

Scrutiny Report:

Transforming Our Community Equipment Services and Fair Access to Care Eligibility Criteria for Equipment

1. Executive Summary

The purpose of this scrutiny review is to gain an understanding of the proposed plans to change Cumbria County Council's community equipment services and the introduction of Fair Access to Care eligibility criteria for occupational therapy assessments.

The Scrutiny task and finish group met on two occasions in which they interviewed a range of witnesses including officers involved in designing and implementing the proposed schemes, representatives from service users' organisations and the Acting Corporate Director of Adult and Cultural Services.

Members considered the following aspects of the proposals:

- Fair Access to Care including its relation to County's Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Prevention Agenda;
- The use of Trusted Assessors to assist in the Self Assessment process;
- The planned consultation on Fair Access to Care;
- The likely effect of the implementation of Fair Access to Care on those with low income;
- Access to transport;
- The proposed consultation;
- The geographical spread of accredited retailers;
- The danger of abuse of vulnerable adults;
- How the Retail Model will function including its relation to Fair Access to Care.

This task and finish group has been requested to submit a final report to Cabinet in March 2010.

2. Recommendations:

- 2.1 That the Adult and Cultural Services directorate continue to monitor the correlation between areas of deprivation and areas where there is greatest need for equipment. Members recommend that the directorate takes the necessary steps to ensure that poverty does not result in people being unable to obtain the equipment they need.
- 2.2 That the directorate produce a long term plan for the training of Trusted Assessors to support the long term effectiveness of this scheme.
- 2.3 That the directorate report to Scrutiny with details of the proposed Hardship Fund including how much will be in it, who will be eligible for it and how long it will be in place.
- 2.4 That the directorate take steps to ensure that service users are not discouraged in seeking help because they do not have access to transport to take them to the locations where they can see Trusted Assessors or to accredited equipment retailers.

Note:

Following the interim report of October 2009, the Adult and Cultural Services Directorate have already started to address some of these recommendations.

Members feel strongly that there are issues that they would like to explore once the new systems are up and running. They intend to revisit the issue in around six months' time. The areas of further research are outlined in 'Conclusions' on pages 14-15 of this review.

3. Introduction

- 3.1 This report is the result of a scrutiny review on the proposed transformation of Cumbria County Council's community equipment services and the proposed introduction of Fair Access to Care eligibility criteria.
- 3.2 This piece of work is being considered by Scrutiny at the request of Cabinet. Cabinet have requested that Scrutiny look at this proposal before they consider it since it is seen as a sensitive issue which has the potential to result in negative press coverage and public dissatisfaction with the authority.
- 3.3 Whilst welcoming the opportunity to consider this important topic, Scrutiny Members felt that the time made available by the Adult and Cultural Services Directorate was not sufficient to give the task the thorough examination it merited. However they were sensitive to the fact that a delay in implementing the scheme would result in considerable added cost for the authority. In view of this dilemma, Scrutiny produced an interim report which set out scrutiny's initial findings on the issue which went to Cabinet on the 13th October 2009. Scrutiny held a further meeting on 14th December 2009 which resulted in the production of this final report.

4. Background

- 4.1 This review focuses on two separate but interlinked developments. The first addresses the way that the authority provides community equipment to older adults and adults with physical disabilities. The second addresses the way in which the authority provides Occupational Therapy assessments for this equipment.
- 4.2 The authority is under pressure to change its current arrangements due to demographic changes which have seen an increase in the numbers of older people and subsequent demand on the existing service. Current demand has resulted in significant waiting times for OT assessment particularly for those with lower level needs. Demand is forecast to grow by 30% by 2020.
- 4.3 Transforming our Community Equipment Services will entail the authority rationalising their community equipment service to provide only large specialist items and simple items where both are needed by an individual. It has been proposed that in the future low cost simple aids to daily living of less than £100 will be provided instead on prescription via a newly developed network of accredited retailers.
- 4.4 Fair Access to Care will entail moving away from OT assessments for all towards a system where the efforts of OTs will be concentrated on those with high level/complex needs. Those with lower levels of need will be offered a self assessment tool, support and signposting to

places where they can obtain information and advice or the support they need through a Trusted Assessor in a voluntary sector organisation.

