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P6: I am, my job description at the moment is the LLDD coordinator for [anon.], which actually tells you nothing about what I do. What am I supposed to do? Right. My background is careers guidance and that’s where my main hat still is. My job now is supporting a team of [anon.] advisors doing transitions for young people with special educational needs from school into other settings so that be college, work or whatever, so effectively that’s the sixteen plus transition and I’m supposed to coordinate that team, we in the last year have had the introduction of education, health and care plans and all the associated stuff that comes with it so there is a lot of funding stuff and commissioning and things like that, so that’s my background.

A typical week for me, doesn’t have a typical week really, I do have a lot of stuff around funding, but a lot of my week is a about transitions, so it is about supporting staff. I might meet with parents, I might meet with social workers, I might go out with support staff if they’re leading meeting for the first time, things like that so I have an incredibly varied week and life. But a lot of it is coordinating with externals from ourselves, so a lot of my role is networking.

**Interviewer: So when you say ‘externals’ is that schools, or is that?**

P6: Colleges, training, other departments within the council, voluntary organisations. A lot of my role is supporting creative options for young people…

[break]

**Interviewer: So the local offer, do you want to say a little bit about how you became involved in the local offer? [8:16]**

P6: Obviously the Local Offer loomed as a statutory obligation on the council and the reason I got involved is that very much careers guidance is very much around making those choices, what is around, what is available. And there are not that many people in the world of post 16 that are non-school based and therefore I got co-opted in. And I suppose by big thing was that the Connexions service have a website that did some of the local offer stuff, so it did training opportunities, job opportunities and things like that. And it was like are they going to dove tail together? Are they going to be separate? And I’d worked on another website which had been the database about options and stuff like that and I’d spent three years working on that so I think a few things came together as to why I was asked to be on the local offer stuff.

Interviewer: Was it the case that you were invited by, I can’t remember what his name was?

P6: [anon.]

Interviewer: [anon.] , so [anon.] was the…

P6: [anon.] nominally had it but, you have to understand [anon.] spent most of his time sitting in our office, so he was a nomad and he’d known about the work I’d done on this other database before.

Interviewer: So when you first heard about the local offer, or even the SEND reforms in general but the local offer was a key part of that, what change did you think it was going to make?

P6: I supposed I was a bit of cynic and I still do have concerns about it, because knowing what databases are like, if the information is not up to date, people lose confidence and when you read the local offer requirements, it was so huge that having been involved in a website before my first look at it was, ‘How on earth are we going to make it relevant, keep it up to date and not lose people’s confidence in it?’ That was my initial thinking, I thought it was incredibly ambitious and then when you add the layers on that this was not supposed to be just a database, that it was supposed to have feedback, my initial thought was, ‘This is a hell of a lot of work here.’

Interviewer: In a way it’s remarkable that it is what it is now. Keeping stuff ticking over, but how do you keep it up to date?

P6: [anon.]’s departure, I was sat in a meeting already this week and that was raised as a concern, ‘Who is doing that?’ And I know that all you need is two or three months, things go adrift, people look up stuff and it’s out of date and they suddenly say, ‘Well there’s no point at looking at the local offer.’

Interviewer: And do you know of anyone who is actively using it at the moment?

P6: Some of our staff use it. If a young person asks them, ‘I’m interested in blind football,’ then yes they would look at that sort of thing. But I’ve come across families that go on it. The feedback I get from them is that it looks pretty, they can find stuff compared with other people’s local offers, but I’m not convinced it’s reached its full potential to be honest.

Interviewer: Okay, well let’s come back to that in a bit then. Going back to your involvement, you were initially invited by [anon.] to get involved? How does that work within the council? Do you get time taken, do you get x amount of hours a week or something?

P6: No, no, no, no, it’s a lot vaguer than that. What happened was with that basically when [anon.] had to pull a group together that had to be agreed at quite a high level as to who was actually on it and then after that we did co-opt people on at a later point. That was identified that there was going to be meeting once a month and I think the initial assumption was that all I was doing was turning up to a meeting once a month. It didn’t quite work like that because, as you’re probably aware, actually were you involved when [anon.] first chaired it?

