

Signing off Support: Panels - Doncaster's Journey

Introduction

In Doncaster a panel system was in place prior to Putting People First in 2007 (the Government's first personalisation policy initiative). In 2013 work carried out with social workers to prepare for the Care Act indicated that not only were panels not working for people who access services, but the whole approach was inefficient and ineffective. As part of a bigger piece of work to re-design the offer to the citizens of Doncaster and re-consider social work in light of the Care Act, the role and function of panels became a part of a wider modernization project.

Background

Current system

In Doncaster all eligible people receive a care and support plan. Almost all of these plans go to a single panel dealing with all customer groups. Agreement exists that if a person's support costs fall within the allocated budget then it can be signed off outside panel. However, in reality, because many people need two workers to support them with moving and handling, their care and support plans tend to exceed the agreed budget allocated by the Common Resource Allocation System (RAS). Work is underway to solve this as a parallel issue (see other case studies on RAS within the minimum process framework). This means that almost all care and support plans are seen by the panel.

Where we want to be: the vision

Doncaster's vision is that only the smallest number of people's care and support plans will go to panel for approval. The majority will be signed off by social workers with team managers acting as a quality control mechanism. In other words, team managers will be signing-off plans where budgets vary within clearly identified parameters. Panels will effectively only be for exceptional circumstances. To achieve this Doncaster has taken a 'whole systems approach'.

This whole system approach is 'asset-based'. The approach requires social workers to assess the person first of all as if they have no support what so ever. But to then include the full range of the person's informal skills, knowledge, abilities, family and community assets and informal support to establish what the unmet needs are. This assessment creates a 'starter budget', based on a judgment about the number and severity of eligible unmet needs, and the risk if they are not met. Informed by this holistic assessment and a starter budget, the person, with or without informal or professional assistance, can develop their support arrangements.

The idea is that if the social work judgments take into account the person's whole life, and these judgments lead directly to the allocation of resources (rather than being decided through application of a technical algorithm); then whether or not the care and support plan and the personal budget are correctly derived is a social work competence issue, not a technical administrative question.

Social work competencies are best judged, not by a panel meeting to discuss a care and support plan in relation to the funds allocated, i.e. whether or not the services identified to deliver the care and support plan are acceptable, but through professional line management and training.

Panels, in this whole system context, are only needed for exceptional cases and as an occasional 'spot check' quality assurance mechanism for the whole system.

Care Act Compliance

Doncaster's new panel process is less bureaucratic, less intrusive for the person accessing services, and it has a focus on outcomes not services. The focus at review is also on outcomes and it asks the question: Has the persons quality of life improved? Not what has the money been spent on?

Of course, where there are concerns, panels still have a role to play, and they also have a role to play as an overall quality assurance mechanism. But overall, this asset-based approach increases the emphasis on individual practitioners using their skills and professional judgment as part of the process with their client, to enhance well being, as well as address eligible unmet need.

Solution summary

Doncaster is 18 months into the journey to develop an asset-based approach to personalisation that empowers both the social worker and the customer. Changes to panels are set in that broader context. Key stages in this journey are noted below. They will however be different for every organisation based on culture, structures and processes that are in place:

- Listening to practitioners and customers about what was working and not working.
- Analysis and research to understand why the model that had been implemented was not working. Key in this was understanding the Social Work role and a focus on culture change not just process change
- Using Johnsons cultural web¹ as a means of analysing the culture of the organization, to fully understand the journey that needed to be undertaken
- Training provided on asset-based assessments, identifying outcomes, and appropriate decision-making
- A series of social worker and assessment officer conferences have supported the wider change agenda impacting on this work
- Development and testing of the asset-based assessment process
- Develop a new resource allocation system based on numbers of eligible unmet needs and the risk to customers if they are not met
- Agree new rules for delegated authority in keeping with plan to have team managers agree and sign off significant budgets
- Review and enhance line management and supervisory regime for social workers

Key challenges included:

- Practitioner engagement

¹ See for example, http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newSTR_90.htm

- Identify criteria for success and setting targets
- Protecting practitioner time to deliver change
- Generating a trusting relationship between social workers and external planners
- Taking support service teams on the journey

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