- 4.5 Scrutiny members, the Adult and Cultural Services Directorate and Health Agencies recognise the increasing financial burden which the authority is faced with particularly in the light of a growing aging population. However, before implementing the new arrangements for the Community Equipment Service and changes to eligibility criteria, Scrutiny members want to be reassured that future service users will not be significantly disadvantaged by the proposals.
- 4.6 Task and Finish members also need to be reassured that the preparations for a full public consultation exercise are sufficiently open and inclusive and is not regarded simply as a 'done deal' and thereby attracting bad press and further public dissatisfaction with the authority.
- 4.7 In the recent Cumbria Place Survey 2008, the level of confidence the general public have in being able to influence the County Council's decision-making process has fallen to 36%. This is well below the national average and the need to improve public perceptions of the local authority is regarded as a key objective for the County Council.
- 4.8 It is therefore crucial that any major consultation exercise (particularly relating to a reconfiguration of service), is seen to be open, transparent and equitable.

5. Methodology:

Witness Interviews – 20th August 2009:

Nick Waterfield -	County Manager Physical Disability – Cumbria County Council
Catherine Morley -	Project /Service Development Manager (TCES) – Cumbria County Council
Mark Tennant -	Development Manager – Cumbria Disability Network
Sally Bloomer -	Business & Retail Development Manager at Age Concern South Lakeland and involved in the Retail Workstream
Gordon Barwick -	Service Manager PDSI West (Retailer Workstream Representative)

Witness Interviews – 20th November 2009:

Catherine Morley -	Project /Service Development Manager (TCES) – Cumbria County Council
Nick McCarthy -	Operations Manager, Self Directed Support Development – Cumbria County Council.
Mary Bradley -	Chief Executive, Age Concern
Nick Waterfield -	County Manager Physical Disability – Cumbria County Council.

Documentation:

Transforming Our Community Equipment Service and Fair Access to Care Eligibility Criteria for Equipment – Draft paper to Cumbria County Council, Cabinet Briefing 7th July 2009.

PACE – OT Service Delivery Review – Adult and Cultural Services DMT 22nd December 2008, Cumbria County Council.

Transforming Community Equipment – Retail Model Project Initiation Document – Cumbria County Council and NHS Cumbria.

Cumbria County Council Consultation Strategy 2006.

Cumbria County Council Public Consultation Scrutiny Review 2009.

Cumbria County Council Anti-Poverty Strategy 2009.

Cumbria Place Survey 2008.

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6. Findings and Conclusions

Fair Access to Care:

- 6.1 The Adult and Cultural Services directorate feel that the current assessment system is unsustainable. Long waiting lists for assessment indicate that the system is over stretched at present and some staff feel that they are not able to spend sufficient time with clients with complex needs.
- 6.2 This demand is forecast to increase by at least 30% by 2020 due to demographic growth in the older people's population and changed patterns of service that aim to support people in their own homes. The introduction of Fair Access to Care for Equipment will affect approximately 30-40% of cases currently seen. Under the Fair Access to Care scheme, all service users would be assessed for their level of need. Those with high, complex or substantial needs would still be assessed by an Occupational Therapist and would receive their equipment free of charge.
- 6.3 Those with low to moderate needs would no longer automatically get an assessment by an OT. They would be able to assess their own need using an on-line self assessment tool preferably with the help of a Trusted Assessor and signposted to purchase any equipment needed through an accredited retailer.
- 6.4 Trusted Assessors are trained individuals, often from the voluntary sector, who can help people through the self assessment process. Trusted Assessors can direct them to sources of support including retailers that stock the equipment they need to support their independent living.
- 6.5 Members established that part of this new scheme would involved service users with low level needs being encouraged to use self-assessment tools such as on-line assessment which would help them identify any help or equipment they may need. The self diagnosis tools have a facility which will advise people who turn out to have high or substantial needs to seek a professional OT assessment.
- 6.6 Members had some concerns that there was a danger that some people may misdiagnose their own needs and that people with high or critical needs may not assess themselves correctly or underestimate their own needs.
- 6.7 Virtual assessments can be carried out using a plan of the client's house on a computer and if the Trusted Assessor thinks that a home visit is required, this can be arranged.
- 6.8 It is unlikely that there will be reductions in staffing in OT services as a result of the Fair Access to Care for Equipment being implemented as

