

Should personal budgets come with a warning label on the packaging?

Our family has been in receipt of individual budgets and direct payments (local authority) for a number of years. Having also worked in governance; both private and public sector for over 30 years, I hope that by sharing my personal and professional experiences, engagement will go beyond ticking a box.

As the father of a disabled daughter whose mobility was rapidly deteriorating, we recently applied for a Disability Facilities Grant (DFG) to adapt our home; which included a through floor lift, wet room, ramped and level access.

We were awarded £30k, which the council wanted to spend on our behalf, and for that privilege they wanted £4500, referring to the 15% as administration.

With nearly 20 years of 'battle scars' from engaging with Health and Social Services we confidently advised them we could manage the budget ourselves, as was our right, and they eventually agreed to only deduct £500 for their administration.

Maybe this is what Parliament was striving to achieve when it stated;

given the financial challenges facing the NHS it will be vital to find the right balance to achieve value for money?

Oh yes, and the council recommended we should use their approved contractors, but again we advised them we could manage the requirements ourselves.

Not surprisingly, the council approved contractor estimates had been far in excess of those we obtained and some of

their work proposals were simply ridiculous!

We have also been in receipt of direct payments for respite care for nearly 10 years. Managing this budget, which has not increased from the beginning has been challenging, especially as employing a respite carer means you become an employer, which involves recruitment, payroll, contracts, indemnity insurance, mandatory pension contribution etc.

Again, we could have engaged with an organisation recommended by the local authority to manage the budget and process but ironically, the cost of using this third party service made it impossible to fund the 5 hours per week that had been awarded!

A personal budget will not be for everyone.

Many people may not feel confident in managing a personal budget themselves, but they would like to receive one, as is their legal right. For these people, they will probably need to engage with a third party, sometimes referred to as a broker to help them.

I believe it is essential that all third party costs and deliverables are completely transparent and easy to understand.

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Briefing

When promoting individual health and care budgets, commissioners should engage with third parties to ensure they are effectively monitoring the quality and safety of the provided services on behalf of their patient/client.

Third party organisations must be capable of challenging a provider and where appropriate the commissioner on behalf of their patient/client, should there be any concerns.

However, there cannot be any conflicts of interest, so I have to ask what regulations will be in place with the appointment of a third party or can anyone provide this service to patients, many of whom may be very vulnerable?

Our personal experience to date is that we have never been asked to provide any information regarding the quality of service(s) or persons we employ, although there has been a small degree of financial probity, which will please Parliament!

The media have included events recently with not dissimilar questions being raised about the lack of governance, for example; mandatory home education registers after a young boy died who had no contact with authorities and private social care companies where quality assurance and

patient safety appears to have been absent, both resulting in appalling outcomes.

Personal budgets are now entrenched in statute and being further embedded into an already crowded and challenging health and social care landscape that still has far too many unanswered questions?

I am yet to be convinced about the robustness of governance before we can confidently use fit for purpose in the same sentence.

Please do not misconstrue the issues I raise as negative towards personal budgets and individuals having more choice and control, on the contrary I am a firm advocate and they have worked well given our families circumstances.

But the points I have raised based on first hand experience need much further examination together with clarity regarding the enforcement measures that will be quickly and easily enacted should things go wrong.

As a passionate advocate and Governance expert who proudly works in the NHS my message is simple; the lessons are already there if we want to find them!

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