

Direct Payments Project

A project to develop and trial systems of direct payment to people with a disability has recently started in the Southern Metropolitan Region. The project uses an action learning approach, in which people with a disability take an active role in the development and direction of the project.

'Direct payments' is an option, in which a person with a disability* can choose to have their funding for disability support paid directly to them. In the present system, funding is provided to a support agency, which then delivers supports to the person with a disability. However, in a system of direct payments the person with a disability receives the funding directly, and is then able to choose, arrange and purchase the supports they require to meet the goals they have identified in their individual plan. This approach aims to give people with a disability greater independence, choice, control and flexibility over their supports and how and when they are delivered.

Systems of direct payment have been successfully operating in countries such as the UK, USA and Canada for many years, and have also been recently introduced in Western Australia (in 1994) and through Victoria's Transport Accident Commission (in 2005). There has been a growing interest in Victoria in the introduction of direct payments, an option that is consistent with the directions of the Victorian State Disability Plan, which focuses on the capabilities and individual aspirations of people with a disability. A system of direct payments is also in line with the Individualised Planning and Support approach, one of the strategies aimed at achieving the State Disability Plan goal of enabling people with a disability to pursue an individual lifestyle.

The *Direct Payments Project* in the Southern Metropolitan Region involves ten people with a disability*. These ten people already receive funding through existing support programs such as Home First, Future for Young Adults, or *Support & Choice*, and during the *Direct Payments Project* will receive their funding directly over a six-month period. They will also take part in workshops to contribute to policies and procedures that will support the future implementation of *Direct Payments*.

* can also be the person's family member, guardian or administrator

The Department of Human Services through this project is committed to listening to the experiences of people with a disability and working in partnership with them to learn more about how *Direct Payments* can be as effective and simple to implement as possible.

In the first phase of the *Direct Payments Project*, people who are taking part will discuss and explore the different options for how funding will be paid to them. People who are involved will explore the ways to meet both the needs of individuals, and the legal and accountability requirements of the Department of Human Services. Some of the issues that will be looked at in this developmental phase include processes for how money will be transferred, record keeping, and tax and GST implications. The group will also consider what support might be required to assist people with a disability to make informed decisions about the quality of the supports they are purchasing, and how to balance the need for flexibility to use funding within an agreed individual plan. At the end of this first phase, a Direct Payments User Manual will be developed, for use in the Direct Payments trial, which will start in the second half of 2006.

In this developmental period, the Department of Human Services will also work with support providers and planning facilitators to give them more information about the *Direct Payments Project*. Before the trial begins, all people taking part in the project will have developed their own up to date individualised plan, with the support of a facilitator. Throughout the trial period there will be a series of meetings to support the project participants to use Direct Payments, and to gain feedback from them on how the system is working and what can be improved.

Evaluating the *Direct Payments Project* is an important way to capture the views and experiences of people who have taken part, and learn from their experiences when further developing policy. The evaluator will maintain regular contact with the people involved in the *Direct Payments Project* throughout to gain a picture of the benefits and challenges of the new approach from the perspectives of both the individuals and the Department of Human Services. The evaluation will also assess the level of support that needs to be provided if people with a disability are to use direct payments, and explore which factors led to successful outcomes and which were less successful. The information gained from the evaluation will form an important base for recommendations about the further development of a system of Direct Payments to people with a disability and the ways in which this approach can be improved.