

Strategies for change in services for people with learning disabilities: messages from the implementation of the *Valuing People* White Paper.

In 2001 the Government White paper *Valuing People: a new strategy for learning disability in the 21st century* set out a challenging agenda for the development of better support services for people with learning disabilities in England. The *Strategies for Change* project at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol, explored the key issues faced by those charged with implementing these changes: newly-formed local Learning Disability Partnership Boards and commissioners of learning disability services. It found that:

- **Strategic planning** needs to be based upon accurate information about populations; existing services; unmet need; and costs. Many authorities lack the information systems required for this, but there were signs of improvement.
- **Learning Disability Partnerships Boards** have been established, but in order to increase their effectiveness they need to define their role more clearly and maximise their influence through lobbying of generic public services and effective scrutiny of local strategic plans.
- **People with learning disabilities and carers** are represented at Partnership Board meetings although significantly outnumbered by professionals. Good progress has been made in some areas, but more remains to be done to facilitate their participation on a more equal footing.
- In order for innovative, person centred support to become more widespread commissioners need to become more proactive in **managing the market in social care services**.
- **Person centred planning** is being interpreted and implemented in a wide variety of ways. Managers and commissioners need to make clear the distinction between community care needs assessments and person centred planning processes.
- A lack of capacity in **housing** remains a key issue in many parts of the country. But there were indications that commissioners and Partnership Boards are beginning to engage effectively with local authority housing departments and registered social landlords to improve the range of housing options available.
- **Modernising day services** presented a variety of challenges. Family carers were often wary of changes to provision, but in some areas it *had* proved possible to change the types of activities or support offered *without* reducing the overall hours of service provided.
- There remains a need to develop more **employment opportunities** for people with learning disabilities. Although much can be done at local level, some barriers (for example, the benefits trap) will require change at a national level.
- Many people with learning disabilities have had negative **experiences of change** in the past. It is important that the desire to improve services is not allowed to override the need to actively involve people with learning disabilities in decisions about changes that will affect their lives.

Introduction

The publication of the English White Paper *Valuing People: a new strategy for learning disability for the 21st century* (DH, 2001), was widely welcomed by people with learning disabilities, family carers, and professionals from within both the statutory and independent/voluntary sectors. The agenda that it set out for the development of services was based on the promotion of four core principles: rights, independence, choice and inclusion. Few would wish to argue with this value base, or the promulgation of person centred planning as a foundation from which to develop a wide range of alternatives to traditional residential care and day services.

In its creation, *Valuing People* represented a radical departure from the traditional processes of Whitehall policy development. For the first time, people with learning disabilities were actively involved in the working parties from which the White Paper was developed; their views, needs, ambitions, and dreams were reflected in the final document. Subsequent to the White Paper's publication, the involvement of both service users and family carers has continued to be an important element of the implementation process; in particular they have had an important role to play in Learning Disability Partnership Boards. These new structures within local government aim to bring together key local stakeholders, including people with learning difficulties and family carers as well as social services and health and a wide range of providers of services, in order to raise awareness of learning disability issues beyond the specialist services and plan for the implementation of the changes the White Paper required.

Taking as its starting point the assumption that effective implementation of *Valuing People* would require significant changes to services at both a strategic and operational level, the *Strategies for Change* project posed a number of questions:

- How can local strategies be developed which reflect the needs, wishes and concerns of local populations?
- How can people with learning disabilities and family carers be involved effectively in the work of Partnership Boards?
- How can the types of support offered to people with learning disabilities be changed, to enable people to take more control over their own lives?
- What role should commissioners of learning disability services play in bringing about these changes?
- How have people with learning disabilities experienced previous changes to their support services and how can these changes be user-led?

Strategic planning

Although *Valuing People* provided a national strategic framework for the development of services, it did not describe in detail either the quantity of services that should be made available or exactly how local agencies should finance new developments. These kinds of detail were left to local strategic plans. These need, therefore, to be both realistic and robust if they are to produce the changes required. Evidence from the learning disability Joint Investment Plans produced by local authorities in 2001 suggests however that many lacked the ability to bring together crucial information about the services that they were already providing; areas of unmet need; or human and financial resources. As a consequence local action plans often resembled ill-defined 'wish lists' rather than coherent strategies for achieving measurable objectives within an agreed timeframe.

