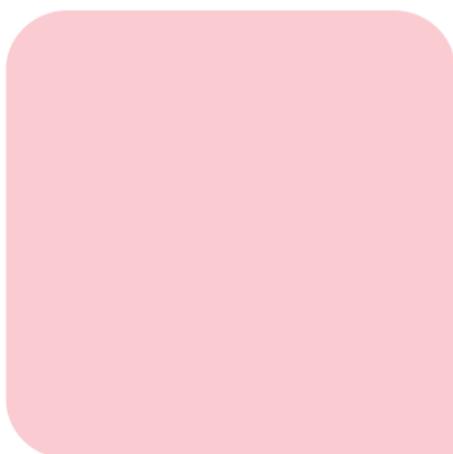


Will community-based support services make direct payments a viable option for black and minority ethnic service users and carers?



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Introduction

More people than ever before can now choose to have cash payments to purchase their own personal assistance rather than using services arranged for them by local authorities. This scheme is called direct payments. New legislation has placed a mandatory duty on all care managers to offer service users and carers, with an assessed need for services and cash payments.

This new flexibility has been welcomed by disabled people after decades of campaigning to be given choice and control over their lives. The direct payments scheme is seen as an important step towards the goal of achieving independent living. Unfortunately, one group has failed to benefit from the choice and flexibility offered by direct payments: black and minority ethnic communities. Local authorities have a history of consistently failing to provide black and minority ethnic communities equal

access to direct services. And there is a growing body of evidence that black and minority ethnic service users will also be underrepresented in direct payments schemes.

The purpose of this discussion paper is threefold:

- First, it will explain the latest legislation on direct payments and how it is meant to work.
- Second, it will summarise the growing research and secondary evidence that point to the inability of black and minority ethnic service users and carers to fully embrace direct payments.
- Third, it will pose a number of questions that will address ways in which direct payments services can be effective for black and minority ethnic service users and carers.

Direct payments

There are two key components to direct payments. The first is the care manager's assessment of the needs of service users and carers. The care manager must include direct payments as an option to secure direct services. They must also seek to offer the service in innovative ways. No service user can be forced to choose direct payments. The second component is the support services that will

help users and carers manage their direct payments. The result is that a service user becomes an employer to their personal assistants. This means they will need help with taxation, payroll and other employer-employee matters. Support services can assist with this process while advocacy services can help service users choose the best option for them. The Department of Health believes support and advocacy services will overcome the one major weakness of direct payments – its complexity. The Department also believe that community-based support services are better placed to represent and assist black and minority ethnic service users and carers.

Black and minority ethnic service users' experience of direct payments

Despite the hopes of the Department of Health, black and minority ethnic service users are faced with considerable barriers to accessing direct payments.

They include:

- confusion over the meaning of 'independent living'
- assessment processes not taking account of black and minority ethnic service users' backgrounds and requirements

- service users being unaware of how to access important information on direct payments
- lack of support for people to use the available information
- difficulties in recruiting personal assistants who can meet the cultural, linguistic and religious requirements of black and minority ethnic service users
- failing to consider using direct payments in more innovative and creative ways
- a shortage of appropriate advocacy and support services
- lack of resources for local schemes
- variable levels of commitment to direct payments among local authorities, and the possibility for confusion over the relatives' rules.

All together these barriers present a considerable challenge to local authorities. They require them to use imaginative and original methods to attract hard-to-reach groups. Training programmes for care managers need to reflect the socially inclusive goal of direct payments. The barriers also require local authorities to look carefully at the kinds of advocacy and support and services they have in place and to ask whether they represent the interests of all local users.

Local authorities have an opportunity to deliver innovative and flexible services to groups they have traditionally been unable to assist with direct services. There are going to be problems reaching some service users within this group. However, if the message – that direct payments can make a massive difference to the lives of service users and carers – is made to reach the target audience, then overcoming these problems will have been worthwhile.

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