

Is it time for free personal care?

With the growing policy debate on the use of individualised budgets and more personalised care services Sharon Holder, National Officer for Social Care with the GMB union explores what the future might hold for adult social services



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The future of Social Care for adult services in England looks likely to change fundamentally when the government finally publishes its long awaited Green Paper on the future of the 'Care and Support system in England'.

So why, despite the previous launch in 2008 of a national debate on the long term future of social care in 'The Case for Change', is GMB not convinced local councils, with social services responsibilities, are likely to benefit in the long term from the Government's ambitions for 'modernising' social care in England.

GMB, Britain's general union, represents over 611,000 members working in all sectors of the economy. Over 50% are engaged in delivering the nation's public services either employed directly by local government, the NHS, education or independent sector service providers. Nearly 75,000 are employed in a wide range of social care settings within the public, private and voluntary sector.

GMB members can be found working in all social care jobs, such as home care, day care, social workers, residential care and nursing, drivers, administrators and managers. They work with a range of diverse service users, often with complex needs associated with physical and learning disabilities, children and families, mental health as well as care for the elderly. While GMB has its roots in traditional public service sector settings, GMB is now also the union representing the largest number of trade union members working in social care across the independent sector. This makes us well qualified to comment on the government's transformation of social care and the personalisation agenda with local authority social care provision.

GMB agrees with the Government that public services should enable people to feel empowered and supported, allowing individuals to meet their ambitions and aspirations. GMB supports the principles of independence, choice and control that greater personalisation should provide to users of conventional services. GMB however remains sceptical that the Government has so far 'made the case' for the introduction of personal budgets or considered, in any real depth, the implications for adult social care provision.

The 'personalisation agenda' was originally a secondary theme of the government's Social Care reform programme but it has become unsurprisingly one of the most important aspects of the policy debate. Personalisation is designed to provide individuals who currently receive Social Care services greater choice and control over their support arrangements ranging from 'Direct payments' where people, after assessment, are given the money to pay for their own Social Care to 'Individual budgets' - a system which involves streamlined assessment across agencies responsible for a number of support funding

streams. Both result in public sector resources being transferred or allocated to the individual user to pay for their own support either by employing individuals themselves or for purchasing support through an agency. The term 'personal budget' describes the transparent allocation of resources made up from only Social Care funding.

Evidence from the *Individual Budget Pilot* in eleven councils have found little difference between the average cost of individual budgets and the costs of conventional social care support. Despite the intention that individual budgets should include resources from different funding streams care staff experienced legal and accountability barriers to integrating funding streams. NHS resources were not included in the individual budgets.

The number of people receiving direct payments and individual budgets will increase as a result of the Government's policy, even though again there is little evidence to back this system of providing support to people eligible for publicly funded social care. Other concerns arising from the evaluation were,

- (i) Service users planning and managing their own support activities historically undertaken by trained or qualified care staff
- (ii) Paying family members or neighbours (with no Criminal Records Bureau checks).
- (iii) The potential harm or risks of financial exploitation arising from users' choice.

The key concerns of GMB are; the lack of information on what happens when a budget is exhausted? how will personal budgets maintain care quality standards to vulnerable service users - particularly when used to employ a third party?

Although GMB supports the principles underpinning personal budgets GMB have maintained a policy supporting free personal care paid from general taxation. The Government's recent response to the crisis in the financial sector only goes to prove 'where there's a will there's a way' and GMB take the view that to deliver a modernised high quality personalised social care system today, the Government can just as simply increase investment in social care provisions. Create a fully universal system paid for from general taxation, like the NHS, geared to the needs of service users and instead of undermining public sector provision in the long term, support the role of local councils providing social care in the community.

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