

Social Services Consultation Event

12th October 2005

Panel: **Claire Debenham**; Equalities Officer, East Sussex County Council
Imran Yunus; Policy Officer, East Sussex County Council
Theresa Hodge; Chair of Hastings & Rother Disability Forum

Also present:

Justine Fallis; Direct Payments Development Worker,
East Sussex Disability Association

Claire opened the meeting by explaining that over the last year she has spoken to a lot of people in minority groups about how well East Sussex Social Services are serving people in their community. Part of the work was aimed at challenging labelling and stereotyping that has been part of Social Services structure historically. The result of these consultations was to discover that some people find it hard to find out information about which services are available and some people asked felt that the services were inadequate. Imran explained that Social Services were developing a strategy to improve the dialogue between Social Services and working aged adults (18 – 64 years). Claire's main question was to ask people how they wanted Social Services to look in the future.

There were twenty people in attendance at this event; some old faces and some new ones were present.

Waiting Time

This had been an issue for most people in attendance at one time or another. People described situations where they were living in properties which were not accessible to them and were unable to access the bath. The main areas of concern for waiting were for an initial assessment and waiting for the Disabled Facilities Grant. Feedback from the panel informed the meeting that waiting times are a big issue and that maybe it might be helpful to give people an idea of the anticipated waiting time and what the next step would be and when it was likely to be taken.

Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG)

This can take three years to apply for and process, disabled people felt that they were given little choice of what happens and when and the experience of many people was that the whole process was disempowering. Someone asked for the power to employ his own contractors and have the DFG released to him in stages. The panel recognised the difficulty in liaising with the housing

departments and the Government wants to introduce targets to get things done more efficiently but unfortunately the whole process is a “nationally recognised mess”. It was reported that not only is the time taken frustrating as time passes and people move within jobs it is possible to deal with several people and have to explain things again and again. It was suggested that an improvement would be to assign an individual case worker to deal with the process. Information systems should be improved so that personal details don't have to be repeated again and again. Several people in the audience expressed the belief that employing their own contractors would reduce the cost of the grant work which would enable more people to have grant work undertaken within the same budget.

Concern was expressed about contractors' behaviour when they entered a disabled person's home. There were reports of racist and homophobic remarks made by Contractors whilst working in people's homes. The approved list for contractors does not prevent the employment of builders with these unacceptable attitudes. It was suggested that a questionnaire should be issued to get feedback from clients about DFG work undertaken. The information obtained in this way should inform the approved list of contractors.

Equipment

A member of the audience reported having been issued with a shower chair some 33 years ago. It finally gave up the ghost recently and when the wheelchair user rang through to request a replacement, Social Services had not heard from him in such a long time that they found themselves unable to simply reissue a current model and instead insisted that he have a whole new assessment. Sadly, he would have to join a waiting list. He was advised to take very great care whilst using the broken shower chair in the meantime. The panel agreed that this sounded a ridiculous situation.

Sensory Impairments

It was reported that the needs of this client group are often very different but of equal importance. Whilst they may not need support with personal care tasks, they do need support with tasks of daily living and enabling them to move about in the community. People with sensory impairments are often put at risk by being unable to clean their houses effectively thus eliminating germs and other hazards, which can put them at risk.

Private Care Providers

Some agencies in the town are very rigid about what they will and won't do for a disabled person. A wheelchair user is unable to change a light bulb and yet care agency staff will not do this for them. Furniture will also not be moved including beds and some agencies are very difficult about routine matters like mattress turning, which was news to the panel.

Direct Payments

There is currently a waiting list and many people are frustrated by knowing that their needs could be met better and the services provided cheaper if they were allowed to exchange a private care provider with direct payments. This is particularly acute in rural areas.

Social Services of the Future

- Social Services in the 21st Century should review its literature to stop using medical model terminology and thus disempowering disabled people.
- They should focus on what disabled people say they need rather than what Social Services have decided they should have.
- All staff should have Equal Opportunities training as standard.
- Social Services view of what are the most important needs of an individual are too rigid.
- People are disadvantaged by the rigid eligibility criteria.

Break

Direct Payments development work

Justine Fallis spoke after the break about the work she is doing with East Sussex Disability Association looking at different ways of individuals and groups using Direct Payments. The aim of Justine's project has been to look into using Direct Payments as a group rather than individually. Her project is funded by the Department of Health for 18 months (6 months remaining) and she has encountered a lot of barriers during the initial period of the project. Justine discussed contractual obligations and the snags encountered with cooperative working and the issue of registering with the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate. Parents of disabled children and mental health service users have both looked into setting up activities as a group. They have investigated such things as bowling trips and employing an art teacher between them.

If anyone is interested in using Direct Payments as a group, please contact

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