Knowsley Direct Payments Conference Report

1 October 2021 – Updated Version

Knowsley Leisure and Culture Park Huyton

KNOWSLEY Engagement Forum

KDC

Knowsley Council

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Background and Context

In November 2019, KDC designed and delivered the first ever Direct Payments Conference and Market Place event in partnership with Knowsley Council and the Knowsley Engagement Forum. The aim of the event was to raise awareness and work together to make Direct Payments better for everyone.

The structure and format of the 2019 conference was successful and agreement was secured to replicate this format. The content will be different and move forward from the November 2019 event.

Planning the Conference

Knowsley Disability Concern (KDC) led the planning and coordination of the event in close collaboration with Knowsley Parent Carers Voice (KPCV), individuals receiving Direct Payments, and managers and commissioners from Knowsley Council's Adult Social Care Services. The primary aim was to co-design and co-produce the event by actively engaging both partners and people who use Direct Payments. To facilitate this, three planning sessions were held in August 2021.

A key success factor was the opportunity to share the platform with Executive Directors and Commissioners from Knowsley Council—an approach that was both welcomed and seen as instrumental in securing the positive impact of the inaugural conference. Continued collaboration was regarded as essential, particularly in increasing the involvement of social workers at future events. While the previous conference had a strong focus on Adult Social Care, there was a shared ambition to broaden the scope to include Children's Services and Personal Health Budgets from Knowsley CCG moving forward. A commitment was made to ensure transparent and inclusive communication around content development, with consensus-building embedded in the process ahead of the event.

Four main themes identified.

1. Information
2. Culture, Confidence and Process

3. Personal Assistant resources, for example, training, development of PA Market Place and recruitment.
4. Fear

Proposed themes for the workshops were identified.

1. Tackling what's not working?
2. The possibilities of Direct Payments? Understanding the well-being principle
3. Designing the future of Direct Payments in Knowsley

Delivering the Direct Payments Conference

Huyton Leisure and Culture Park was identified as a suitable venue, and we enrolled a number of local support providers to create the market place and designed the agenda and presentations. We undertook promotional activity and awareness raising. Invitations (followed by reminders) were distributed to all current direct payments users, all social workers, local provider organisations, community groups and other key partners.

The conference took place on Friday 1 October 2021, 65 people attended and there were 4 information stands hosted by local providers and community assets.

The Agenda

- ✓ Background and scene-setting
- ✓ Tackling what's not working
- ✓ The possibilities of Direct Payments
- ✓ Designing the future of Direct Payments

Welcome from Cllr Louise Harbour, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care

"I would like to offer a very warm welcome to Knowsley's second Direct Payments conference, which builds on the success of the Borough's first ever Direct Payments conference that took place in 2019.

I know that residents, partners, and colleagues across Knowsley have worked hard over the last few months to make today's event a reality, which is no small feat during the ongoing pandemic. I am so grateful for the planning and effort that has gone into today and I am just so sorry that I can't be there myself to join you all.

Supporting the continued growth of personalised care is a key priority in Knowsley, and this can be demonstrated in the joint commitments that we make within our Recovery and Transformation Plan for Adult Social Care. To support and enhance personalisation, we see direct payments and personal budgets playing an even greater role in the delivery of services for people with care and support needs as we move forward in the future. This is because they provide more flexibility, choice, and control over how care and support is arranged and provided.

Today I welcome you to share your experiences, thoughts, and ideas around how we can all work together and continue to improve the delivery of direct payments in Knowsley. I hope that you all have an enjoyable and productive day and I look forward to hearing all about it"

Jenny Rollinson, Knowsley Council's Assistant Executive Director of Adult Social Care, started the day off by setting the scene and placing the work of the conference within the national context and policy drivers.

We heard about the future demand locally - as set out within the Council's ***Adult Social Recovery and Transformation Plan (2020-2023)***
And also the Adult Social Care Market Position Statement (2020-2025),

The Council anticipates that direct payments and personal budgets will continue to play a greater role in the delivery of services for people with care and support needs over the next three years (and beyond).

