Proportionate Approaches

Case Study

Introduction

Proportionate assessments are difficult to define. It is easy to define the parameters of this process, namely the start of a statutory needs assessment to the sign-off of a care and support plan or support plan for carers, but it is not clear what a proportionate assessment process or document looks like. However, Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council (DMBC) has produced a process model which is worthy of consideration.

Background

As part of their Adult Services Modernisation Programme, Doncaster Council developed an asset based assessment process. It was necessary because previous incarnations of assessment processes and pro-forma had been overly bureaucratic, confusing for both service user and worker alike and did not produce consistent practice decision making across the Council. The format was deficit based and did not allow for the service user's 'voice' to emerge. Social care assessors had to 'fudge' the common Resource Allocation System that was in use in an attempt to generate sufficient money and the process was opaque to service users and fellow professionals alike.

Doncaster's new assessment to eligibility, to outcomes statement and thereafter, to support planning, is combined in a well-crafted process. It is leaner and more user friendly for both service users and assessment staff. It is also compatible with fulfilling the organisational and bureaucratic needs of the Council. The approach in Doncaster reflects the Wellbeing Principles in the Care Act 2014 and enables the Council to move to an 'assets first, services last' approach that:

1. Enables people to identify and harness their individual strengths and resources and the universal assets available to them in the community
2. Helps people to access and maximise their informal support networks, for example, their friends, neighbours and family
3. Provides formal support where and when this is needed to scaffold the informal and universal assets for those who meet the eligibility threshold

Findings

Doncaster's new approach to assessment embraces individual and community strengths, recognising these as key assets to meeting social care need. The new process and accompanying documentation is self - explanatory but differs from previous community care assessment documentation used by the Council because:

- It is less prescriptive and allows the service user to tell their own story, from their perspective
- It teases out a picture of need and the context of that need from what the service user says
- It filters needs into those which are met and unmet and, where the latter are identified, it allows the worker to discuss informal options prior to establishing the need for statutory

services to be delivered. It includes a carer's assessment and only then identifies the eligible unmet need.
- It enables the service user to recognise their strengths and assets; to identify the things that are important to them

This leads them to be able to consider the outcomes they wish to achieve – with public funding if they are eligible, or with access to universal services and informal support if they are not.

The assessment works with a new Resource Allocation Tool (see below). Completing the assessment with an allocation of money breaks the link between cash and services. Doncaster has also introduced an 'outcomes statement' which follows on from the assessment. This allows the social worker to agree with the service user what their cash sum is for - not what services it must buy, but what the purchasing must achieve.

The process and the use of the new documentation demonstrated some very interesting and important results:

1. Social care workers felt re-valued as they were asked to make professional competency-based judgements
2. Amongst customers there were 'winners' and 'losers' from the process. The net financial effect was neutral
3. Social care workers did not feel they had to 'game' the RAS because the process by which finance was allocated was clear and meaningful to them.
4. The process heavily relied on the competencies of the assessment officers with implications for workforce training, budget control and line management

Solution – the steps of the process

Doncaster's process commences with a conversation asking the service user to describe an average day in their life followed by an outline of what they currently do on a weekly basis. A typical day captures routines like self-care etc.; a typical week enables the service user to reflect on who they see, where they go, where they used to go, but don't now; their networks and community relationships. Two further asset based questions are asked in the assessment:

- Who is important to me – to identify circles of support
- What is important to me – what outcomes are important to the person

Identified needs and the risks posed if the outcomes are not met inform the Resource Allocation Decision. The risk severity and risk frequency judgement allows the worker evidence their decision and encompasses the flexibility to accommodate both fluctuating conditions and the meeting of need in complex cases.
The Outcomes Statement allows the social worker or assessment officer to agree with the customer what their cash sum is for. Not what services it must buy, but what the purchasing must achieve.

Contacts: Martin Walker: Manager, Modernisation and Improvement, DMBC, Civic Building, Waterdale, Doncaster, DN1 3BU martin.walker@doncaster.gov.uk
Author: Dr Celia Harbottle: Celia Harbottle: Education, Training and Consultancy. Celiaharb@aol.com tel: 07734871075

How the Resource Allocation Tool Works

Workers will have identified areas of need from their assessment and these areas are outlined as headings for capturing their professional judgment in the assessment document. The risks faced by the service user if their outcomes are not met are evaluated in term of the severity of that risk, and the frequency (or likelihood) of harm. The re-script group in Doncaster created a tool to guide practitioners as to what each level constituted because they recognised that language used to describe risk is often very emotive.

The RAS grid is therefore made up of numbers of identified need along the horizontal x-axis and the risk calculation for the y-axis is generated by multiplying the number allocated to risk severity by the risk frequency number

Worker questions to be answered

1. Number of needs areas (0-12 in groups of two, i.e. 1-2, 3-4 etc., to form the x-axis number)

2. Risk Severity 1-4:
   1: Restricted independence
   2: Moderate threats to independence
   3: Serious threat to Independence
   4: Immediate risk of harm/neglect/crisis

3. Risk Likelihood 1- 7:
   1: Occasional incidents
   2: An incident every month
   3: Some incidents a month
   4: An incident a week
   5: Several incidents a week
   6: An incident a day
   7: Several incidents a day

Multiply answer to Q2 (above) by answer to Q3 (above) to achieve the (1-28), to form the y-axis number

The squares in the RAS grid have been populated with money equating to the costs of meeting the level of need based on a stress tested evaluation of over 400 current cases. This therefore gives an accurate figure of how much it would ordinarily cost in the Borough to meet those needs currently.

This approach enables resource allocations to be made for people with fluctuating need because the figure embraces frequency and severity. The virtue of a direct payment is that it will be available therefore for the individual who needs to use it when necessary, not continuously.