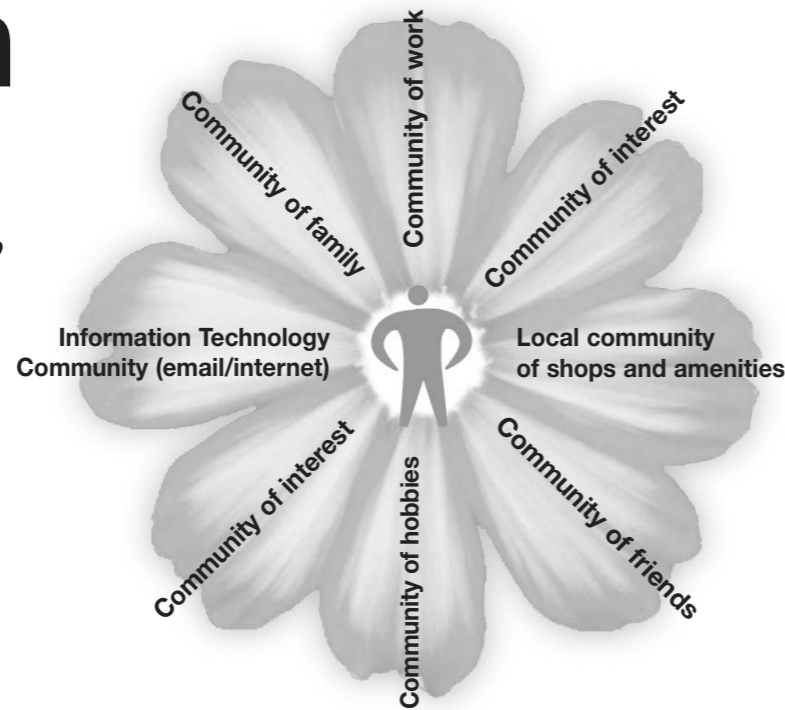


## Location, Location, Location

*Locality commissioning, BIG idea or BIG mistake? John Gilkes, Quality Development Manager at Perthyn, offers a personal view*



Cardiff Council have announced that they are going to commission Supported Living services on a locality basis. They have divided the city into six areas with a view to identifying one provider for each area. (It could be that one provider will get more than one area.) This approach certainly came as a surprise to parents and service users and as such has been greeted with a great deal of suspicion.

### **Community relationships**

The authority is taking the view that developing community relationships and resources is at the heart of their commissioning strategy. Most people, I would imagine, would be fully in support of this idea. They take the view that whilst many people may be located in the

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However, most of us recognise that we exist in a wide range of communities that may not have a geographic boundary but could be defined as a community of interest or common endeavour which may or may not overlap with our local neighbourhood.

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community they are not necessarily a part of their community. In keeping with this view, the authority wants there to be greater interaction between services and communities so that natural

community-based supports can be identified and enjoyed. As an outcome this is laudable. However, that the best way to achieve it is through geographically based block contracts is highly questionable. There are a number of reasons to question the locality approach to commissioning:

### **What is a community**

Defining 'community' in a purely geographic way is a single dimensional analysis. Clearly a person's neighbourhood is an important part of their life. Developing positive relationships with neighbours and others in the immediate vicinity of someone's home is an important outcome for the person and helps them to fulfil their responsibilities as a tenant.

However, most of us recognise that we exist in a wide range of communities that may not have a geographic boundary but could be defined as a community of interest or common endeavour which may or may not overlap with our local neighbourhood.

## No Boundaries

Cardiff's Strategic Commissioning Plan (pg29) in relation to person centred planning states:-

*Person centred putting the needs of service users and carers first, and building services outward from these considerations.*

Building outwards is a key concept. It does not presume geographic boundaries. Thus building our individual communities of interest will only be defined by where, and with whom, such interests can be pursued. For example, we seek work, or volunteering opportunities, where such opportunities exist, not just within our local geographic area. There is only one Ice Rink (almost) in Cardiff. Not every location has a bowling alley. One uses community education classes according to subject, not location. If all your friends and colleagues are located across town, you may just treat your home locality as a place to eat and sleep.

## Difficult

Developing community links and relationships is probably the most difficult part of Supported Living. What experience has taught us,

however, is that success depends on our knowledge of the individual, the skills of staff, and the support of family carers and advocates. The way forward therefore has to be to create a culture in which care plans and assessments lead on to person-centred plans and support arrangements, with a huge focus on training staff, families and individuals to reach out beyond current limits and boundaries, and to take risks together, as people explore their own potential and the potential of communities, local and not so local.