Jenny set out a range of opportunities and intentions for Knowsley including:

- Developing a range of money management options including Pre Payment Cards and Individual Service Funds
- Reviewing audit arrangements
- Supporting the development of community interest companies, social and micro enterprises
- Supporting providers to work in collaboration
- Working with regional partners to develop a workforce strategy for social care

Session One – Tackling what's not working

Andy Gilbert led the first session about "tackling what's not working "themes that emerged from the first conference. Andy outlined the five outcomes

- Everyone knows the value of their budget and how it is spent
- Everybody has possession of their Support Plan
- Easy to find /employ a Personal Assistant
- Information about different support and services is widely available
- The process of receiving a Direct Payment is faster

- Receiving a Direct Payment does change people lives for the good
- Gives people more control over how they wish to be supported
- Some Social Workers are very passionate about Direct Payments
- Ability to be flexible works well when it happens
- Positive to see as range of different providers
- Good information and advice from Direct Payments Support Service.

Tackling what's not working: Four Themes:

Information
Culture, Confidence and Process
PA resources: Recruitment and Training
Fear

People worked in groups having round table conversations about the 4 themes.

People commented about how they can use their Direct Payments – it is not clear and consistent. More information about flexibility of Direct Payments is needed. This theme also emerged in the "Culture,, Confidence and Process " group with people asking for a consistent message that flexibility is ok and a desire to be confident in what you can and can't use a Direct Payment for.

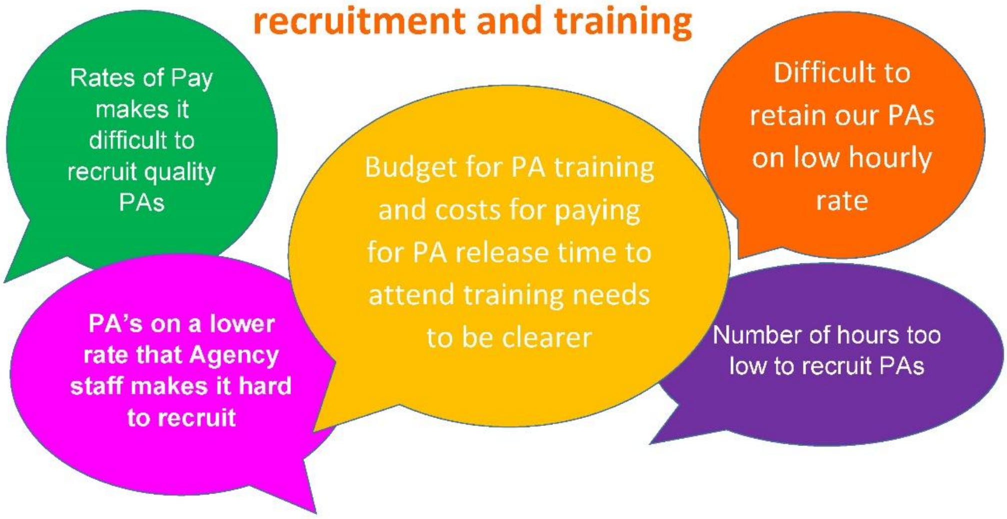
Support plans was highlighted as an important issue with a number of comments about people not receiving a copy of their plan.

For PA resources - Pay, terms and conditions impacting on recruitment and retention were the key issues highlighted. Feelings of frustration were expressed that nothing has changed despite the issues being raised in relevant forums.

In tackling fear – people commented about being fearful to ask for an increase in support as “felt” threat of removal/placement of individual.

