

Travel Buddies, Hounslow

Background

In June 2002, the Speaking Up self-advocacy group told service providers that some people did not like travelling on special buses. The journeys took longer and they were segregated from other people, so they wanted to get to day centres and colleges using ordinary transport. The group suggested that people with learning disabilities could provide the support to do this and they suggested the name "Travel Buddies".

Aims

The scheme provides proper paid jobs for people with learning disabilities. The travel buddies provide one-to-one support to other people with learning disabilities who want to use ordinary public transport so they can choose how they get around. They are more a part of the local community and also become more independent and confident. This service is unique because the support for people with learning disabilities is provided by people with learning disabilities.

Key Actions

Staff in learning disability services thought this was a good idea and a small steering group was set up to plan how the scheme would work. They also asked family carers for their views about the proposed scheme.

Learning disability services were not able to employ any more staff, so they looked for a local company who could employ the travel buddies. They wanted a company which would really support the scheme and was prepared to pay the buddies the going rate for the job. Building a good partnership between the Council and the company was very important and they did a lot of work together to make things work well.

Two members of the Council's Learning Disabilities staff recruit and train the Travel Buddies. The company employs and pays them and the Council pays the company. The Council staff also match each person wanting to travel more independently with a suitable buddy.

The scheme started in January 2003 with one travel buddy to see how things worked. This was very successful and people started asking if they could have a travel buddy for themselves. There are now 6 buddies who support 24 people and 9 others have also used the service. About half the current users use their Direct Payment to pay for a travel buddy.

Each travel buddy starts by doing a five-week training which is accredited by TRAC (Thames Region Accredited Training Centre). Training includes: Using Buses, Road Crossing Skills, and Basic Health and Safety. Buddies are paid while doing this induction course.

Someone wanting a travel buddy can ask for one themselves, and their key worker or social worker will contact the scheme. There is a leaflet which explains how the scheme operates.

Travel buddies' jobs work at least 16 hours a week, though some do more than this. They can claim Working Tax Credit. They work mornings and afternoons and there are plans for them to start working in the evenings and at weekends.

Two Council (learning disabilities) staff support the buddies who carry a mobile phone which they can use to contact them if there are emergencies. The staff have also talked about the scheme to managers of local bus companies and London Underground so they understand how it works.

The scheme has been so successful that a full time co-ordinator started in April 2004, paid for by LDDF money. Another Council staff member is looking at the scheme to see whether it could become a social firm which would directly employ the travel buddies.

Overcoming problems

- The company employing the travel buddies had no previous experience of employing people with learning disabilities and at first did not always do this very well. They did not understand that people can need more time to learn and there are still often new managers and co-ordinators. The Council knew that the company was committed to the scheme so they talked to them about how things could work better. Travel buddies were also encouraged to speak up and to ask the Council staff for support when they needed it.
- Family carers sometimes worry that their relative will not be safe if they start travelling more independently. The scheme has a good relationship with the local carers support group which means that carers now trust services much more. Parents also know that the travel buddies have been properly trained and know how to deal with any emergencies.
- People with learning disabilities have usually found it difficult to get jobs in social care. This scheme has broken through this barrier and the company that employs them has learned that they can be good employees.

Learning Points

- People with learning disabilities are experts about what it's like to travel around in their local community and this scheme is successful because it was their idea.
- Good support from senior managers and having enough time to think through the details of the scheme has helped things work really well.
- People who have a travel buddy become more independent, they feel more confident and because of the one-to-one relationship with their buddy, they communicate better with other people.

- Travel buddies have shown that people with learning disabilities can qualify as care workers and can do a good job.
- It's important to take plenty of time explaining to family carers and people with learning disabilities how the scheme works, and making sure they have understood.
- A flexible approach can meet individuals' different travelling needs which may involve some short-term help but also longer-term support.

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