between the voluntary and statutory sectors. 'We have brought professionals from both sectors together in two rounds of workshops, so that each can appreciate the strengths of the others,' says Dr Williams.

Help with support planning

'Local authorities are asking us to offer training and to share our learning about how good support planning can work. It shows how research can itself be a conduit for disseminating best practice between providers,' she adds.

The Bristol study is unusual in that it involves services users and carers at its core, as advisors, and can draw on Dr Porter's expertise as someone living with a disability herself.

'To have someone with direct experience of impairment and being disabled by society makes a big difference to any project,' says Dr Williams. 'That experience is reflected back into our thinking about the project and helps to break down the "them and us" situation that can sometimes occur between researchers and participants. We are trying to make sure that we understand the issues from the point of view of people who are disabled themselves.'

Personal approach is valued

The research has uncovered some examples of good support planning by statutory and voluntary sector workers. Dr Porter says the project is collecting considerable information about the

qualities of a good support planner, as well as the outcomes of the support plan.

'People value a personal approach. For example, a woman with mental health support needs described a support planner taking her out to the park to talk about her budget. That simple act, taking her away from a setting in which she feels trapped, out into the world to discuss how she wants to live, made a difference. That was a worker from a user-led organisation,' she suggests.

'It's not just about getting someone to come and feed you and make sure that you have had a bath. It's about being supported so you can actually contribute to your own life and other people's and do something useful.'

Voluntary sector worker

Respect, patience and availability are also important features. 'Pressures on the statutory workers mean that support planning tends to be a "one-hit" activity. With the voluntary sector, people tend to come back again and again,' explains Dr Porter.

'People feel they can take things at their own pace and re-evaluate what they are doing, so that the support plan continues to evolve and is flexible enough to meet their developing needs. We are hearing a lot of stories of voluntary organisations working very hard so that a disabled person gradually becomes more confident to look at their own needs. The goal is that, eventually, they can do their own support planning,' she says.

Project: [Support Planning in Practice](#)

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