

Day centre activities for people with Learning Disabilities Mini task group review

Task group members:

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Introduction

Scrutiny panels have an important role in reflecting the concerns of the public. This involves gathering information from local communities about the key issues they feel the council should address. Looking at activities in day centres was raised by a local carer who was concerned that budget savings had led to a detrimental impact on the range and quality of activities available. This is because budget savings in 2014/15, led to a reduction in the number of front line staff and increase the use of volunteers to support activities within day centres. Activities can range from attending an art class to going on a shopping trip in the local community.

Having a range of stimulating activities in day centres help people with a learning disability gain new skills, build confidence and interact with other people in their communities. They provide an environment where people can build and maintain friendships and support networks. They play an important preventative role including:

- Providing social contact and reducing isolation and loneliness
- Maintaining and/or restoring independence
- Offering activities which provide mental and physical stimulation
- Providing opportunities for people to contribute as well as receive.
- Day services also provide much-needed respite for parents and carers.

On the other hand, when people experience a reduction in their day services or lose them altogether, there can a devastating impact as they can be left socially isolated, bored and lonely, and important friendships and support networks are lost. The knock-on effect for families can be severe, often with extra financial and emotional strain on already overworked family carers.

The purpose of this mini review was to look at the current offer within Merton day centres and consider if the council was providing the best service possible within the current budget envelope.

How the mini review was conducted

On the 27th September 2016, Councillors visited High Path Day Centre to discuss activities provided across the three day centres. There was a group discussion followed by a breakout session to consider the issues in a smaller setting and a finally the group came together to discuss the findings. At the end of the session councillors visited All Saints Day Centre and had a further opportunity to meet with staff and service users .

Aims of the session:

To review the activities in day centres and how they could be improved
To compare the Merton day centre model with neighbouring boroughs

Attendees to the session included:

Service Users from Merton Day Centres
Staff from Merton Day Centres
People who care for someone who attends day centres
Chief Executive, Merton Mencap
Head of Direct Provision, Merton Council
Councillor Peter Southgate, Chair Merton Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Attendees to the session were split into smaller groups and considered the following questions:

1. Please tell us what you like about the activities provided and what positive impact do you feel they are having?
2. What difference does it make in the life of the service user?
3. What changes/additions would you like to see if any?
4. What are the barriers to achieving this?
5. How can they be overcome?
6. Any ideas about good practice in other areas?

National policy context on day centre provision

Valuing People (2001) was the first major policy statement for almost 30 years to outline the strategic direction for people with learning disabilities. This focused on people's rights, choices, independence and inclusion into mainstream society.

In December 2007, the Department of Health published a consultation document entitled 'Valuing People Now'. This built on the 'Valuing People' White Paper of 2001 and concluded that there had been good progress for people with learning disabilities in some areas. It also emphasised the importance of the personalisation agenda.

Overall, day service provision for people with learning disabilities has changed significantly in the past ten years. The Valuing People White Paper advocated a move away from day centres to a range of activities based in communities, including employment and volunteering. As a result many councils had started reviewing their provision, partly as a response to advocacy groups demanding a modern approach, and partly due to many services being based in industrial type premises which were outmoded and in need of investment. Further momentum came with austerity, which led to councils raising the eligibility threshold for services and the move towards provision of personal budgets for people to arrange their own care.

Across London, councils arranged contracts with local providers to organise day time activities. This has led to many examples of good practice in terms of local groups offering interesting community based programmes. However the numbers of people supported this way tends to be small, and can often be the most able people. Provision for people with challenging behaviour and high physical and personal care support needs has generally been difficult to arrange in community settings. This has led to people with medium type support needs missing out on services, and people with higher needs remaining in building based care.

Merton Model for day centre provision

LB Merton provides day services mainly through three day centres, All Saints, High Path and the JMC, our largest service which includes a Special Care section and also a service for people with more challenging behaviours. A handful of people attend specialist services outside of the borough, and there are a small number of activities available through the voluntary sector.

Nearly two hundred people attend the three centres on a daily basis, the numbers are as follows; All Saints 20, High Path 40, JMC 90. These numbers have remained consistent over the past few years, but the client profile has changed and the trend is for people to have increasingly complex needs or additional support requirements. The client group is ageing, and younger people entering the service have higher support needs.

