

Alison's story

From the perspective of someone with a visual impairment

Alison currently receives direct payments and has a personal assistant to support her with the tasks she finds difficult to manage because she has a visual impairment. In the past year, Alison has been working within a pilot coproduction support planning team to create a support plan to help receive a personal budget. This will help her to have more flexibility and control with the funding she receives. Alison's support plan was recently reviewed by a panel and has since been approved.



Alison is in her 30's and is a qualified secondary school music teacher with dreams of one day owning and running her own music school. Alongside her passion for music and writing songs, she also suggests she is a closet Harry Potter fan and has recently taken to collecting reborn dolls. Alison has been visually impaired since birth and has raised three children with her husband of 10 years, who has been visually impaired since his teens. After the death of her father and

the birth of her second child a number of years ago, Alison knew she had reached a "make or break point" and contacted the council for help.

"With so many changes happening at once, I knew I needed help now, right now," Alison said. "I didn't think they'd be able to help, as I thought I had to be quite bad, but the kids and changes were just too much...at times a three year old can make you feel so small and intimidated."

The council mentioned direct payments to Alison after hearing about her situation, and passed on contact numbers for the appropriate people in social services. A member of the social services team met with Alison and discussed her situation and her need for an assistant. "I didn't want someone in the house to look after the kids; I needed to find someone to support us in areas like keeping the house tidy and safe for the children, and to help us with shopping and taking the kids

to the park. I didn't want my mum to have to be around to help all of the time either, that isn't a situation I would like to put her in, she needs to enjoy the grandchildren and come when she wants like other mothers do," she said.

Alison began receiving direct payments so she could employ an assistant to help with the established needs of shopping, cleaning and helping her to give her own children the experiences that sighted parents take for granted, such as playing ball, using computer games, doing homework tasks and so on. Part of the process included a meeting with a personal financial guide from her local Centre for Independent Living, who explained aspects from a business perspective and also helped with completing financial forms. "He was great and really explained the financial side of things clearly. I was worried about employing someone and completing the forms correctly," she said.

Alison also met with the Sensory Support Group and a direct payments coordinator to assist her with organising employment, manage her payments and look at other areas of her entitlement.

"All of the professional experiences have been wonderful...very positive and empowering for people," she said. "I didn't find (the process of hiring an assistant) easy, but I learnt from my mistakes and remained positive. It was, throughout the process, lessons in life. I knew the monetary support was now in place, so it was just the challenge of finding someone. I wanted to maintain a

high level of independence, but needed help with checking food dates and quality of food to ensure it is safe to eat, and also changing dirty or unsuitable clothing when I am informed of stains and holes etcetera."

Alison has been working closely with her assistant for three years now, and has noticed an improved quality of life and greater independence. "The direct payments have certainly made a difference. I feel more of a stable person, I felt so isolated before" she said.

Earlier this year, Alison was asked by a member of the coproduction pilot steering group if she would like to participate and be involved in a pilot for personal budgets. This would involve her attending Coproduction support planning meetings, based on a process called Planning Live! and creating a support plan that would deliver the outcomes she was seeking.

Alison said her motivation to participate was because "...they needed people from various backgrounds with various disabilities, and I liked the idea of personalised payments, having more control of the funding and using the money for what I need."

The Coproduction meetings were set up as a way for the members of the personal budget pilot to meet locally and discuss the process, and gain support and learning from other members while creating their individual support plans.

“At one of the meetings, we were shown a DVD about direct payments and about people who receive them and have successfully made the transition to personal budgets and the difference it has made to them. However, the biggest impact was the hypothetical story that was handed to us on a piece of paper. It showed a scenario about a person with a disability who received direct payments, and their hypothetical goals and dreams. It asked us to answer questions like ‘Would we think it was ok for them to spend money on a mentioned situation?’, and it was a powerful teaching tool for me...I felt less guilty when creating the planning tools when I could look at this hypothetical scenario and compare it to mine.”

Alison also received help from her family and personal assistant when creating her support plan, with topics and questions including ‘What do you think you need help with; what’s working in your life now and what’s not working, and what things are most important for you?’ For Alison, these were things like positive constant parental involvement in the safe care of her children, what meals were planned and served by her, checking the cleanliness and quality of clothing, and shopping.

Alison’s advice to others is “...be as open as you can be with the people putting the plan together, because if you get it right you can get the support when you need it the most. Don’t be afraid to challenge what they are saying either. If you have a need and it is not being met, ask why it is not being met. It’s not enough when they say they can’t help, the point is to empower people. If it isn’t working one way, it is their duty, and yours, to look at another way. You’re in control of changing it.”

Recently, Alison’s support plan was submitted to a panel for a review, along with other members of the Coproduction pilot team. Her plan has been approved, and Alison will now receive a personal budget. “I’m sounding out the possibility of owning a vehicle for my family, and hiring some assistance to help me move furniture in the house and with the maintenance of the garden, the guide dog spending area and erecting play ground equipment for the children,” she said.

Alison added that the support she has been receiving has made a “dramatic difference” to her life, enabling her to spend more time with the family, strengthen her social connections and focus on her passion for music and collectables.