the existing staffing level will be needed to keep waiting lists down (the target is 28 days maximum) and for OT staff to have time to thoroughly assess those with complex needs. The alternative to introducing Fair Access to Care for Equipment is that there will have to be an increase in staffing levels to meet the present and future needs. This is not possible within the resources currently available.

- 6.9 The directorate see the introduction of Fair Access to Care for Equipment as a way of 'normalising' the equipment needed to support independent living in older people. They would like to move away from a model where this equipment is seen as specialist and towards a situation where it is seen as readily available on the high street. The need to purchase this equipment should be seen as a natural part of aging and not as a specialist intervention.
- 6.10 To date, Age Concern have completed training six assessors, are currently training four and have twelve awaiting training. They feel that this number give a sufficient spread across the county to be able to carry out the scheme. Cumbria's disability organisations also plan to train some Trusted Assessors for this scheme. Members feel that it is imperative to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of trusted assessors to carry out assessments across the county in order for this scheme to be a success.
- 6.11 All Accredited Retailers will have trained staff on site who can give advice about equipment.

Fair Access to Care and the Prevention Agenda:

- 6.12 A characteristic of the current generation of older people is their reluctance to ask for help. There is an important role for social workers in the implementation of this new scheme in persuading people to come forward. Social workers are well placed to introduce support gradually, as it is needed. The Prevention Agenda will address the needs of people not currently 'on the radar' of social services and who do not currently seek or receive support.
- 6.13 The Prevention Agenda will address the needs of people not currently 'on the radar' and who do not currently seek or receive support. Library services for example could reach 'hard to reach' groups. Library services could provide information, access to the online self-assessment tool and signpost people to sources of help.

Fair Access to Care and the Anti-Poverty Strategy:

- 6.14 Scrutiny members were concerned about the effect that the introduction of Fair Access to Care for Equipment might have on people with low incomes.

- 6.15 Members felt that there may be a correlation between areas of high deprivation, poor health (and correspondingly high level of people with low level disability) and low income. They were concerned that certain areas of the county could be disadvantaged by the introduction of Fair Access to Care eligibility criteria for equipment.
- 6.16 Following their inquiry, members were supplied with maps which detailed the level of need for low level equipment by ward. There seemed to be some correlation between the areas of greatest need for low level equipment and areas of greatest deprivation in the county.
- 6.17 Members were concerned that the introduction of this scheme did not go against the intentions of the County's Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Adult and Cultural Services Anti-Poverty Strategy

"The County Council has both an obligation and an opportunity to protect the interests of those in greatest need and to champion the cause of those who are most at risk".

Amongst other things the Anti Poverty Strategy aims to:

- Prevent families and individuals getting into poverty in the first place
- Minimise the harm caused by poverty for people living on low incomes

- 6.18 There was concern that the additional expense of having to purchase and pay for delivery and fitting of OT equipment, even when the cost of the equipment is relatively low, might potentially be too much to pay for those on low incomes.
- 6.19 The scrutiny report 'Debt in Cumbria' identifies that many older people are already being pushed into debt as a result of higher costs of living. Older people and those on low incomes often suffer from financial exclusion and can be forced to borrow from commercial loan organisations with high rates of interest.
- 6.20 The directorate feels that, since many of the people who are identified as having low – moderate level needs are 'new' to the system, they haven't needed help before, they will not have experienced the current system and therefore will not be expecting to get an automatic assessment and free equipment.
- 6.21 One of the advantages of using Trusted Assessors based within organisations that support older adults or those with disabilities is that people are offered other services including benefits checks to ensure they are taking up all the benefits they are entitled to, advice on debt and healthy living.

