

Financial Assessments and Direct Payments newsletter

Welcome to the March edition

Welcome to the March edition of the Financial Assessments and Direct Payments Newsletter. You are receiving this newsletter because you or someone you represent receives social care services from Merton Council.

In this issue we will bring you information on:

- The new charging policy and how this may affect you.
- Automatic financial reassessments.
- Direct payments and pre-paid cards.
- Merton managed accounts.
- Self-directed support.

Automatic financial reassessments

To ensure you are always paying the correct amount of money towards your social services, The Financial Assessments team at Merton Council will automatically reassess the contribution you will need to make towards your social services each year. All you need to do is check the information we send you. You only need to contact us if the figures we have sent you are wrong.

In March you will receive a letter informing you of your new assessment, which will begin from April 2011.

If you have any questions do not hesitate to contact us. Contact details can be found on the back page.

Could you be entitled to more money?

The Department for Work and Pensions estimate that billions of pounds worth of welfare benefits go unclaimed every year.

We can help you apply for benefits that you are entitled to. Go to page 7 to find out more.

Paying for social services just got easier!

Find out more about two new flexible ways you can now pay for your social services on Go to page 3 to find out more.

Giving you more choice and control through self-directed support

What is self-directed support?

Self-directed support means having more choice and control over the care and support you need to live your life. Merton Council is making sure local people who are eligible for adult social care services have the freedom to organise their support. You tell the council what you need help with, and the council tells you how much money you're entitled to. This amount is called a personal budget.

What's happening in Merton?

Merton Council is currently in phase three of the self-directed support project. This means that all new and existing social care customers will go through the self-directed support process and receive a personal budget. So far, 387 customers have been given an indicative allocation, which is an estimate of how much money their care and support needs could cost. 77 of these customers now have a personal budget and are receiving the services they organised in their support plans.

There are a variety of options for customers who need help designing their support plans, including a service hosted by Merton Vision, Merton Mencap, Age Concern, and Merton Council's Direct Payments Support Planning Service.

We are working on delivering an online service directory for customers to use when planning how they would spend their personal budgets

For more information about self-directed support and personal budgets, visit www.merton.gov.uk/tasc

If you're a self-directed support customer and you would like to give feedback on your experience please email us...
PersonalisationQueries@merton.gov.uk

New finance booklet available

A lot has changed since the direct payments scheme was introduced over ten years ago. To accommodate these changes we have produced a new finance booklet. This booklet will cover everything you need to know about pre-paid cards, how the finance side of direct payments work and what monitoring is required. The booklet will be available on our website

www.merton.gov.uk/directpayments

If you would like to be sent a copy in the post please contact us directly.

Important changes to the monitoring process

As explained in our last newsletter, we will be making some significant changes to the monitoring process in the next few months. We will be asking all customers for copies of their bank statements prior to the changes. Please make sure that you have copies of your last two bank statements available to send to us when we contact you.

Paying for your social services care just got easier!

Merton Council is committed to making your social services easier and more convenient to access. Below are two flexible ways you can now pay for your services.

A direct payment without the paper work

Receiving a direct payment to pay for social care services instead of having directly provided services are a great way of enabling you to have more control over you're your own lives.

However, we know from experience that there are many people out there who would like the flexibility and choice that a direct payment offers, but feel unable to take on the responsibility. This could be for many reasons, such as not being able to open a bank account, or not feeling able to provide monitoring information.

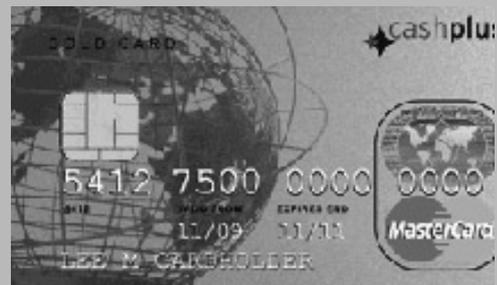
That's why we are delighted to announce the introduction of a new service offered by the Direct Payments Team called Merton managed accounts.

A Merton managed account is basically a direct payment without the paperwork. The customer would still be able choose their own services, but the council would keep control of the money and complete the financial paperwork such as paying invoices.

