

July 2017

Recycling of Disability and Medical Aids

Exploring opportunities for the
voluntary and community sector in
South Devon and Torbay



working with

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FUNDING TORBAY

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1 BACKGROUND

For a number of years national newspapers have been running stories about the issue of disability and medical aids being scrapped rather than recycled. The Mirror ran a campaign in 2014 and the Mail ran the following graphic headline in Sept 2016 accompanied by photos and quotes from a “concerned public”:

A sick waste: Piled high in a skip, a mountain of NHS crutches, wheelchairs and vital medical equipment dumped for scrap - in a scandal that costs YOU millions in taxes every year

In response, many health authorities highlighted the difficulty of recycling these items. Whilst recycling was desirable, the cost of collection, cleaning, repair and re-allocation was seen as prohibitive. Rather than save £millions, most felt that recycling would actually add cost to the process.

Health authorities nevertheless felt the need to address recycling concerns. In South Devon and Torbay, a range of ideas were explored with the voluntary sector who were invited to put forward innovative proposals

In April 2017, Teignbridge CVS received an Awards for All grant to explore this issue further and in particular to see whether recycling of disability and medical aids could be better integrated into the provision of post-hospital social care services - many of which are being delivered by the voluntary sector.

2 FEASIBILITY STUDY

Torbay and South Devon are at the forefront of integrating health and social care. Within this new model, there is a much greater role for the voluntary and community sector and a new dependence on the sector to play an innovative role in finding new and better ways of supporting people with care needs, in their own home.

Teignbridge Community Voluntary Service are playing a lead role within the new structure. It was through these discussions that the issue of recycling of disability and medical aids was raised. It was suggested that there might be a role for the voluntary sector to recycle equipment and therefore make better use of prescription items. If the voluntary sector could generate a surplus from being paid through the prescription process for recycled goods, then this could be used to help fund VCS care provision, with the delivery of recycled equipment becoming part of an improved integrated care package.

Teignbridge CVS successfully applied to Awards for All for a grant to further explore this proposal. This study was to consider the following:

- Current models of delivery, marketing and promotion.
- Technical considerations including: storage, quality standards and skills required to complete recycling tasks.
- Detailed exploration of income and expenditure including startup costs, running cost and potential surplus
- The local market, competition and analysis of risk

However, as detailed below, unknown to those involved in the earlier discussions, other work had already taken place. This had resulted in two long term contracts being commissioned and awarded to separate private sector companies who now deliver new and recycled products to people in Torbay and South Devon.

The remit of this feasibility study has therefore changed and now simply focuses on what is currently happening so that the voluntary and community sector can at least have a better understanding of how to access and work with these new services. The study also considers the challenges involved in being able to compete for these contracts in the future.

3 WHERE ARE WE NOW

3.1 PROVISION IN SOUTH DEVON

Whilst there was a strong view within the community that equipment was not being recycled, Devon County Council had an existing contract with PLUSS Community Equipment – PLUSS is a voluntary sector organisation specializing in helping disabled people into work.

This service is still advertised on the DCC website. It describes the service as having a central equipment store at Sowton Industrial Estate, Exeter, 33 collection points in Devon and a van collection services. Despite bidding to deliver the new contract, PLUSS was unsuccessful. The contract was won instead by Milbrook Healthcare. NRS Healthcare Ltd, who deliver a similar contract in Torbay (see below), also submitted a bid for the Devon contract.

The new contract delivers the Devon Independent Living Integrated Service (DILIS) which is for an integrated service that provides a “one stop shop” for the provision of Community Equipment, Assistive Technology and Minor Adaptations, as well as information, advice and signposting services for the community of Devon.

The value of the DILIS contract is approximately £41 million over 7 years (a 5 year term with an option to extend for up to a further 2 years). The expected contract end date is therefore 2022.

The contract price is an approximate amount because it is for a demand led service where volumes of business fluctuates depending on a range of factors, such as enabling social care re-

ablement to support people for longer at home and supporting the varying numbers of hospital discharges caused, for example, by severe weather.

The new service brings together two previous contracts: 1) for provision of stock, non-stock and bespoke Community Equipment, fixed ceiling track hoists and minor adaptations, and 2) for the provision of technological equipment.