- 6.22 There are plans to set up a 'Small Grants Fund' which may be managed by the voluntary sector or Cumbria's Credit Unions and aimed at those without the means to pay for the equipment they need. This is only intended as a temporary measure while the new scheme is being implemented. In the long term, the changes to Community Equipment criteria and the introduction of Fair Access to Care for equipment are intended to be a way of 'normalising' the purchase of equipment needed to support independent living in old age in the much the same way as people now expect to have to pay for eye care from their own resources.
- 6.23 Age Concern has an existing system in which they hold a small amount of money (around £2000 per district) which is used to supply people with equipment especially those who are 'outside the system' and do not approach the local authority for help.
- 6.24 There is also a plan to encourage third sector (voluntary) organisations to sell or otherwise make available items of second hand equipment through their premises or shops. Surplus stock held by CCC after the scheme is implemented could be donated to those experiencing financial hardship.
- 6.25 Age Concern has been exploring the possibility of collecting and cleaning equipment for redistribution to those experiencing financial hardship. At the moment it appears that it is not financially viable to refurbish items that have a value of less than £60 due to the high costs of cleaning them. They have explored the possibility of applying for grants for carbon offsetting if they recycle equipment but there is no guarantee that these will be obtained.
- 6.26 Age Concern has also explored the possibility of recycling equipment for scrap value as they have a licence for this. In addition to any financial gain, this scheme would also serve to take some unsafe equipment out of circulation.

Access to Transport:

- 6.27 Members are concerned that older adults and those with disabilities in rural areas will be disadvantaged by this new scheme as it will increase the amount of travelling they have to undertake. Under this new scheme, if they are not entitled to an assessment through social services, they will have to undertake one journey to see a Trusted Assessor and another to source the equipment they need.
- 6.28 Eden has been identified as the second most deprived district in the country in terms of 'geographical barriers'. According to the County's Anti-Poverty Strategy this means that local people without access to private transport will find it very difficult to get to important things they need.

- 6.29 There is a concern that lack of access to transport might put people off seeking help altogether. It is also thought that if people relied on the self assessment alone, without the advice of the Trusted Assessors (for example if they decided to undertake the self-assessment at home) they may not be able to accurately assess their own needs or correctly identify the support they need.
- 6.30 The directorate has undertaken a mapping exercise which shows the spread of accredited retailers who have already signed up for this scheme. The directorate are continuing to expand the list of accredited retailers in the county. A greater the spread of retailers means less chance of people being geographically disadvantaged.

Trusted Assessors:

- 6.31 It is very important that the assessors receive the right level of training and be able to recognise situations where the service user requires an assessment by an occupational therapist. At present, those currently trained as Trusted Assessors (who, for example, deal with Direct Payments) tend to err on the side of caution with assessments. However it is important to maintain the quality of service as the scheme is rolled out and assessors potentially get less cautious. It is important to ensure that those with higher or complex needs do not 'fall through the gaps'.
- 6.32 Equipment retailers will not have trained Trusted Assessors but they will have staff who will be able to advise customers on the equipment that they sell.
- 6.33 Using Trusted Assessors for those with low to moderate needs provides a lighter touch than a full OT Assessment. There are also many service users who do not feel comfortable with having contact with social services. Trusted Assessors from the voluntary sector often appear less 'official' and threatening.