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The question has to be asked, if location commissioning is such a great idea, why aren't the authority's own in-house services being included?

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Instead, the council's focus is on creating artificial service zones which are no more communities than the four so-called Communities into which, until recently, the City was split for the purposes of locating its LD multi-disciplinary teams. Those four non-Communities have been merged into two. It would seem that, in relation to social work and community nursing, the community engagement strategy is moving in a centralist direction not a local community direction

It would help if the Authority

indicated that they had based their decision on evidence drawn from practice elsewhere. They haven't done so yet, and one rather suspects this is because they do not have any. (I would be happy to be proved wrong)

## Restricts choice

In response to the criticism that Locality Services would restrict the choice of service users, the authority has stated that if a person is unhappy with their provider, there would be no problem changing provider. In which case, why bother commissioning by locality in the first place? There is also a great deal of uncertainty with regards the legal status of present supported living schemes. At least one social landlord has raised concerns that locality commissioning could lead to the registration of current homes with all the consequences that would result. It will probably take a definitive view from CSIW to clarify the situation.

Cardiff have stated that they are still committed to extending Direct Payments so that people can buy their own services from whom they wish, as they can if they receive money from the Independent Living Fund. How does this fit with the concept of locality providers?

The question has to be asked, if location commissioning is such a great idea, why aren't the authority's own in-house services being included?

## Joint Review

You may have heard that the authority is doing what it is doing because of a damning joint review in 2002. Well, the 2002 joint review stated: "In-house costs are considerably higher than those of the independent sector, underlining the Best Value case for more effectively targeting in-house services on the strategic priorities." In contrast, the most the joint review had to say about the independent sector was that "it should not be concluded that there are no efficiency savings to be made", a statement that no one would argue with. Consider the two statements. Do you think they should be interpreted as meaning: "Leave your in-house services alone and try and get all your savings from the independent sector" Of course not. And yet that is what is happening.

Interestingly, services for older people have been organised on Locality lines too, and I have not read one explanation that mentioned community development as a key motive. It was unashamedly about reducing cost. I am told that the providers are now desperately trying to get out of their contract as it is not working.

## Cost savings

So is cost the real reason for Localities? Councillor John Dixon, executive member with the portfolio of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing, when asked on Radio Wales how the authority would deal with the £3 million cut suggested that the

proposed Localities would cover the shortfall by reducing staff travel costs. This is an interesting viewpoint that sadly has no basis in reality. There would be no staff savings for travel as these services do not operate the same as domiciliary services for older people. If I am wrong, I would welcome being told why I am wrong?

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On the same theme, Neelam Bhardwaja, Corporate Director, has stated that the Localities would help with problems with regard to staff deployment across the County. What problems? None of the providers know about such problems, and given that Cardiff covers an area of only 20 miles by 14 miles, one can but feel admiration at the efficient way in which the same providers cope without Locality monopolies in vast counties like Powys and Carmarthen...

Given that there could be concerns about staff deployment and travel costs in a Locality-less world, why has Cardiff stated that it wishes to contract its 'Flexible Support Service' with a single City-wide provider?

Surely this would be exactly the sort of service where you might want to cut down on staff doing two hours in Caerau and then travelling to Splot to do two more.

All of the above, however, is likely to be of no consequence when the impact of removing over £3 million from the budget is realised. If providers are to be able to pay their staff a half decent salary then there will have to be a cut in support hours to a level that will make community participation a rare occurrence. Keeping up the level of hours will mean paying staff at, or close to, minimum wage. This will result in huge turnover and low recruitment levels. There will not be the staff to support community activity.

## Verdict

What's my verdict on locality commissioning? Well it's definitely not a big idea and in itself will not deliver the outcomes the authority has claimed in public. Is it a big mistake? Only time will tell. Sadly, the really BIG mistake is the belief that you can cut £3 million from the supported living budget without serious consequences for service users and staff. The really BIG idea would have been to discuss the financial problems facing the authority in an open, honest and transparent manner and to work with all stakeholders to plan solutions. Well actually that's not a very big idea is it? Just common sense!

*John Gilkes  
Quality Development Manager  
Perthyn*