The specification for the new contract included increasing equipment recycling rates, and as part of the contract design and consideration, Devon County Council also completed an impact assessment which concluded that “There would be a number of environmental benefits including increased recycling”.

Millbrook Healthcare, now run the service. They are a national company, formed in 2000 with a track record of delivering similar contracts to 15 other health authorities. They are based at:

Units 5-8
Jacks Way
Hill Barton Business Park
Clyst St Mary
Exeter
EX5 1FG

Tel: 0330 124 4491

Customer services opening hours:

- Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm
- Saturdays 9.00am to 5.00pm

The service includes delivery and installation, servicing and maintenance, and collection of equipment that has been ordered by a prescriber. A prescribers can be a GP, nurse, therapist or a social services provider. Millbrook also makes adaptations to people’s homes.

In addition to prescription funded products, Millbrook provide direct services to personal callers who can view and purchase equipment from their retail suite based at the Exeter service centre.

Whilst the 33 collection points available under the previous contract have gone, people wishing to recycled equipment, from outside of the collection scheme, can recycle it any of the Devon recycling centres. All centres have an arrangement with Millbrook so that as much of the equipment as possible can be re-used.

3.2 PROVISION IN TORBAY

A similar scheme to Devon is offered in Torbay by another national company called NRS Healthcare. They also deliver contracts for 16 other health authorities in the UK. Their Torbay office and Service Centre is based at:

Unit 1 Torbay Business Park
Woodview Road
Paignton
Devon
TQ4 7HP

Tel 0300 100 0047
enquiries@torbay.nrs-uk.net

Open Monday-Friday 8.30am-5.30pm

The company has a contract until 2020 worth £700,000 per year. They supply the Torbay area and a rapid response service to South Devon.

As with the Devon contract, all assessments are completed by health workers, not NRS. They determine the patient's equipment needs and the response time for delivery. Standard deliver targets are five days, but health professionals can also specify next day and same day delivery.

Wherever possible equipment is recycled either as whole item or broken into spare parts. NRS recycling rates are in the high 90% with May 2017 showing 97%. This figure is slightly misleading because some items are used a number of times whereas other items may only be used once. Items which cannot be re-used by clients are sent for recycling as scrap.

Patients do not have a choice between new or recycled. The scheme is described as an equipment loan scheme. However, patients do have a choice to purchase new and in some cases will choose non-prescription items which they may feel are of a better quality or design.

To ensure targets are met and monitored NRS use sophisticated IT systems which track orders, delivery and collection. All items are delivered by NRS who also complete installation (unless it is a bespoke item) and provide instruction on use.

On delivery, the client is given a letter which describes the service, how to get help or maintenance of the product and what to do once the product is no longer required.

To improve response times, the company also has five smaller outlets across Torbay. These are restocked weekly.

NRS supply a comprehensive range of items for private purchase. Many of these products get donated back to the company and are then recycled for use by other clients. The company has an equipment catalogue and items can also be purchased using their online store.

As with Millbrook, arrangements are in place with the recycling centre at Paignton – often people will recycle items which have been brought from another area or purchased from other providers. Sometimes families or carers simply are not aware of the collection service. Unfortunately, most of the items which are taken to the recycling centre get damaged in the process and the recycling rate, in terms of re-use of these items, is quite low.

4 ORIGINAL CONCERNS

As noted above, this feasibility study was triggered by a number of concerns:

1. How to recycle items
2. Whether items returned were being re-used or just scrapped
3. The speed at which items could be delivered
4. How recycling was linked into general care provision

4.1 HOW TO RECYCLE ITEMS

As you will see from the above, there are two companies delivering these services in Devon and Torbay. They operate a very similar service and there is evidence from NRS Healthcare that the two companies are in touch with each other and are currently developing a shared approach to emergency response in south Devon.

Currently there is the potential for confusion in Devon because Devon County Council has not yet amended the detail on their website (despite being informed of the issue as a result of this research). However, both companies were of the view that those doing the assessments are very clear about the process and unless the equipment is being purchased privately, all requests for equipment on prescription have to come via the assessment route. Anyone using the telephone contact details for PLUSS advertised on the DCC website are directed to Millbrook.