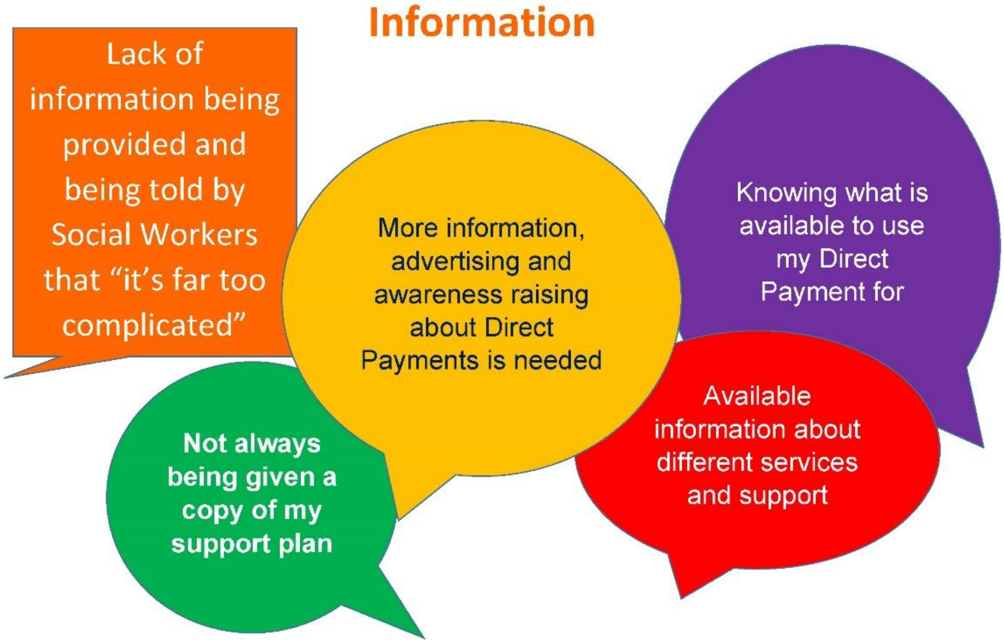
Session One - Tackling what's not working

Personal Assistant resources – recruitment and training



Session One - Tackling what's not working

Information



Personal Assistants (PAs): Workforce Challenges and Professional Recognition

The current landscape for PAs reveals deep-rooted issues in recruitment, training, retention, and recognition. Rates of pay remain low, with long-standing stagnation—many citing no increase in over 15 years, leaving providers unable to recruit skilled staff. Disparities between PA and agency pay rates further complicate the landscape. There is limited job security, no structured progression pathway, and a lack of formal contracts and benefits such as sick pay. The matching process between PA and employer remains inconsistent, and cover remains a challenge, despite the existence of tools like PA Finder. Additionally, responsibilities are often poorly defined, especially when supporting individuals with complex behaviours. The role lacks clarity around expectations, boundaries, and professional standards, contributing to high turnover and low job satisfaction.

2. Information, Guidance, and Access

Access to reliable and up-to-date information continues to be inconsistent. Individuals report being unaware of what their Direct Payments can be used for or where to obtain support plans. Some never receive copies of assessments or care plans, and the use of outdated processes like postal distribution remains a barrier. Confusion about flexibility in spending, a lack of information on opportunities such as Market Days, and infrequent updates all contribute to feelings of disempowerment. There is also minimal access to promotional materials, user-friendly websites, and informational campaigns. Despite referrals to support agencies like KDC, understanding around Direct Payments remains patchy—particularly when comparing adult and children's services. Miscommunication between social care and CCG professionals results in contradictory guidance, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive training and clearer policy implementation.

3. Cultural Barriers and Systemic Attitudes

Many families describe managing a Direct Payment as overwhelming, often due to inconsistent guidance and a lack of supportive culture. Confidence varies significantly and is often tied to individuals' prior knowledge or support networks. Creativity in using Direct Payments is not actively encouraged, with frontline practitioners sometimes displaying risk-averse attitudes or lacking a full understanding of permitted flexibilities. The legacy of COVID-19 and ongoing remote assessments have further impacted communication and rapport between social workers and families. A shortage of consistent social work support, unclear messaging, and outdated attitudes toward flexible use of budgets add to the problem. Building a culture that champions personalisation, innovation, and trust is essential to transforming the experience for individuals and families.

4. Fear and Risk Aversion Among Service Users

Fear emerged as a dominant theme impacting how people engage with Direct Payments. Users often fear that reviews will result in reduced support, higher charges, or unnecessary changes to their support plans. There is anxiety about requesting additional help or triggering reassessments, driven by concerns of service withdrawal or forced placements. Direct Payment users worry about spending money incorrectly and facing scrutiny or penalties. Reviews that are not conducted in person exacerbate this unease. Parents, in particular, report feeling judged during assessments, and many are reluctant to seek support due to fear of social services intervention. There are also questions about whether Direct Payments can be accessed independently of a social worker, with some advocating for a separate pathway.

