

Part II

B. Group Discussions

In addition to the questionnaires, group discussions were also held across the county to give an opportunity for users and their families or friends to take part.

Seven of these meetings were organized at the following locations: Pwllheli, Porthmadog, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Dolgellau, Caernarfon, Bangor and Bethesda.

These meetings proved to be a very valuable exercise. A total of 25 people attended. One advantage of having small meetings was that everybody felt free to talk. It was an opportunity to hear what people's concerns are, and a significant number of practical and constructive suggestions were received.

Here is a short summary of some of the comments received in the meetings. As a number of recurring themes were prevalent throughout all areas, we have listed the comments under some of the main issues raised.

Any change must be managed carefully

One of the most important messages to emerge was the need for any changes to be gradual, as any unexpected disruption can cause anxiety or lead to a change in behaviour. It was important to avoid making big changes in one go, as smaller steps need to be taken with some individuals.

"Change needs to take place step by step," said one. "Big changes cause anxiety."

As well as the change itself, thinking about changes can also cause anxiety, and therefore there is a need to update people continually, and inform them of any change well in advance.

Several people stressed the need for flexibility when contemplating any changes. A carer for a 72 year-old relative warned that any change can cause anxiety to an older person.

The same kind of flexibility was also needed when moving from 1:1 services to group services, as not everybody could socialize with other people.

The idea of promoting more independent living was welcomed in principle, and one participant called for more support to live independently. Another one said that he was happy with many of the changes that have already been made. At the same time, others stressed the need to take care. One said that some were afraid of failing, and therefore the full support was needed as a backing. The need to ensure safety at all times was also stressed.

"Stay as independent as possible by having support and an opportunity to take part in activities," was the wish expressed by one participant.

More information and better communication needed

Another constant theme was the need for more information and for better communication between the Council and service users.

Asking to what extent everyone understood the three reasons for the need for changes, one important point raised in more than one meeting was that more information was needed about them. One stressed the need for one-to-one discussions because of the concern about the decisions that are being made.

It was also suggested that there should be an opportunity in an annual review to meet everybody who is involved with the user's care plan.

Another wanted to know to what extent Gwynedd's team were working with the National Health Service, and somebody else asked who was assessing people's needs.

One participant said it was difficult to access medical information, for example, and suggested that information such as care assessments, abilities and care packages should be centralised. There was also a need to ensure that any discussions were open and honest.

It was important that families and social workers collaborated well – one said that his relative would suffer anxiety if he or she received any paperwork or forms because of a fear he or she would be sent away.

It was also suggested that drop-in sessions would be a welcome development.

A concern raised by one was that people were fearful of complaining in case they are removed from where they are. Another asked for the Council not to keep quiet about bad news.

One specific criticism about this consultation was that the information had been sent to the service user only, and that it should also have been sent to family members. "It's important for the Council to learn from this," said the relative. Another one suggested that the package and questionnaire were too similar and that there was no need for two documents.

When discussing the need to target resources carefully for the people who need them most, one participant asked how these people were chosen and who is making the decision.

In view of concerns and uncertainty about the possible changes, several suggestions were proposed for future improvements.

- An annual meeting, or at more frequent intervals, where everything will be discussed openly and the recommendations implemented.

- Set up a panel of parents/family/carers – an opportunity to share problems and to discuss instead of people feeling they were alone. The panel could be used to look at documents before they are sent out
- Parents to lobby councillors for safeguarding the budgets of services. These should be a key priority.
- Better communication, being more open, enhancing service with some workers, improve weaknesses, learning lessons.
- One specific information point where people can contact services, resources handbook and a one-stop shop.
- Open surgery at regular times.
- Full review of care plan, an opportunity for carers to give their views.
- An opportunity for parent to come together to discuss ideas.
- A report to show how things are getting on.

A service that is centred around the individual

The need was stressed for services that have been individually tailored for each individual.

Looking at the changes that have already taken place, one participant was concerned that moving towards working in groups was a step backwards. The suspicions were that change was being driven by the need to save money rather than by the individual's choice of what he or she wanted to do.

Much focus was given to the new development of Pant yr Eithin, Harlech, a different model of providing support, which was generally welcomed.

One carer, who wanted his relative to be independent, said that he thought the model was an excellent idea. Another said that it was a good place for young people to learn skills.

At the same time, the need for support to keep people in their communities was also stressed. One said the Pant yr Eithin idea was good, but that similar things were needed for older people in their communities, where they had built contacts over the years.

