

Giving people control

by **Sally Neville**

If you need services from your local council, would you rather choose the services you want or have someone else decide for you?

In October 2008, Essex County Council (ECC) introduced a new system to transform the way adult social care is delivered across the county. Instead of telling service users what they need, the Council now offers people the option to manage their own budget and spend the money on the services they feel would best meet their needs.



But the question is: does this improve people's lives?

Working together

To answer this question, OPM is working with the Essex Coalition of Disabled People (ECDP) to design and deliver a three-year study of personal budgets for the ECC. The study provides an innovative example of partnership working in the commissioning and delivery of public services, with a user-led third sector organisation (ECDP), an independent not-for-profit organisation (OPM), and the council (ECC) working together to study key policies and use evidence-based recommendations to make 'real-time' improvements to delivery.

Designing the study

To determine the impact of personal budgets on the lives of people who use them, OPM designed the study to capture the views and experiences of service users. We sought to include those that are 'harder to reach', including people who are older, learning disabled or have physical or sensory impairments. A sample of 50 people and their family members and/or carers will take part in the study twice a year for three years to track their experiences and provide evidence of longer-term impact on people's lives. We have taken steps to ensure that everyone involved in the study is meaningfully engaged during the process and finds it a positive experience. The study team has designed a suite of inclusive methodologies that allow participants to determine exactly how they wish to be involved. Options include using tools such as photographic and written journals to complement interviews and group discussions.

OPM is also interviewing a range of service providers and staff within the ECC to understand behaviour change among them in the delivery of the personalisation agenda.

We use a proactive and flexible approach to disseminate findings, with a focus on close partnership working that will enable us to identify – and immediately respond to – opportunities to communicate findings to those involved in the design and delivery of the new system. We will work with the ECC to ensure that the evaluation findings have maximum impact – both within the ECC and among other local authorities – to improve people's lives.

Learn more

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More information about ECDP can be found here: www.ecdp.co.uk