

What's going on in the Learning Disability Service?

UNISON briefing for Somerset county councillors – 9 May 2018

In the year since Discovery took over Somerset's Learning Disability Service, customers, carers and staff have reported many problems and a decline in services. The people relying on the service have been left worse off. Despite the SCC scrutiny Task and Finish review minimising concerns as essentially growing pains, there is no sign of the situation recovering. On the contrary, Discovery's announcement of a consultation on likely large scale redundancies seems destined to worsen quality and industrial relations in the LD service.

UNISON's short term recommendations for SCC

- Head off the oncoming problem of large scale redundancies by guaranteeing the LDS enough funding to maintain current staffing levels until at least 2019/20.
- Run a fresh review of Discovery's performance against the contract outcomes that maintains the trust of staff and customers and takes their concerns seriously.
- Instruct Discovery to give facilities time to UNISON stewards to enable partnership working.

Staffing

Discovery set out to implement a programme of cuts to salaries, terms and conditions. They made it clear that if staff didn't agree to these cuts, then Discovery would dismiss them en masse and re-employ them on new contracts with the reduced terms and conditions.

Following a rejection of Discovery's offer by 99% of UNISON members in September 2017, management eventually halted this programme. Unison fears these latest proposals will further decimate staffing levels in the service with the associated decline in service provision.

LD workers were left with uncertainty and anxiety for over six months as Discovery repeatedly delayed bringing forward a new plan.

Although Discovery pledged to bring down sickness absence rates, no meaningful results have been published on this yet.

Large scale redundancies

At the beginning of May 2018, the employer finally came forward with their proposals: a 45 day consultation on an unspecified number of redundancies.

This time period meets the legal minimum for making 99+ staff redundant in one go, leading UNISON to believe more than one hundred job losses are likely. That would represent a reduction of about 10% of the workforce— already in a perilous position relative to safe staffing levels.

The scrutiny committee task and finish review

- Established in November 2017, the three-councillor review panel was supposed to report in March 2018. This initiative was received hopefully by staff and customers.
- The chair of the panel stood down without warning, which UNISON believes followed pressure from SCC to take out sections of the report that were critical of Discovery
- Despite Discovery promising to supply a customer and staff satisfaction survey in November 2017, no such document was ever received by the scrutiny panel
- This fact, and the final report's general lack of reference to concerns raised by staff and customers during the research process, has led to a loss of faith in the independence of the process and its conclusions.

Have Discovery fulfilled their promises?

Upon taking over the LD service in April 2017, Discovery boss Luke Joy-Smith outlined three areas of change which would enable Discovery to work within the budget allocated by SCC:

Day services transformation

Discovery promised customers and carers

- An updated individual needs assessment
- A personal budget letting them know how much they had to spend on their day service
- A business plan for each day service setting out the future for each area and the improved options and choices available for learning disabled people.

Discovery have failed to keep any of these promises, leaving customers, carers and staff in a state of limbo. Discovery are holding SCC responsible for the delays, saying that SCC have failed to undertake new assessments. No explanation has been given about SCC's failure, nor has anyone explained when the assessments will be done.

Management restructuring

Team Managers, Assistant Team Managers and Support Leaders have spent twelve months in a state of uncertainty about their future. All the while Discovery has relied on these grades to implement a raft of new policies and cope with a shortage of permanent staff.

Discovery was awarded the contract to deliver services on the basis of a range of additional promises:

They promised an organisation that communicated well with its customers, carers and staff, and manages change well.

- Communication with staff and managers has been sporadic, and has failed to deliver the detailed content promised.
- Staff are increasingly reluctant to communicate their concerns to management, believing that no action will be taken.
- Discovery's engagement with UNISON has been poor, with meetings frequently cancelled.
- For the first time in many years, UNISON was forced to ballot for industrial action.
- The situation has not been helped by Discovery banning facility time for UNISON stewards.

Discovery promised access to better IT and equipment, freeing up staff and management time for direct work.

- Whilst it is doubtful that the equipment is any better than that previously issued by SCC, there is no doubt at all that Dimensions' software systems consume much more staff time than was previously the case
- Systems appear to be struggling with the additional demands.
- This is unsurprising, given that someone from Dimensions' IT team recently admitted to managers that the system was struggling as long as two years ago, and that they are now looking to develop a new one.

Discovery promised a new approach to the buildings and accommodation used by customers.

- Whilst we appreciate that this can take time, there appears to be no movement on this front, other than the veiled threat to close an unspecified number of Day services. This has left customers, carers and staff anxious and afraid.

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