

Experiences of Direct Payments and finding a Personal Assistant in Dudley Borough



Where would you look for a Personal Assistant (PA) for support?

Dudley Council and Healthwatch Dudley teamed up to find out how people who receive personal budgets are finding the best people to support them.

Employing a Personal Assistant (PA) can give people more choice and control as they can help with things such as washing and dressing, reading letters, or with activities people most enjoy in the community.

We invited people who already have a PA, or who might be thinking of employing someone using their personal budget, to share their experiences during a series of online events.

Fourteen people took part in three conversations in October 2020, December and January 2021. Participants with a wide range of experience including employing PA using their personal budgets or through self funding, were joined by staff from Dudley Council, Queens Cross Network and Healthwatch Dudley to explore:

- How people prefer to get information about employing a PA using a personal budget
- If they would use a local online PA jobs board and information site
- What information would they find most helpful on such a site
- If they already employ a PA, how they found them
- If they were thinking about employing a PA where they were looking
- If they previously used and valued the PA listings and information pages on Dudley Community Information Directory that are not currently a feature of the new directory (www.dudleyci.co.uk)

Ahead of the first event, participants were invited to provide feedback via an online survey and the views captured were used to kickstart conversations.

Following the second session the group decided to come back together in January on 'Blue Monday' to continue conversations as the events had taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic and coming together online had made people feel less isolated.



“I have had a personal assistant for five years and I only found out what was available by talking to a friend – I didn’t know what was out there.”

What people told us...

At each event participants shared their experiences of employing a PA using a personal budget and considered where they felt help could or should come from, who they would trust to provide it and where else they might look for information.

The group talked about the best ways for people to be supported with finding information about employing Personal Assistants using their Personal Budgets and also explored:

- Who they would trust and where they might look for support.
- If they already employ a PA, how they found them.
- If they would find a local online PA jobs board and information site useful.
- What information they would find helpful on such a site.
- The importance of Internet access with consideration that not everyone is online.
- Their expectation of checks made on people offering services on Dudley Council maintained websites.
- How long they would expect listings to be live.
- Their previous experience of PA listings and information pages on Dudley Community Information Directory www.dudleyci.co.uk
- How they felt social media could help.

Support networks

“I found out about an online Direct Payments café where I can share ideas and offer support. This has become an important part of our lives - a real lifeline.”

“It’s about networking. I felt isolated and on my own and then I connected with a carers support group and it has really helped.”

“I really value the information shared by organisations supporting disabled people, though it’s not always easy to find.”

“I didn’t realise that I had a right to a personal budget – people need more information about this but who do we ask? The council should advertise it.”

Experiences of Employing a Personal Assistant

“My PA is self-employed. She has her own insurance and lots of other clients. I don’t employ her, I am her client and she invoices me for work carried out. We have managed to find our own way, though I had problems keeping on top of paperwork so we came to our own agreement and we have built up quite a level of trust.”

“If there was ever a real serious problem, I know I could go to Trading Standards but I really don’t feel like that is going to happen. If things changed and I needed to look for another PA, I feel I would flounder. I would start my search with Dudley Council and hope that they had a directory.”

“I went to Adult Social Care and they walked me through the interview process, I was offered support all along the way. They didn’t do it for me and the responsibility was most definitely mine but they asked me what I needed help with and supported me when I didn’t know what to do at any stage through the process. They empowered me to be independent and I can’t speak highly enough about them.”

“The main problem I have had has been with an agency because as soon as I told them that I was self funding they didn’t want to know, I felt completely isolated as though I had been cast out to sea”

“There is a very personal touch in employing PAs. It’s about building a relationship and finding a rapport. It takes time and it may take several attempts before you get it right.”

“There is so much involved that I have to hire an accountant. I have to get my PAs to fill in a time sheet. I have to do supervisions and I am their boss. It’s important that people understand what they are getting themselves into.”

“There is a lot of hard work involved in employing a PA which needs to be highlighted and talked about.”

“Adult social care is supposed to enable people to self-manage care and stay out of the ‘system’ but the way the support arrangements are set up in Dudley, if you are self-funding, you can’t get much support with managing staff.”

“I have recruited five people in five different ways, one is self employed, one asks to be paid in cash, I’m trying to do the right thing but I need some guidance. I honestly wish I hadn’t got any savings as it would make things easier, I have said I would be happy to pay for the support I just need help but it doesn’t seem to be there, I have never been an employer and I don’t know what to do and I’m exhausted.”

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Available information about Personal Budgets

“I only found out that personal budgets were available through a friend who was helping her elderly parents, without her I would never have known that such a thing existed.

“It is actually a disabled person’s right to have a personal budget.”

“It is about developing skills for life - we need to empower people to help them realise what they have the power to do or how to manage their accounts.”

“Make the most of the Internet and have a strong social media presence. Information is key and whilst not everyone has the Internet many people do look online.”

“Our son wants to use his Direct Payment for a tablet to make it easier for him to communicate while he can’t attend groups because of the pandemic. The money is in his account but he is having to jump through hoops with the social worker who is saying the payment can only be used for social care. They don’t seem to understand that it is in his best interest and a tablet would give him greater choice and control. There definitely needs to be more training around what Direct Payments can be used for.”

Attitudes around safety and security

“There used to be a section on the Dudley Community Information Directory advertising PAs. It could have been useful but the information wasn’t up to date. People might have thought that because the listings were on a council website that PAs were vetted but I don’t think this happened.”

“I would definitely think that if someone is listed on a council website, they have had sufficient checks and hold a DBS. Isn’t this part of having a Direct Payment?”

