

A Postcode Lottery? Explaining the uneven implementation of direct payments in the UK



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**Independent Living and Direct Payments:
The National Picture Conference**
Weetwood Hall Hotel, Leeds, LS16 5PS,

22nd March 2006

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Key points and plain English version

For more detailed information and papers please see the project web page:
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/projects/ukdirectpayments.htm>

In our research we wanted to find out how direct payments have been working in different parts of the country.

Many disabled people and their organisations have said that direct payments are working better in some places than in others. The title of our presentation suggests that it makes a difference where you live. If you live in the right place then it can be easy to get a direct payment and there is lots of support. If you live in the wrong place then it can be more difficult. We wanted to find out why there were more people using direct payments in some places and very few in others. We wanted to find out why some local authorities had managed to introduce direct payments ten years ago but others had only started quite recently. We wanted to find out why there was strong support for people using direct payments in some places and not much support in other places. We also wanted to see if there were differences in the way that direct payments were working in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The first ideas for direct payments came from disabled people and the first direct payments schemes were led by local groups of disabled people.

Having a direct payment means that disabled people can choose whether they want to receive services or whether they want to receive money to organise their own support services. Before 1996 local authorities were not allowed to give this money directly to disabled people, but in a few places disabled people and staff were already finding ways to make this happen. The first direct payments schemes were in the South of England and in the Midlands. In these places direct payments were very successful and soon disabled people in other places were asking for the same thing. We talked to people who were involved in the early days of direct payments. These included disabled people, people in local authorities and people in Government. All of them said that direct payments would not have happened without the disabled people's movement.

Ten years ago there was a new law for direct payments but local authorities did not have to offer them to disabled people if they did not want to.

In 1996 there was a new law called the Community Care (Direct Payments) Act. This meant that local authorities could offer disabled people a direct payment if they thought that the person could manage with one. But the law was not compulsory and the local authorities did not have to offer anyone a direct payment unless they wanted to. This meant that some local authorities started to give people direct payments and others did not. In our research we began by looking at all the local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland and all the Trusts in Northern Ireland to see which ones had been using direct payments from the beginning.

In the beginning there were big differences in the numbers of disabled people receiving direct payments in different places.

In the first five years after the Act there were still some places where no-one at all was using a direct payment. In other places the numbers were growing very quickly. Almost nine out of ten authorities had disabled people using direct payments before 2003 but there were still 19 authorities that did not. In England, two authorities already had more than 600 people using direct payments. In Scotland, the highest number was 120 people. In Wales and Northern Ireland the highest number of users in one place was 47 people. There were direct payments users in all of the English authorities except one, but one in three of the Scottish authorities did not have anyone using direct payments officially.

The places where direct payments were most successful were the same places that had support services led by disabled people.

In the first part of our research we also found that good support services for direct payments users really make a difference. In the early years, all of the places that had high numbers of direct payments users already had strong local support services in their area. The fastest growing direct payments schemes had support services led by disabled people themselves. The National Centre for Independent Living provided an important base for sharing information and advice.

In the past few years there has been a much bigger increase in direct payments for disabled people and other groups.

The graph shows that the number of people using direct payments in England increased very quickly between the year 2000 and 2004. But there were still big differences across the United Kingdom. We talked to staff in 102 different local authorities and asked them about the reasons.



Having someone responsible for direct payments makes a difference

Most of the English local authorities had a full-time member of staff who was responsible for taking direct payments forward in the area. In other parts of the UK the person with responsibility was more likely to be part-time or involved in other areas of work for the authority. This meant that there was often more time and resources to develop direct payments in English authorities.

The law on direct payments can mean different things to different people in local authorities.

There has been some useful guidance from the Government but some local authorities say they find it difficult to understand exactly what is allowed and what is not allowed. Many authorities in England worry that it is difficult to provide direct payments and keep their 'duty of care' to disabled people. Other authorities are worried that they cannot check on personal assistants in the same way that they do with their own staff. In Wales and England, local authority staff are very worried about deciding whether some people can manage a direct payment. This affected people with learning difficulties and people using mental health services. In Scotland some staff were not sure how direct payments would work with children and young people. In Northern Ireland most of the local Trusts had very little knowledge about how direct payments policies work.

Local authorities have different rules about how disabled people can spend their direct payments.

Many staff are positive about direct payments and like the idea of flexibility, choice and control for disabled people. Using direct payments can help them to arrange new ways of solving problems with everyday life. Some authorities will allow disabled people to use direct payments to pay for holiday accommodation, leisure activities, trips abroad and mobile phones. Other local authorities will only allow disabled people to use direct payments for practical help with their personal care. The outcomes for disabled people are different in different places and this often depends on the decisions of staff in the local authority.

Local training and publicity can make a difference for staff and disabled people.

Some local authorities had made a big effort to do more training and this increased the number of disabled people using direct payments. Training was much more effective when there was someone in the local authority who had time and responsibility to do it. English authorities had more money and staff to support direct payments training. There were good examples where local authorities had used television, radio, videos and DVDs to help tell people about direct payments and how they worked. There was a need for Disability Equality Training and not all of the authorities were working with local disabled people on their training.

Some authorities set targets for direct payments and this increased the numbers of people using them.

After 2003-2004 local authorities had to start offering direct payments to disabled people when they carry out a general assessment of needs. The Government also gave targets to the English local authorities for the number of people who should be using direct payments. These changes made a big difference and many authorities started to develop direct payments properly for the first time. Many local authorities in Scotland and Wales were strongly against the idea of being set targets by the Government.

Adults with physical impairments were more likely to get direct payments in the beginning but things are changing

The law has changed so that direct payments can be used by different groups of people, including older people, children, and people with all kinds of impairments. There has been a big increase in the number of people with learning difficulties who get direct payments but people using mental health services have not been so successful. In Northern Ireland there was not as much progress with new groups of direct payment users. The Government provided money to help English authorities and this made a real difference. They were able to employ staff and work with local support organisations to increase the use of direct payments by new groups of people.

Direct payments are a small part of local authority work but if more people choose them the money will have to come from somewhere.

Staff in local authorities are worried that if more people take direct payments there will be less money for services like day centres or respite care. This may mean that some small services have to be provided in a different way. Local authorities have a great deal of money in block contracts for services that exist and it can be difficult to take this money out for direct payments.

In some places it can be difficult to find people to work as personal assistants

Half of the Welsh authorities had some problems in finding enough people to work as personal assistants for all of the disabled people who wanted them. In other parts of the UK this was less of a problem. It can be hard to recruit personal assistants in some areas that are rural or have an ageing population. It can be difficult to recruit people when there are new local jobs available from large employers like supermarkets or call centres. It can be difficult to find personal assistants to work for people when the number of hours is very small or there are short visits in the evening. Some jobs have been advertised in local Job Centres for months with no enquiries at all. Some local authorities have increased the rate of pay to attract new staff. Many disabled people still employ people they know. Local authorities were cautious about employing relatives but sometimes this could solve the problem.

As more people take direct payments there have been problems for some local support organisations

Support organisations led by disabled people have been important in developing direct payments in the UK but now many of them are under great pressure to cope. More local authorities are choosing to use their own support services and some local schemes have been replaced by large charities. Some of these support organisations employed disabled staff but many did not. Only a quarter of the English authorities we spoke to had a user-led support scheme. Support organisations were providing a wide range of services but in some places this was being cut back in their contract. The National Centre for Independent Living is also under threat of closure. There is a danger that we will lose the connection between direct payments and the independent living movement.

For more information about the research project, and more details about the findings, please visit the website.

You can email us at disability-studies@leeds.ac.uk