

ADULT SOCIAL SERVICES - CHARGING POLICY - SERVICE USERS RESIDING AT "IN HOUSE" SUPPORTED LIVING UNITS DURING THE PERIOD 1997 TO 2003

Audit Commission Report - May 2000- Charging with Care

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within which users must lodge any appeal against their charge, or telling clients who have savings of more than £3,000 that they are not allowed to make appeals. Less than one-quarter of councils set out clear target times for deciding an appeal.

107. As the existing systems rely on each client appealing to ensure that their charges are affordable, people who are vulnerable or less confident may be penalised because they are much less likely to complain. More worryingly, there are some indications that users stop using services as charges mount and their circumstances change, unaware of their rights to appeal, and the fact that the council cannot withdraw the service if they do not pay.

108. The best councils have taken steps to ensure that these systems are as open and easy to navigate as possible (CASE STUDY 3). For example, some send a standard form or letter to every client explaining how to appeal, together with their notification of charge. One council includes a tear-off slip in its home care payment books for users to appeal. Others try to encourage access to their appeals system: 'The service user has the right to make an appeal over the telephone, in person ... or in their own home, using sign language or their native language'. One council provided a further level of re-assurance by telling clients that they have the right to attend (and to be accompanied) at the meeting to discuss their case, and that the council will ensure that the meetings are held at a convenient location, after which '[the council] will relay discussions by phone to service user'.

CASE STUDY 3

Improving its handling of appeals: the Metropolitan Borough of Wirral

The Metropolitan Borough of Wirral has sought to improve its management of reviews of charges by establishing a Conciliation Service, co-ordinated by a central Conciliation Officer. She considers users' financial circumstances, helps users access advice on benefits take-up, and has delegated authority to vary or waive charges. The service is available to all users to help ensure that charges are reasonable and reasonably practicable to pay.

Mr B, an 80-year-old user of home care and meals on wheels, cut back on his services following notification of the charges. Concerns were raised over his vulnerability and ability to pay the

charge. Help was given to him to claim extra benefits and feel confident to accept much needed support. Charges were reduced pending the result of the claim and the service was immediately reinstated.

Mr C's situation was deteriorating as a result of Alzheimer's disease, causing particular stress for his wife, his main carer, who also had health problems. There were worries that they might withdraw from services as a result of charges. Help was given with benefits and a level of charge was agreed that was affordable, enabling the user to continue with the services in the confidence that further use could

be made of the Conciliation Service should their circumstances change.

The Conciliation Officer also monitors a number of aspects of charging: referrals for conciliation (broken down by income bracket and area office); outcomes of referrals; waiting times between referral and conciliation; cancellations of service due to charges; and, details of users given welfare rights advice (including the outcome of that advice). This information is used to ensure that charges are managed consistently and fairly for all users. It is also reported annually to councillors in order to inform decisions over charging.