Consultation:

- 6.34 The Adult and Cultural Services Directorate have been undertaking a three month consultation on Transforming Community Equipment Services and Fair Access to Care Eligibility Criteria for Equipment. The consultation took place at the same time as this review and it is intended that the two reports are submitted to the Cabinet meeting in March 2010.
- 6.35 Previous experience has shown that when changes such as this are implemented by Cumbria County Council, that involve the implementation of charges where the service was once free, it can result in negative media coverage and public outcry.

- 6.36 In their interim report (October 2009) this Scrutiny Task and Finish group recommended that the directorate use Cumbria County Council Consultation Strategy and Toolkit to ensure the public consultation exercise is conducted in an open, transparent and equitable manner.

Abuse of Vulnerable Adults:

- 6.37 Members raised concerns during this review that there was a danger, with less direct contact with experts from social services, that instances of abuse of vulnerable adults may not be picked up.
- 6.38 The Adult and Cultural Service directorate feel that Age Concern and other agencies acting as Trusted Assessors have enough experience to police this issue themselves.

Transforming Community Equipment Services

- 6.39 Cumbria County Council currently supplies community equipment to anyone who needs it within the county following an assessment by the OT Service. These pieces of equipment help people to continue to live independently and in comfort in their own homes which would otherwise be difficult or impossible due to disability or the onset of old age.
- 6.40 This equipment can range from simple items to address low level needs such as waterproof mattress covers and grab rails through to equipment to address more complex needs such as hoists.
- 6.41 County Council is following national policy by promoting the normalisation of low level equipment in order to meet future demand. The aim is to encourage individuals to address the impact of low level disability without direct state intervention.
- 6.42 There are currently two community equipment stores in Ulverston and Maryport. The annual cost of running these stores is in the region of £900,000 which includes staffing and the costs of distribution but which doesn't include the cost of the equipment itself.
- 6.43 Under the proposed new system, larger items will continue to be distributed from these stores while smaller items (i.e. those up to a value of £100) will be given out on prescription.
- 6.44 Service users will be signposted to accredited retailers where they will be able to obtain the equipment with the prescription. Under this system, the accredited retailer will also be able to deliver and fit equipment if required by the prescription. The cost of the fitting will be included in the prescription the cost of which will be fixed by national guidelines. All accredited retailers will be responsible for employing fitters and will also be liable for their conduct.

6.45 Individuals obtaining equipment without prescription from accredited retailers will have to make their own arrangements for fitting equipment. Handyman services are going to be put in place across the county. Cumbria County Council is currently putting out a tender for this contract. Experience nationally is that for full cost recovery, £25 per hour would be needed to fund the scheme. However, indications are that individuals would prefer to pay £12 to £15 per hour so this is likely to be charge to the individual. Very quick and simple jobs, such as changing a light bulb, may have a charge of around £5. Members felt that it was very important to have a fixed pricing structure across all areas of the county.

The Retail Model:

6.46 Cumbria County Council has designed a retail model which separates the supply chains for simple and complex equipment. Currently the authority holds all equipment within its own stores and distributes it. In the future the local authority and NHS partners will still supply items of complex equipment, but equipment for low level needs, up to a value of £100, will be available via a network of Accredited Retailers. If Fair Access to Care eligibility criteria for equipment is introduced, equipment for people assessed as having low or moderate needs will no longer be available free of charge. Instead people will be expected to purchase it themselves.

6.47 The Adult and Cultural Services Directorate is currently setting up a network of accredited retailers who will form the Retail Model. Approximately 30 retailers and third sector organisations have shown a firm interest in becoming part of this scheme to date. Some of the retailers have more than one outlet in the county. Not all the organisations currently stock this type of equipment but are all are keen to expand their range of activities and see potential in this market.

6.48 The distribution of retailers currently covers the whole county although there are areas where the spread of retailers is sparser than others. There is a nationally fixed tariff for delivery of equipment that increases the further out a client lives from the retailer. Members had concerns that people in areas where there were fewer accredited retailers may be unfairly disadvantaged as they will have to pay a higher price if they need equipment delivered and further to travel to purchase equipment.