Once in the system, there is clear instructions given to the client in writing which provides details of who to contact for information, maintenance and collection. Under these circumstances, as long as information is correct on the statutory websites, there seems little point in promoting the service to a wider audience.

4.2 RECYCLING OF EQUIPMENT

From the visit to NRS Healthcare and telephone discussions with Millbrook, it is clear that every effort is made to recycle equipment provided via the prescription service. In fact some items will get used a number of times. The companies also use damaged recycled items for spars (although they will only keep a limited stock of common items eg the rubber ends for walking

sticks). Those items which are damaged beyond repair, are collected for recycling as scrap rather than just being sent to landfill. There is also evidence that clients who purchase items privately often offer these items to the Service Centres for recycling under the prescription service.

The only area where there seems to be some uncertainty is where items have been given to a patient whilst attending a hospital clinic eg Accident and Emergency. NRS Healthcare in an email reply stated, "I understand crutches can be returned to Torbay hospital and I further understand they are also assessed and recycled and reused". A telephone conversation with the Royal Devon and Exeter and the North Devon District Hospital both confirmed that small items of equipment such as crutches or zimmer frames can be returned to the hospitals.

4.3 DELAYS IN GETTING EQUIPMENT TO THE CLIENT

One of the main concerns which led to this study was the time which patients had to wait for equipment to be supplied to them on returning to their home. However, again this concern seems unfounded. Both companies operate delivery targets with the level of urgency determined by the medical professional doing the equipment assessments. In Torbay and South Devon it is possible to have equipment delivered on the same day if requested by the assessor.

4.4 OPPORTUNITIES FOR BETTER INTEGRATION WITH SOCIAL CARE

There seems little potential for generating a surplus to help better fund social care services delivered by the voluntary sector. Long term contracts are already in place and both companies delivering these services recycle wherever possible. Both companies have a national structure behind them which enabled them to supply a wide range of items either on prescription or through private sales. There are benefits in terms of economies of scale, established IT systems and experience which enables them to compete for these types of contract.

The view that a surplus could be generated by the use of volunteers would also be difficult now that this type of service is part of the commissioning process. For example, when the contract went from PLUSS to Millbrook, staff were protected by TUPE regulations and this would apply to the re-commissioning of these contracts in the future.

Both companies were asked if they would be interested in exploring some type of partnership working with the voluntary sector. Millbrook stated that this could only be done through the commissioning team because it would imply a change to the service being offered. NRS Healthcare were more open to exploring joint working but were unclear what this might look like given the systems in place appeared to be working well for health workers and the clients.

5 LESSONS FROM ELSEWHERE

An internet search revealed a number of national private sector companies who now supply disability and medical aids to the NHS. As highlighted above this appears to be a developing trend. However, there are interesting voluntary sector business models in use:

5.1 BRIGHTER FUTURES

Brighter Futures Workshop Limited was set up in 2005, by Peter Cousins MBE. The company is based in Skelmersdale, Lancashire and combines the recycling of disability and medical aids with training and work placements for people with disabilities. Trainees work alongside experienced technicians and mentors, learning hands-on skills in basic mechanical and electronic engineering as well as gaining Assessment and Qualification Alliance (AQA) accreditation. Turnover in 2016 was £611,788

As with NRS and Millbrook, delivering this type of service is quite a major undertaking. Brighter Futures currently has a showroom 400m², a similar sized Independent Living Centre, and a warehouse / storeroom which is 600m². They currently employ 18 fte staff.

The organisation is set up as a charity and company limited by guarantee and has won 14 awards since 2005. Further information can be found on their website

<https://www.bfworkshop.com/>

As with the private national companies, Brighter Future sell their products online through the use of an eBay shop. They sell recycled goods and a range of spares. They deliver all over the UK through the use of courier companies. For local deliveries, Brighter Futures have their own delivery drivers who, as with NRS and Millbrook, are able to install equipment to the required standard.

6 QUALITY STANDARDS

Not surprisingly there are rigorous hygiene standards required. All items considered suitable for recycling are first cleaned with specialist equipment to ensure all traces of MRSA are removed.

Employees also have to go on regular training courses to keep up to date with new product ranges. Brighter Futures have been able to reduce the cost of training by build a strong working relationship with a wide range of providers who deliver product training to their trainers and engineer staff.