“Before PAs go on ‘the list’ they should have already proved that they are qualified and have met some sort of professional standard. - If you wanted a plumber to carry out work in your home, you would make sure that they were suitably qualified and Corgi registered. You wouldn’t stick them on a list if they had only fixed a few taps. The same should apply to Direct Payment PAs.”

“You could have all the qualifications in the world but that doesn’t make you a brilliant support worker. Testimonials could be used to give evidence of good past work.”

“Whether you are a self funder or receive Direct Payments, most importantly the person needs to be in control and to feel safe. It is a right under the Care Act to receive advice and guidance.”

“I am a client first not an employer – what does it mean to have a managed account – what happens if you have a poor experience?”

Where are the gaps?

“We need to find trusted place to source PAs.”

“Choice is important but people need to feel safe.”

“I would definitely want someone to talk me through the whole process - it’s very daunting.”

“There should be information given on different examples of how your Direct Payment budget can be used, my PA is self-employed but that doesn’t work for everyone.”

“Sometimes communications can break down, we need support with what to do and how to deal with it when this happens.”

“Smaller packages of care can put clients in a a really vulnerable position when only a small amount of PA time an be purchased.”

“Self-funded clients have much less support compared to the level of support you receive if you get Direct Payments.”

“It takes far too long to get answers from the Council about really simple decisions, especially when budgets have already been set and it should be a formality. They get tied up in bureaucracy”.

“There needs to be a central resource to provide staff and to highlight the dos and don’ts of being an employer.”

“The law is clear if you have identified needs you are classed as a vulnerable person but support doesn’t seems to be equal.”

“Help and support with overcoming bureaucracy and ‘red tape’. Where else is there to turn for support if you are a self-funder? Who can you turn to for support with managing staff? Are you on your own?.”

“A directory is important for information, signposting and introductions but who will ensure that the PA register remains current, and all entries valid? The old one didn’t appear to be monitored and became out of date. Some PA entries when contacted, had already found work. Safety and security. Background checks? Professional experience and monitoring? If PAs advertise their services on the Community Information Directory, will the council be able to ensure that PAs who advertise on the site are trustworthy?”

“The main problem I have had as been with an agency because as soon as I told them that I was self funding they didn’t want to know, I felt completely isolated as though I had been cast out to sea.”

My Life, My Way, My Choice: The Face of Personalised Support in Dudley

Some of the conversations echoed findings from a research project that took place in Dudley borough in October 2018. The project focused on experiences of people using a Direct Payment to employ a PA and the experience of the PA themselves.

Evidence for the project was gathered from group meetings and an event with 40 participants who discussed issues including information and forms of training, negotiations, money, getting help and recruitment.

They identified:

- Both PA employers and PAs themselves described the value of Direct Payments in empowering individuals and getting access to tailored support.
- Information - The sometimes unhelpful format of literature and forms and a lack of information that is clear and accessible
- Training - The need for good quality and accessible training and the lack of funds for training - life skills are important for the PA
- Negotiation - Difference between being an employer and friend - the need for structure around terms and conditions of PA employment and the difficulty of meeting needs within PA hours available
- Money - the lack of clarity on how monies can be spent - no monies for for PA pension contributions and the lack of clarity of insurances required
- Getting help - the lack of advice available when considering employing a PA

“There is so much involved that I have to hire an accountant. I have to get my PAs to fill in a time sheet, I have to do supervisions and I am their boss. It’s important that people understand what they are getting themselves into.”

Group ideas and recommendations:

“Peer support is key - could people who are already employing PAs help people who want to find out more? - Having advocates for employing a PA would be a brilliant idea.”

“Could a local quality standard be introduced? What about DBS checks for people if they are advertising their services on Council websites?”

“Dudley Council Adult Social Care have Direct Payments Champions, many who are social worker qualified but not many people outside of the Council know what their role is, who they are and how to find them. Can they be better promoted?”

“There needs to be more clarity and consistency of information for members of the public and better training for staff around personal budgets, the legalities, and how they can be used.”

“Could the WhatsApp group for employers of PAs be relaunched so they can support each other? There used to be one but it wasn’t well used.”

“There is a Facebook page called The Bunker for people who are in receipt of Direct Payments. Could this be used or a new page set up to encourage peer support.”

“There are several sections on the Dudley Council website to help people who receive Direct Payments become employers. Could these be tailored to support self funders.”

“Could a series of Direct Payments videos be made for the Dudley Council website and Community Information Directory featuring local people? Bite sized nuggets could explain processes and share real life experiences of accessing Direct Payments in Dudley, of being a self funder and how to be a boss.”

“A local online training course would be good. Made accessible to people who want to consider Direct Payments, and for their family/carers as well.”



Dudley Council is committed to bringing people together, so that local voices can improve the experiences of people receiving direct payments in Dudley borough.

Dudley Council Adult Social Care has listened to what people have said and to the recommendations made in this report. The Council has committed to working with local people to consider how to put their ideas into action and will continue to progress this work through collaborative working with the Dudley Empowerment Partnership and the Direct Payments Café, which has been established as a result of a recommendation within this report.

Anyone can attend the Direct Payments Cafe, in person or online, if they receive a direct payment for their adult social care, or is thinking about doing so.

Find out more information about Direct Payments in the Dudley Council Adult Social Care Portal: <https://adultsocialcare.dudley.gov.uk> or call 0300 555 0055

Search for the Direct Payments Cafe on Dudley Community Information Directory <https://dudleyci.co.uk>

This report has been produced by Healthwatch Dudley in collaboration with Dudley Council Adult Social Care

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