6.49 The Adult and Cultural Services Directorate feel that the spread of retailers will develop quickly as the scheme is implemented. There will be a 12 month cross-over period as the scheme is implemented and the existing premises stores reduce their supplies of low level equipment. It is felt that further opportunities can be explored during this time such as approaching pharmaceutical outlets in supermarkets to see if they would be interested in becoming part of the scheme.

- 6.50 A series of training and information events have been run since September 2008 which cover different aspects of the scheme and will include accreditation requirements. Items prescribed to service users will be priced at a fixed cost set by the National Catalogue of products. Retailers will receive in the region of £1.50 in fees for every item handled.
- 6.51 National Accreditation criteria apply to retailers and will be administered locally by Cumbria County Council Contracts team. In addition to the criteria set out in the national model, Cumbria are considering setting further requirements ensuring reasonable opening hours and accessibility to stores for those with disabilities. The Cumbria County Council complaints procedure is available and will be promoted as the method for making a complaint. The activity around prescriptions will be monitored.
- 6.52 All larger items of equipment (i.e. with a value greater than £100) will be supplied, delivered and fitted by Cumbria County Council as before.

The Retail Model and Fair Access to Care:

- 6.53 During interviews members heard that that the implementation of Fair Access to Care would mean that those with low level needs will not be entitled to get their equipment on prescription. Concern was expressed that this would lead to fewer prescriptions being issued and less custom for the accredited retailers. The witness was concerned that this might cause the Retail Model to fail as it could cause accredited retailers to pull out of the scheme.
- 6.54 There is concern that the Retail Model needs to function effectively in order for Fair Access to Care to work well. Customers who are advised through the self assessment tool and the Trusted Assessors to buy a piece of equipment need to be able to obtain it easily and locally.

Conclusions:

The timing of this work has meant that this has been a 'pre-scrutiny' review looking at the preparations for the introduction of changes to the Community Equipment Service and the introduction of Fair Access to Care eligibility criteria for equipment. Scrutiny members understand the need for the introduction of Fair Access to Care eligibility criteria and support it in principle.

Members feel that there are certain aspects of these new arrangements that they would like to revisit once the scheme has been up and running for six months or so. Specifically they would like to interview Occupational Therapists, Social Care Workers and Trusted Assessors to see how successful the

implementation of the scheme has been and if there are any areas of concern.

It was recognised that the introduction of Fair Access to Care has the potential to be a controversial issue. During the review, members questioned whether the three month consultation period proposed was long enough.

Members recognised the need to ‘normalise’ the purchase of items of equipment for low level need. They recognised that most of the purchasers of this simple equipment would be ‘new’ to the system and therefore would not necessarily expect to receive the equipment for free.

There were some concerns about the correlation between areas of greatest demand for this equipment and areas of greatest deprivation in the county. Members would like to monitor this situation to make sure that the implementation of this scheme will not result in people being unable to access the equipment that they need because of financial hardship.

Members would like to be reassured that service users will not be put off seeking help because they do not have access to transport to take them to the locations where they can see Trusted Assessors or to accredited equipment retailers. Members noted that this scheme will require the service user to go through more processes than the previous scheme where service users would be assessed in their own home and the equipment delivered to them.

Members felt that the success of this scheme depended on the quality and availability of Trusted Assessors. They would like to know more about the authority’s plans to ensure enough sufficiently trained Trusted Assessors are in place to support this scheme now and in the future.

Members would like to make officers aware they understand that this is a new scheme and that it is to be expected that there may be ‘hiccups’ in the first year. They request to be kept informed of developments and any problems that arise.

While Scrutiny has no great concerns about the plans to transform the community equipment services, they recognise that securing ‘buy in’ from partners in the private and third sector to the Retail Model is essential to its success.

Scrutiny recognises that for Fair Access to Care to be implemented effectively it will be essential that the Retail Model is also working properly enabling service users to access the equipment they need.