7 CONCLUSION

The decision in South Devon and Torbay to commission long term contracts for the distribution of new and recycled disability and medical aids means there is very little prospect of the voluntary sector offering a different type of service in the short term.

Whilst there is a very strong view from providers and healthcare workers, that the system is working effectively, there is still some confusion around small items of equipment eg crutches which are distributed directly to the patient at A&E, Physiotherapy etc. This could be addressed by these patients being given information about what to do with items when they are no longer needed.

It is unfortunate, that commissioners did not explore ways in which the contract could have been delivered to a high standard whilst also encouraging innovative ideas which bring added social value. The Brighter Futures project is an excellent example of how this can be done.

Whilst Millbrook were very clear that they could not explore new ways of working with the voluntary sector in Devon, NRS seems more open to an ongoing dialogue. If the voluntary sector is keen to pursue the delivery of this service in the future, now may be the time to open a discussion with commissioners so that a more innovative approach can be built into the contract specification.

Should the voluntary sector consider this an area for development they will have to take onboard the high startup costs which will be required including premises for offices, warehousing and workshops. In addition, all examples considered offered private sales as well as prescription items in order to make the contract work. Online shopping is an essential requirement of this type of business. NRS demonstrated a very sophisticated systems of ordering and delivery which was dependent on good IT systems. This will be another area of development which the voluntary sector will need to address if pursuing future contracts.

The voluntary sector may conclude that a new cross sector partnership, which provides training and work placement opportunities alongside prescription and private sales of aids and equipment, could be a model to explore with commissioners and providers.

8 APPENDICES / RESOURCES

8.1 WEBSITES

Devon County Council Impact Assessment for the new service

<https://new.devon.gov.uk/impact/devon-independent-living-integrated-service>

Devon County Council

Devon County Council Waste and Recycling information – now out of date

<https://new.devon.gov.uk/wasteandrecycling/recycling-centres/nhs-equipment/>

Devon Social Services, Community Equipment Prescriptions – now part of new DILIS services

<https://new.devon.gov.uk/adultsocialcareandhealth/help-to-stay-living-at-home/equipment-to-help-you/community-equipment-prescriptions/>

PinPoint

List of accredited suppliers in Devon

<https://services.pinpointdevon.co.uk/kb5/devon/services/results.page?qt=equipment+prescription>

Disability Information Service – Information sheet “Equipment Centres”

<http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/uploads/dis-information-sheet-equipment-centres-p07.pdf>

8.2 CURRENT CONTRACT HOLDERS IN DEVON AND TORBAY

<http://www.millbrook-healthcare.co.uk/>

<https://www.nrshealthcare.co.uk/>

8.3 LIST OF OTHER RECYCLING SCHEMES AND PROJECTS

This is not a comprehensive list of projects but instead serves to demonstrate a few of the recycling projects specializing in the re-use of disability and medical aids.

Brighter Futures <https://www.bfworkshop.com/>

Demand, <http://www.demand.org.uk/> accepts donations of clean items. Many are sent abroad

Disabled Equipment Sent Overseas, <http://www.desouk.org/> – has a list of disability and medical aids that they will send to Africa.

Legs for Africa, <https://www.legs4africa.org> - Accepts equipment that aids walking (including prosthetics and parts, crutches, walking sticks, walking frames, etc) which are then sent to the developing World. Based in Leicester but have pick up points nationally.

Through the Roof - Wheels for the World, <http://www.throughtheroof.org> Accepts donations of certain manual wheelchairs which are sent abroad. If possible, donations need to be taken to their depots in Epsom, Surrey or Aldershot, Hampshire.

Limcare <http://limbcare.org/recycling-limbcare.html> recycles limbs as well as other equipment. Often these are sent aboard

8.4 ORGANISATIONS CONTACTED

Torbay Voice

Healtwatch Torbay

Disability Information Service

PLUSS

Torbay Hospital

Torbay and South Devon CCG

Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital

Northern, Eastern and Western Devon CCG

North Devon District Hospital

NRS Healthcare

Torbay Council

Millbrook Healtcare

Devon County Council

Brighter Futures

Produced by Funding Torbay, July 2017 for Teignbridge CVS

