

**Meeting with Department for Work and Pensions and Merton Representatives.
22nd May 12noon -2.00pm, Merton Civic Centre**

Present: Councillor Peter McCabe (Chair) Councillor Andrew Howard, Lyla Adwan-Kamara, Chief Executive, Merton Centre for Independent Living. Karen Brunger, Service Manager Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice. Alan Wylie, Merton Disability Benefits Adviser, Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice. Kam Patel, Partnership Manager DWP Maria Monaghan, Independent Assessment Services (IAS) Sue Hubbert, Adults First, George McAdam, Adults First.

The Chair invited voluntary sector colleagues to give an overview of the challenges they have been facing with the Personal Independent Payment process.

Merton Centre for Independent Living

There are a higher proportion of applications turned down in Merton than the England average. There are also a higher number of appeals and higher overturn rate. Refusals are above average.

There are access issues as many of the assessment centres are difficult to get to. Merton residents are sent to Vauxhall which is not accessible by public transport.

There are problems with overbooking where people have to wait a long time and may be sent home.

Many assessments of client's mobility are fundamentally incorrect.

It was noted that there are a large number of people being transferred to PIP and the voluntary sector will not have the capacity to support them all. It is important that Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Independent Assessment Services (IAS) rectify the systemic problems within the process.

Merton and Lambeth Citizens Advice

Over five hundred clients have been supported on issues with PIP regarding eligibility appeals and making a claim

The claim form needs to be reviewed as many clients are finding it difficult to complete.

Clients are having difficulty successfully being awarded mobility element at first application. As a result their cars taken away causing unnecessary stress and hardship as the vehicles are reinstated after appeal.

Adults First

The forms are very complex.

The assessment interview had a high emotional cost as it involves numerating all of the personal difficulties that the person with a learning disability is faced with.

There was support for the audio recording of assessments as recommended in the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee Report on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and PIP Published on 14th February 2018. The report states that:

Offering audio recording of assessments by default would reassure claimants that an objective record of their appointment exists, to call on in the event of a dispute. Providing a copy of the assessors' report by default with claimants' decision letters would also introduce essential transparency into decision-making.

Assessors need higher level of training to deal with mental health issues.

Response from Independent Assessment Service

The IAS recognise there are issues in relation to working with clients with a hearing disability and they are working with the British Deaf Association to address this.

Changes have been made to make the process easier such as assessors attending day centres and installing designated rooms which are light and noise sensitive

IAS will need specific details of clients before the issues can be addressed. They are happy to follow up the issues raised by the local residents at the scrutiny meeting.

There are issues across the country but they need further evidence about the specific issues in Merton so further investigations can take place.

Overbookings are managed at a local level using local intelligence on which appointments are likely to be filled. Session management is determined according to a number factors. Whilst overbooking cannot be stopped as assessors will not be working at capacity, there should not be large numbers of people waiting and sessions cancelled. It was emphasised that everyone should be treated with respect and dignity.

IAS reported that assessors are from a wide range of professions including; mental health nurses, learning disability professionals, physiotherapists. They must have had two years in their profession. They have four levels of training

Colleagues asked for details of the modules of training for assessors which has been received.

Actions arising from the meeting

- There needs to be a line of communication between voluntary sector and IAS, Maria Monaghan has provided details and said people can contact her directly
- IAS to review overbooking in Croydon and Wandsworth
- IAS to review circumstances in which Merton residents are being sent on long journeys for assessments. An example is from Merton to Barking.
- IAS to review the higher than average PIP denial rate in Merton. This is 29% in Merton and 27% as the national average.
- Merton CiL will work with peer audit of accessibility of Wandsworth Centre
- Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel to monitor this issue on an ongoing basis with regular reports to the panel.
- Voluntary sector colleagues to monitor the numbers of clients who are facing challenges with PIP and report specific issues to IAS.

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