There was general concern over the impact of cuts, with problems foreseen if there will be fewer social workers. More social workers were needed, not fewer, according to one.

It was suggested that more needed to be done to bridge the divide between education and social services.

There was a concern as well over the future of leisure centres and libraries, as they are making an important contribution to the well-being of people with a learning disability.

The importance of qualified workers/continuity of care

The need for fully trained staff was stressed, and it was suggested that more social workers were needed.

Stability was also vitally important for service users. "Social workers coming and going, and having to start anew," was one complaint.

As training and specialism take time, a long-term plan was needed to ensure continuity and quality.

Some doubts were expressed over the intention to promote, encourage and support local communities to do as much as possible to help people with a learning disability.

Another one said that it was essential that volunteers are properly trained from the beginning.

One participant stressed that people's needs varied and that support from volunteers or in the community was out of the question for some users.

"It's easy to put words together but has research work been done?" asked another.

One participant foresaw that it would not be easy for some to go out with a group of volunteers who they did not know. One must remember that some find it difficult to create a relationship, and that continuity is vitally important in their case.

Opportunities to socialise

It was obvious that opportunities to socialise were important to all. One participant enjoyed group work and the opportunities to make friends.

More evening activities were needed, but it was said that transport is a problem. One said that more sporting opportunities for the disabled would be appreciated. Shopping was also an opportunity that was enjoyed, and disappointment was expressed by one who did not get to go to Pwllheli and Caernarfon any more, but to Dolgellau on Saturdays only instead.

One person said that group activities was a way of building confidence. It was suggested that a group be established to encourage self-confidence.

People saw the value of using local and outreach groups, especially in rural areas. Football clubs were discussed, and more than one mentioned the need for an opportunity to take part in riding activities and to learn riding skills. Other groups mentioned were ones to promote healthy living and keeping fit and

walking groups. Drama and singing groups would also be welcomed, together with an opportunity to see films in the Harlech area.

There was concern over the future of Canolfan Gwystl at Y Ffôr. "It should not close, everybody is happy there," said one.

A quiz night was suggested as an opportunity to have fun and hobby groups as a help to make new friends.

There was a feeling that the provision was unsatisfactory at present. One person said that there was nothing for young adults in Bangor during the evenings, and another one said that it was difficult to access activities without transport.

Opportunities to work

According to one participant, work was needed, but not full-time work necessarily. One of the users said he enjoyed going to an Age Well centre. Another said that he enjoyed the opportunity for work and having a wage, one worked one day a week at a nursery and another hoped to run his own car-washing business.

There was also a feeling that people needed to be paid for the work they did rather than expecting them to volunteer.

Help with life skills

Many saw a need for more help with life skills for people with a learning disability.

With changes to ILF arrangements being a cause for concern for some, one person suggested that she would like to see learning disability team professionals collaborating with the Department of Work and Pensions when assessing for benefits.

Another one said that it would be a good idea to combine respite care with learning opportunities, in order to help them prepare for the future.

It was important to prepare for the long term in order to ensure that support was in place by the time the parents might not be around. This was even more important in view of direct payments that would place more responsibilities on carers. Plans were also needed for situations that could arise if carers went ill.

It was said that assistive technology such as telecare was not suitable for everybody. "The principle is fine, but the service is not very good at present," said one participant, who said the equipment was old and unreliable.

When discussing services that would help people live as independently as possible, there was concern over direct payments, as the system has not worked well for everybody and as some individuals have suffered.

One participant stressed the need for more help during difficult times in life, and said that support should be available to deal with letters or problems and to organise personal budgets.

Learning to cook was also seen as an important activity.

There was enthusiastic welcome for courses on topics such as healthy living and more than one said that they would like the opportunity to learn to cook “in order to feel more independent”.

The meeting heard that cooking classes had been successful in Caernarfon.

On the other hand, concern was expressed that a cooking class had ended in Bangor and impersonal letters sent to inform people of this. “It was more than a cooking class, it was an opportunity to make friends and to socialise,” said one. Another one said that help to do things in the house would be very beneficial.

Transport

Specific difficulties concerned with living in a rural area were mentioned. The transport services were too scattered according to some, and there were also concerns that travel can be expensive. More local services were needed.

Other suggestions

- Organising activities to deal with direct payments
- Asking large companies for sponsorship
- A comprehensive lifelong care plan that would plan for the future
- The need for volunteers to learn new skills
- Assistive technology has enabled one to continue to live at home.