5. Employment Responsibilities and Employer Support

Becoming an employer through Direct Payments brings responsibilities that many feel ill-equipped to manage. From sick pay and performance reviews to insurance and personnel issues, there is a significant knowledge gap. Access to clear, concise employer guidance—such as fact sheets and workshops—is limited. Individuals lack confidence in navigating annual pay requirements and employment obligations. Many are unclear who to contact when issues arise, highlighting the need for dedicated employer support tools and more responsive communication channels.

6. Market Development and Community Assets

Service providers, including small community interest companies (CICs), report a lack of infrastructure support from local authorities. Buildings, resources, and capital investment are not being prioritised to ensure sustainability of community services. This underinvestment restricts the development of local, personalised options for individuals with Direct Payments. Many feel that existing providers are not adequately supported to participate in an evolving care market, contributing to regional disparities in availability and access.

Session Two – The Possibilities of Direct Payments

Sally Wilson, Interim Head of Adult Social care, Mike Wharton, Head of Service Inclusion and Rachel Sykes, Service Manager CHC/Complex Care, Knowsley CCG led the second session which focused on the possibilities for Direct Payments.

Direct Payments in Children's Services and Adult Social Care – What's Possible?

- ✓ Direct Payments are not just for services.
- ✓ There isn't a list of what Direct Payments can and cannot be used for
- ✓ Direct Payments are flexible.
- ✓ Direct Payments should meet needs and achieve outcomes.

The way you spend the money can be flexible. You do not need to ask permission to do something different to what was agreed in your plan. Whatever you do should however be legal, and you must be able to evidence how it met the needs identified in the assessment.

Rachel Sykes outlined two possibilities for Personal Health Budgets –

> *The aim of a personal health budget is to give people more choice and control over the money spent on meeting their health and wellbeing needs, in order to help meet their needs in a way that is most appropriate for them. They are one way of helping people to be more involved in discussions and decisions about their care, and they can be suitable for people of all ages, with physical or mental health conditions, or both.*
>
> *A PHB can be spent on any care or services set out in your agreed care and support plan. If it is within the budget and assists your care needs, then that's what a PHB is for- flexible and personalised care.*

Exploring Aspirations: What Individuals Want to Achieve Through Direct Payments

People expressed a strong desire for meaningful autonomy, dignity, and flexibility in how their care is delivered. This includes:

- **Professional recognition of Personal Assistants (PAs):** The role should be valued on par with other skilled professions, with fair compensation and status.
- **Control and Choice:** Individuals want genuine control over their budgets, with flexibility to make decisions that best suit their needs and lifestyle.
- **Person-centred planning:** The individual's needs must be central to the process, enabling tailored solutions rather than standardised care.
- **Use of Services and Combating Isolation:** Participants highlighted the importance of using their budgets for wellbeing-enhancing activities, such as transportation (e.g. taxis for social outings), holistic therapies (massage, relaxation), group memberships, and maintaining personal relationships.
- **Access to Support Plans:** Clear information is required about how Support Plans can be used and where to obtain them.
- **Flexible Budgeting:** There is strong support for moving away from rigid care-line allocations to more dynamic budgeting, which adapts to changing personal circumstances.

Barriers and Constraints

Despite these aspirations, users encounter a range of barriers that hinder the effective use of Direct Payments:

- **Funding challenges:** Poor rates of pay make it difficult to recruit and retain skilled staff.
- **Difficulties with Managed Accounts:** Complexities and delays in accessing funds lead to frustration.

- **Lack of clarity from Social Workers:** Incorrect or missing information and inaccessible care/support plans undermine confidence in the system.
- **Inconsistent messaging:** Mixed communications from LAs and CCGs creates confusion.
- **Isolation and access issues:** A shortage of accessible public spaces and services leads to social exclusion.
- **Unclear processes and permissions:** Ambiguity around what Direct Payments can be used for often results in overly cautious spending.
- **Cultural and procedural rigidity:** Overly specific hourly breakdowns and a lack of imagination in planning stifle flexibility.
- **Social Worker knowledge gaps:** There is a need for greater awareness and sensitivity to evolving family and individual needs.
- **Feedback and responsiveness:** A lack of follow-up after queries or issues is disempowering to service users.

Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

Participants outlined practical strategies to improve the system and foster a more inclusive and empowering experience:

- **Improved Communication:** Develop clear information sheets, videos, case studies, and easy-to-understand websites to explain available options.
- **Staff Training:** Comprehensive training at all levels can ensure a more informed and responsive workforce.
- **Collaborative Working:** Enhanced joint efforts between LAs and CCGs will bring greater cohesion and clearer messaging.
- **Information and Confidence Building:** Providing clear resources, directories (like an updated Live Well Directory), and encouraging self-advocacy can empower individuals to use their budgets with confidence.
- **Legislative Awareness:** Ensuring that all decisions are grounded in the Care Act 2014 will support a more consistent and lawful approach.

- **Defined Roles and Accountability:** Clarifying the responsibilities of Social Workers and support services like KDC can improve delivery and responsiveness.
- **Empathy and Personalisation:** Authorities must approach each case with compassion and a commitment to personalised care, rather than focusing solely on cost-efficiency.
- **Process Simplification:** Simplifying systems and audits will reduce delays and improve user satisfaction.

The Market Place

The conference heard from a number of local providers who had information stalls around the room. Each provider has a couple of minutes to describe their services, and everyone was invited to visit any stalls for further information and conversations over lunch.

Session Three – Designing the Future of Direct Payments locally.

1. Introduction
This summarises the key points and discussions from Session Three on enhancing Direct Payments at the local level. The focus was on identifying essential components of a good Direct Payments scheme, proposing improvements, and setting the foundation for long-term success.

2. Essential Components of a Good Direct Payments Scheme
A high-quality Direct Payments scheme should be flexible, person-centred, and transparent. It must empower individuals to make informed choices about their care, supported by clear processes and accessible resources. Success is dependent on three core pillars:

- Comprehensive and consistent training for both staff and service users.
- Clear, jargon-free communication and accessible information.

- Collaborative structures between Local Authorities (LA) and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG) to ensure a unified approach.

3. Improving the Direct Payments System

3.1 Creativity and Flexibility
Encouraging creative and flexible use of funds allows individuals to tailor their care to suit personal needs. This includes operating mixed packages of care and using respite Direct Payments more innovatively.

3.2 Communication and Information
Information must be clear, concise, and widely accessible across different platforms (e.g. Knowsley App, social media, formal letters). The 'Live Well' directory should be regularly updated, and a universally understood guide outlining what Direct Payments can be used for should be made available in multiple formats.

3.3 Training and Development
Training across all levels, including joint sessions for social workers, is crucial. Professionalisation efforts including better Social Work training would elevate industry standards and increase confidence among practitioners.

3.4 Support and Confidence Building
From the outset, individuals need access to clear and consistent support, particularly from organisations like KDC. Confidence is vital—users should feel empowered to make decisions such as becoming an employer, allocating budgets, and shaping care plans without fear.

3.5 Terms and Conditions for Personal Assistants
To attract and retain Personal Assistants (PAs), fair rates of pay that reflect market standards are essential. Incentives for weekend and holiday work, improved terms and conditions, and recognition of the PA role are necessary for long-term sustainability.

3.6 Collaborative Working and System Integration
Better integration between hospital discharge services, LA, CCG, and care providers can reduce repetition, ensure continuity, and promote prevention over crisis response. A shared database could streamline information flow and reduce service user frustration.

3.7 Transparency and Honesty in Budgeting

Discussions around budgets must be open, honest, and based on mutual respect. Individuals should be treated as partners in the planning and execution of their care.

4. Feedback and Accountability

There is a strong emphasis on delivering tangible improvements and avoiding repetition of past concerns. Feedback from sessions must be responded to transparently, and actions implemented effectively.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

To design a future-ready Direct Payments system:

- Foster creativity and confidence in users.
- Invest in ongoing training and professional development.
- Ensure transparency in communication and budgeting.
- Improve PA recruitment through fair employment practices.
- Strengthen collaboration across the system.
- Provide up-to-date, accessible information.

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