If you think you could benefit form this services and would like more information please contact the team for a copy of the Merton Managed Accounts leaflet.

A new pre-paid card

If you are a direct payments customer and receive money from Merton Council to pay for your services, you will shortly receive information about your brand new **pre-paid card**.



Your new pre-paid card

The pre-paid card is like a debit card. It will be loaded with your direct payments funds and you can then use it to pay for your social care services.

If you are already receiving direct payments a booklet and card will be sent to you in the next few months, so keep an eye out for it in the post. Once you receive the information, if you have any questions do not hesitate to contact the Direct Payments Team.

Giving you control of your social services

Your shout

In every direct payments newsletter we like to bring you a story featuring a direct payments customer. In this issue, we caught up with Slim Flegg M.B.E.

Slim is the Chair of the Direct Payments Forum, which is a meeting, held for direct payments customers every three months.

Have you seen a change in the direct payments service?

“I’ve been receiving direct payments for over ten years now. In that time the service has changed so much. I cannot praise the staff enough. The change in attitude is vast. We now have a group of people who look forward and want to improve things even more.”

What is the Direct Payments Forum?

“I’ve been the Chair of the Direct Payments Forum for over five, even after all this time I still find the forum remarkable. We never know who will come, but there are usually at least 15 people, with a few regular faces and a few new faces each time. Some people come just once to find out a particular piece of information and go away happy when they’ve got it. Others come along to chat to people in similar situations to themselves.”

How does it help customers?

“We’ve had all different types of speakers, from HMRC to the Director of Merton’s Adult Social Services. It’s also a great opportunity to meet the staff. They really are fantastic, helpful and they give you answers straight away.

The meetings are really informal. People just say what they want to say. It’s also a good way of sharing experiences with others, and some



really innovative ways of using direct payments have come out of the forum.”

What’s the best part of the forum?

“For me as Chair I enjoy seeing people satisfied with the support they receive from the forum. If you would like to come to the next forum all you need to do is contact the Direct Payments Team.”

If you have an interesting story or would like to share your experiences of direct payments and would like to appear in the next newsletter, contact Amy Bannister on 8545 3610.

Direct Payments forum dates:

Monday 9 May, 1.00pm to 3.00pm
Monday 12 September, 2.00pm to 4.00pm
Monday 5 December, 2.00pm to 4.00pm

All forums take place at the All Saints Day Centre, All Saints Road, South Wimbledon.

Important information about self employed personal assistants

The Independent Living Association has issued the following advice regarding self-employed personal assistants/carers:

Self-employed status is not something that the direct payments customer or the personal assistant (PA) can decide. It is a matter entirely for HMRC (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs). In the case of PAs working for direct payment customers, the tax office will seldom agree to it. Getting it wrong can result in big tax and National Insurance bills.

Direct payments customers should only treat a PA as self-employed if there is written evidence from HMRC confirming their self employed status for PA work and naming you as a customer. You should keep a copy of this written decision for your own records.

Personal assistant open day

Come along to the personal assistant open day to get lots of advice and information.

Thursday 17 March in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Morden.

Drop in between 10.00am and 12noon or 2.00pm and 4.00pm for information on welfare benefits and CRB checks, or if you are a paid for carer or thinking about becoming one. You can register on our Personal assistant database so our customers can contact you about the services you offer.

Bank holidays in 2011

As you may be aware there will be an additional bank holiday in 2011 to mark the Royal Wedding. Please remember that agencies will charge additional rates on bank holidays and that there is provision for your personal assistant to be paid double time for hours actually worked on bank holidays.

Friday 22 April	Good Friday
Monday 25 April	Easter Monday
Friday 29 April	Royal Wedding
Monday 2 May	May Day
Monday 29 May	Late Spring Holiday
Monday 29 August	Summer bank holiday
Monday 26 December	Boxing Day
Tuesday 27 December	In lieu of Christmas Day

How are we performing?

Here in the financial assessments and direct payments teams, we regularly monitor our performance to check that we are performing to the standards you expect of us.