Interviewer: What I found out through talking to everyone was [anon.] and I came to the first one when [anon.] had come which I think was the time when it was you and [anon.] running it.

P6: The initial three or four months [anon.] chaired it, to be fair to [anon.] , he has so many hats, so many jobs. He probably couldn’t devote the time to it and it really was not going anywhere and we were in danger of losing people cause people were saying, ‘Why am I turning up?’ So [anon.] then approached various people and said, ‘Can [anon.] and I run it and [anon.] turn up as a person?’ So he was technically still the chair of the meeting and he reported in to the chair of the board, but obviously [anon.] did the minutes and I chaired the meetings.

Interviewer: How did that, when you say that, ‘things weren’t happening’?

P6: There was a lot of talk and the deadline for actually producing something was increasingly looming and we haven’t actually made a concrete decision. There was a lot of discussion of how to do it and things like that, [anon.] had string views that he wanted it set up by different types of disability and we were all in agreement that that had to go out to consultation, other perspectives and things kike that. And I think we had three or four meetings where we talked round and around the same issues. And it was like, ‘We can’t go on like this forever because next September we have to have a website.’

Interviewer: And you were having these meetings and I imagine there was not much talk in between

P6: No there was nothing, people talked and sat there for two hours and it was like, walked away and we’ve achieved what? And neither [anon.] nor I work like that. [anon.] and I were both very aware that there was a deadline and that we had to have mile stones within that to get things moving and actually make us compliant.

Interviewer: So you took the proxy chairing role?

P6: I took the proxy chairing role yes and I ran the meetings and [anon.] took the minutes and [anon.] and I would meet and see what we’d need to achieve and what outcomes do we need.

Interviewer: To me you, [anon.] and [anon.] were the key driving forces for the local offer.

P6: I think within the council that’s fair to say, yes.

Interviewer: Do you want to talk about from the time you took it on then, can you talk about some of the key points, what do remember as pinnacle moments?

P6: Pinnacle moments was getting [anon.], it was a huge thing getting [anon.], until that point I couldn’t actually see how we were going to get a website up and running because [anon.] and I certainly didn’t have the time or the ability to do it. Getting yourselves on board has been a big thing, because that’s given it the other dimension that it’s got to continually grow and move. I think too many websites they get up and running and they are created and they never develop therefore they lose their relevance. Other mile stones I suppose was getting into the discussions of actually producing the website even in its basic form and being able to show parents and consult with parents and that started to become real. And I suppose the big last one was when we actually had the launch at the civic centre, because that really was, there was a lot of positive feedback and that was quite a busy event and for a lot of people suddenly the local offer was more than just a website. So, I think those were the big ones.

And then of course the group was disbanded and it’s like, ‘Whoosh’. And it’s ceased to be part of my job, I mean it’s just unbelievable. Technically I’m supposed to be, when the new group gets up and running I’m supposed to be on it but without [anon.] there’s no new group at the moment. So, it’s like I was heavily involved and then that’s it. It’s very strange.

Interviewer: I always bring up that interesting meeting when the new groups were being proposed and the local offer thing was there as a task and finish activity, which is like, we’ve done it now?

P6: Yes, ‘We’ve done it, we’ve got it. That’s it.’ And you know what’s going to happen, three years down the line it’s going to be old and tired and people are going to say, ‘Why is this here?’ And as you know the website is only the started. There’s also supposed to be this whole thing of identifying the gaps in the provision and getting the feedback and being a much more interactive thing, that for me, my fear is, that’s going to get lost in [anon.] and basically, tick box, ‘Yes, we have a website.’

Interviewer: I think those are important challenges going forward, particularly that there are gaps and they fee into commissioning, one of the big requirements, you’ve had some kind of challenges?

P6: You mean commissioning haven’t engaged?

Interviewer: I was doing it politely, but I suppose without being ruthless, why do you think that was and what challenges have oyu had there engaging certain folk?