The service has undergone significant change over the last few years and the aim now is to provide a safe and secure environment for people on a daily basis, providing respite for carers and friendship and stimulation for our clients. Most of our clients have been in the day services for years and enjoy a close relationship with colleagues and staff, who in turn liaise with health professionals and social work colleagues on their behalf.

These changes have become increasingly noticeable over the last two years. The needs of people who attend the centre have changed. People used to be more independent and make their own way to the day centre. The more stringent criteria mean we are taking people with increasingly complex needs who need more personal care and challenging behaviour. The demographic of the clients is also getting older so we need to meet the care needs of older people. There are fewer activities in the community and they are not as wide ranging as they used to be.

In Merton we have sought to offer a balanced approach with people encouraged towards more independent activities if possible, for example employment, but a recognition that a cost effective way to provide day time support for clients and carers is through the provision of day centres.

Impact of Budget Savings on day centres.

The need to manage with a smaller budget has led to a reduction in staff numbers on a yearly basis since 2010. We have reduced from a total of 71 staff members in that year to 53 in 2016. While most posts removed have been managerial or administrative, there have been a small number of front line posts deleted as well. The most recent changes saw a cut in the number of creative therapists at the JMC. Staff have also been affected by changes to transport provision. In an effort to reduce spending on transport to preserve staff posts, we use fewer Merton transport vehicles and staff. Day centre staff are now increasingly deployed to collect clients from home and act as escorts on Merton Transport vehicles.

An inevitable consequence of these changes has been a contraction in the number of activities available each day for clients to access, and particularly in terms of outings to the community. These trips do still go ahead, but not in the same number and can be subject to cancellation at times of staff absence. The Community Outreach Service, which has provided activities in the evenings and at weekends is now having to charge clients in order to make sessions viable.

We have sought to mitigate for some of the staff losses by recruiting volunteers, with limited success. A recent project we have worked on with MVSC has brought some results (we currently have ten volunteers across our three centres) but finding volunteers to work in care settings is challenging.

Comparison with local neighbours

Neighbouring boroughs have also made changes to their services in recent years and typically will provide one centre for people with the most complex needs. A range of community groups provide social activities for other clients, who will access them via direct payments or personal budgets. It should be noted that for years many agencies and groups, including within government, advocated that day centres were old-fashioned institutions, and the preferred model of support was enabling people to be in the community. Whilst this is desirable, many people with disabilities and their families find that as the cost of this approach is high, they are often left with a patchwork week which does not contain enough activities.

Typically now councils provide a day centre for people with high support needs, and commission a range of other activities via groups such as MENCAP or the Camden Society.

Services for people with Learning Disabilities across South West London

Merton has stuck to a policy of running day centres as being a cost effective way to provide day time activities to a large number of people and day time respite to carers.

Sutton has a resource called Sutton Inclusion Centre, which supports 15 people per day who have very complex needs. There is a core staff team but a set number of other people can use the facility if they bring their own carers. Other services are run by groups like MENCAP.

Croydon have services run by their Local Authority Trading Company, consisting of one day centre and four resource bases across the borough. These serve as meeting up points for small groups to go out from to access community activities.

Wandsworth also have a main day centre for people with complex needs. This supports up to 38 people per day, and is run by a charity, the One Trust group, which also runs four community bases across the borough.

Key themes to emerge from the discussions were as follows:

Value of day centres by service users and carers

Current activities across the day centres includes; singing karaoke, boxing fitness, using computers, playing pool, team games, trips to the cinema, arts and crafts, sewing, cooking , reading and writing. Bowling, healthy walks, rambling. Service users are able to go out once a day. Some people are not suited to group activities, some like to socialise, others find concentration difficult.

Carers told councillors:

“My child values the interaction and when at home constantly asks when they will be returning. They also like being in an environment with people similar to themselves, as is often the case in human nature in that we tend to relate to people like ourselves, whether it be age, ethnicity or gender. The familiarity at the centre also helps those who attend feel safe and secure which in turn builds their confidence.”