This includes:

- Our performance compared to our customer charter.
- Our customer's satisfaction levels.
- Complaints and how they are dealt with.
- Benchmarking against other authorities.
- Results of our annual customer survey.

We are pleased to report that we are continuing to perform well, both against our own standards and those of other authorities. You can see a full break down of our performance on our website, visit www.merton.gov.uk/financialassessments

- Between April and December 2010 a total of three complaints received with an average response time of two days.
- 92% of new financial assessments completed within five days.
- 96% of customers visited said the officers were helpful, informative and polite.

New charging policy for non-residential customers

As of April 2011, every non-residential adult social services customer will be assessed using a new charging policy: **The Fairer Contributions Policy**.

Earlier in the year we carried out a consultation with our customers on our new charging policy. Thank you to everyone who took part, the results have helped us to shape our new policy.

Although there will be changes to the way customers are charged, please be assured that all customers will still have a financial assessment and will only be asked to pay what they can afford.

The following four changes will be made to the way people are charged:

From April 2011:

- Day centre subsidies will stop, meaning you will be charged up to the full cost of the day centre up to the value of your financial assessment.
- If you have two carers at the same time you will be charged up to the full cost of both.
- There will no longer be a maximum charge of £395.30.
- £10 disability related expense

More information about these policy changes, and how they might affect you, will be sent out with the reassessment letters.

Check out our website!

Did you know that Merton Council has a website full of useful information?

On the **Financial Assessments team website** you can find great information, such as printable copies of all our booklets, as well as detailed explanations of how assessments work. There is even an online financial assessment form to make it easier for you to send us financial information. We also put lots of facts and figures about our performance, including complaints and benchmarking. Visit www.merton.gov.uk/financialassessments for more information.

The Direct Payments team website is a great place to find out more about direct payments, and be kept up to date with the most important changes. You can read minutes from the direct payments forums, and see when the next meetings will take place. You can also send us monitoring information online, or print copies of any of our leaflets. Visit www.merton.gov.uk/directpayments

There is also lots of information available about self-directed support and personal budgets. All the information you need is available at www.merton.gov.uk/tasc. Here you can find out why we have made the move to personal budgets, and what this will mean for you. You can also have a look at the processes and what it takes to get a personal budget.

Have your say on your customer experience with Merton Council!

- Have you got some burning issues?
- Would you like to help shape the future of customer care in Merton?

Now is your opportunity to meet with Rachel Allen, Merton's Performance and Business Improvement Support Officer. She would like you to share with her any experiences you may have had with Merton Council (good and bad!) and share with us any ideas you might have for improvement. By talking to the very people that our services impact on she hopes to be able to bring in positive changes.

To be part of this project, please contact Rachel on 020 8545 4693, or email performance@merton.gov.uk.



Could you be entitled to more money?

We can help you apply for any benefits you may be entitled to. If you think any of the below applies to you, contact us. We can arrange a home visit for someone to visit you and help you make a claim.

Need help with personal care, such as washing and dressing, and are over 65?

You might be entitled to:

- Attendance Allowance, giving you up to an extra £71.40 per week.

Need help with personal care, such as washing and dressing, and are under 65?

You might be entitled to:

- Disability Living Allowance.

Are you are over 65 and single, with an income of less than £132.60 per week?

Or part of a couple with a total income of less than £202.40 per week?

You may be entitled to:

- Pension Credit

If you would like any more details contact us using the details at the back of this newsletter.

Changes to our charges

To ensure we can maintain our services to you we are proposing a small increase in our charges. The charges, if agreed, will start on the 1 April 2011.

	Current charge	New charge	Increase
Home Care (full charge)	£16.32	£16.65	33p
Day Centre (full charge)	£6.85	Actual cost	Various
Transport	£2.64	£2.70	6p
Hot Meals	£3.43	£3.50	7p
Frozen Meals	£3.17	£3.23	6p

Contact us

You can contact us through any of the following methods:

Email:

- The Financial Assessments team:
financial.assessment@merton.gov.uk
- The Direct Payments team:
directpaymentsduty@merton.gov.uk

Telephone:

You can call us Monday to Friday between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm on 020 8545 3632.