Learning Disability Partnership Boards

The Partnership Board structures established by *Valuing People* are responsible for overseeing the creation and implementation of local strategies. They are also intended to act as powerful levers for change, not only by empowering people with learning disabilities and family carers, but also by engaging directly with a wide range of generic public services. Partnerships Boards appeared to be functioning well in relation to raising the profile of learning disability issues, particularly when chaired by a local Councillor or senior council officer, such as a Director or Assistant Director of social services. However, concerns were expressed over the Boards' lack of executive powers and there was frustration in some areas that, although Board meetings were the setting for lively debate, little action followed. In many areas, sub groups, working parties or locality groups were more active, and inclusive, than Partnership Boards themselves. More consideration still needs to be given by many Boards to effectively fulfilling the support and information needs of self-advocates and carers who attend meetings, and to ensuring that information about local service developments is more widely available to those who do not attend meetings.

The role of commissioners

Local commissioners have a critical role to play in facilitating the considerable strategic change undoubtedly needed to implement *Valuing People*. In order to fulfil this role successfully, commissioners need to clarify the relationship between care management and commissioning; ensure that the difference between community care needs assessments and person centred planning is fully understood by all involved in either process; become pro-active managers of the local markets in care services; and encourage sensitive change management within existing services. This is a tall order and the professional development needs of commissioners need to be given appropriate attention.

Developments in person centred planning, housing, day services and employment opportunities

The concept of person centred planning lies at the very heart of *Valuing People*. If this idea is not understood and embraced, then the chances of creating services that reflect the true ethos of the White Paper are slim. The translation of person centred planning from theory into practice is key to the future development of support services including housing, day services and employment opportunities. The evidence so far suggests that joint planning between specialist learning disability services and generic providers of social housing are beginning to show some positive results. Examples were also found of innovative new developments in day services and employment, the best of which succeeded in both enhancing independence and promoting closer relations with the wider community.

Change in the lives of people with learning disabilities

People with learning disabilities have often had negative experiences of changes in their lives being imposed without their having any say or control over the process. (This has also been true of carers, and sometimes front line staff.) Our workshop highlighted the importance of ensuring that service users are empowered to decide what changes they want in their lives and the need to pace change so that all stakeholders have the necessary time to adjust to new ways of working. The pressure to improve services must not overtake the need to listen to people with learning disabilities and carers.

Reference: DH (2001): *Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century* [Cm 5086] London: The Stationery Office

About the project

The *Strategies for Change* project was undertaken by a team from the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol. The project was funded by the Department of Health, as part of its Learning Disability Research Initiative. Work was undertaken between autumn 2001 and spring 2004.

The project consisted of a number of distinct, but inter-related, strands:

1. A series of expert seminars, which reviewed what was known about good practice in commissioning learning disability services and discussed areas of particular importance: person centred planning housing, day services, employment, quality assurance. These papers are available on the Norah Fry Research Centre website (see box below).
2. An analysis of the learning disability Joint Investment Plans (JIPs) produced by local authorities in spring 2001. 104, from a possible total of 127, JIPs were included in the analysis.
3. A user-led review of the involvement of self advocates in Learning Disability Partnership Boards: this was carried out in conjunction with Swindon People First and involved speaking with members of ten different Partnership Boards.
4. Interviews with commissioners of learning disability services and chairs of Partnership Boards in 20 locations across England.
5. Telephone interviews with 18 carer members of Partnership Boards
6. An evaluation of a development programme for commissioners of learning disability services.
7. A one-day workshop with a group of self advocates to explore their experiences of change.

How to get further information

"*Making Valuing People work: Strategies for change in services for people with learning disabilities*", by Rachel Fyson and Linda Ward is published by The Policy Press. available from Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4YN at the price of £16.99, plus P&P.

More information about the *Strategies for Change* project, including accessible summaries of some key findings and details of other publications from the study, can be viewed or downloaded at: www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/NorahFry/

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The Valuing People Support Team, which has co-ordinated the implementation of Valuing People at a national level, has produced a wide range of information and advice on many aspects of learning disability services. This can be accessed at: www.valuingpeople.gov.uk

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