“Acts as a home away from home provides a social setting in which people feel happy and gives carers important respite. “

“ there has been a decrease in activities what is being provided is vital and should not be decreased anymore”

“The council should maintain the level of care at day centres, it provides a vital service of which Merton should be proud. We need to ensure the service is stable and sustainable”

“Friendships are important and have been maintained over 15-20 years. “

Service users views on staff

The task group found that a clear endorsement of the work of staff at day centres by service users, senior staff and carers. It was recognised that they have had to adapt to change, and provide the best service possible within a shrinking budget envelope.

Feedback from the service users Speak Out group highlighted the value of the day centres for those who attend. Comments included their appreciation of centre staff who ‘help’ and ‘take care of clients’.

All of the staff have been flexible in adapting to the impact of budget savings and many have taken on additional tasks and responsibilities without extra pay.

Councillors were able to see some examples of this first hand. For example;

- A staff member works flexibly across two day centre sites to as a result of the loss of a staff member and the service needing admin support at two sites.
- A day centre manager vacated her office to enable to used as an additional arts space. The new office was a smaller windowless room.

There was concern amongst carers that staff could be pushed to the limit and people will begin to leave.

Views on personal budgets, direct payments and community based activities

A number of issues were raised in relation to personal budgets being used to pay for activities. This approach presented a number of challenges for carers. They felt it placed an additional burden on them as support needs to be arranged to take people to activities. It also means shortened respite as the activities take place for around three hours and then collection is required. Furthermore, if people want to fund activities from direct payments they need to be able to budget enough to cover three days.

Although there is a national move away from day centre model, this is not popular in Merton. Carers were very keen to point out that a community setting is not suitable for everyone with a learning disability. Some people need a regular stable routine and may not be able to cope with doing a different activity everyday or a regular change in their environment and carers.

A shortage of personal assistants is also a potential barrier in trying to arrange activities through personal budgets. In order to provide much needed respite it is essential that a personal assistant can be arranged to take people to activities. This has become increasingly difficult in the current market due to historical low wages this role attracts, leading people to seek alternative employment options.

Feedback from service users about day centres

The day centres service users group Speak Out meet on Friday 9th September 2016 and provided feedback on service users experience:

- The staff are lovely
- You get to do things as a group
- It is good that we get transport
- People travel on their own if they can

Things that could be better

- We want to go out more
- There are less staff
- If staff are off we don't go out in groups then staff choose what we do
- The journey home takes a long time

Health Services for People with Learning Disabilities

There is wide recognition about the health inequalities experienced by people with LD. They have greater difficulty in accessing mainstream services and receiving support for health issues that are not in relation to their learning disability¹. The task

¹ Improving the Health and Wellbeing of People with Learning Disabilities: An Evidence-Based Commissioning Guide

group were informed that physiotherapy services have also been reduced. It used to be available for all wheelchair users now it is only given to improve mobility rather than maintain it.

Some staff provide exercise activities but this is limited as classes of this nature can pose a risk if it not delivered by a qualified professional.

Transport

The changes to transport services have had a significant impact on day services. Councillors heard that there are smaller more frequent buses which finish earlier. This can mean that service users spend less time at the day centre. This change has meant:

- Shorter days (core day now seems to be 10am – 2pm)
- Loss of afternoon activity groups
- Later start to morning sessions

Many carers understood the rationale for the cuts to transport. It was also highlighted that smaller vehicles operated by centre staff provide a good service. However the impact over the last few years has been a reduction of between one to two hours from the average time spent at the centres each day.

The use Volunteers in day centres

Some carers felt that the use of volunteers in day centres needs to be understood in the context of all staff having the right skills and abilities to provide a qualitative service. Volunteers can be suited to administrative tasks but should not be relied upon for more specialist roles.

Concluding remarks

The task group were impressed by the willingness of staff to work together to create the best possible environment for service users in this challenging economic climate.

Councillors are keen to see that the current level of service in the day centres is maintained and were pleased that there are no proposals to reduce this provision from its present level.

Recommendations

That the Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel to request a report on opportunities for additional sources of external funding for day centres

That Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel looks at local health strategies to ensure they meet the needs of people with learning disabilities.

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