P6: I think the background is council cuts. That everyone is under huge amounts of pressure. I think it’s like, ‘Is this about to open up a can of worms that, do we have the capacity for? Is it really within our core work? We’re up to capacity with what we are doing already, this is another bolt on’. I think that is probably, there is an element of protecting their own staff. And the local offer didn’t come with any extra money I know we had the initial grant, but it doesn’t come with long term, sustainable funding, and I think that is the biggest weakness in it, because to maintain a website needs staffing. And I think the whole side with commissioning, this kind of developing new things and looking at feedback and all that is beyond what they currently do

Interviewer: So, in a way, my understanding of it has been you can identify gaps in relation to a certain type of service, what are the needs, but of course in order to fill that you need money or you need to cut something somewhere to fill that gap, so I can completely see why commissioning, unless they can see where that will come from, it’s very difficult to engage with it.

P6: And the other problem for me and always has been with the local offer is that, how many people do you need to say, ‘I’ve got a gap’? So you could have three people who happen to live in the east end of the city say that they want flower arranging for the partially sighted and then you suddenly find, is that really a need, and how do you quantify that and how much consultation work does that require? And then you actually find it’s just these three people. Or should we be only identifying gaps in core provision? And the legislation doesn’t account for that, it just says gaps in provision. So, are we talking about everything from social through to housing or are we talking, well actually there are some fundamental things that we do need to identify gaps in, such as education and training, probably housing and respite and do we concentrate on them, but as I say the legislation doesn’t make that clear.

Interviewer: It’s also quite clear whether it means public sector provided or…

P6: Voluntary or private. And how can commissioning influence that? So, for me, the local offer is one of those lovely ideas that there’s huge bits of that SEND legislation that has been dreamt up on a piece of paper and it looks lovely in theory, but the actual practicalities in the ground are very different. I have similar problems with the EAC process. We’re supposed to have youngsters sorted by the 31st of March. Has the person that wrote the legislation actually met a teenager? Because my experience is that they constantly change their minds, as is their want, or it’s based on their GCSE results or their A-level results or whatever which obviously don’t happen on the 31st of March. So, I think somebody has this nice ideal world and wouldn’t it be wonderful with the local offer if we have your local offer and you can identify gaps and then commissioning create it, so I think it sounds wonderful but the actual hard practicalities of what that really means and what are the implications for a local authority, I don’t think were ever really thought through.

Interviewer: So do you think the commissioning element has been the biggest challenge for you so far for the local offer?

P6: I think fundamentally it’s not really been addressed.

Interviewer: So it’s kind of a [conceptual 24:31] of how it’s been set up

P6: I think what we were landed with as an authority it is a flawed concept and I think within our local offer I don’t think it has really been addressed at all because I think all that effort went into, ‘We have to be compliant with the website and we’ll worry about the commissioning bit later on.’ And that links in with the feedback because, let’s be honest, we haven’t really in my opinion cracked that one either.

Interviewer: No, so let’s come back to that one as well. So, commissioning has been an on going challenge and it’s been a bit of an issue. From the year when you were chairing the meetings what do you think were the other hardest parts across the period of time? Or were there any other hard parts?

P6: [anon.], [anon.] and I really struggled with getting buy-in from other departments that weren’t represented on the local offer group, to actually write information that went on the local offer

Interviewer: Oh really?

P6: Oh yeah. Oh yes. Getting people to actually, because obviously you’ve got your list of all your organisations, but there were then all those pages about legislation and, as I say, housing options and respite options, trying to get that was tough going and [anon.] spent a huge amount of time running around the civic centre trying to get that sort of stuff

Interviewer: Literally running around, knocking on doors type of thing?

P6: Yeah, hounding people

Interviewer: So what was the, did you ever get a sense of what the problem was there for people, for people to engage?

P6: Because it was an additional part of what they had to do and it wasn’t part of their core work. And unless they were represented, if people are represented on something I think you get more buy-in but we couldn’t have a group that had about 100 people representing. So, it just went, I suspect those requests went further and further down the to-do list. I’m sure they probably intended to do stuff, but until we really started hammering on doors and using the threat of, ‘We’re not going to be compliant if you don’t do this.’ That was tough going.

Interviewer: So has the website still not got that information on it? Some of it or is a lot of it on there now?

P6: I think some of it I would say is probably of variable quality, but then we’ve still got the issue of who’s going to read it every year and update it.

Interviewer: Yeah, well that is the continual challenge of that isn’t it?

P6: And that’s the other thing, the more you have that kind of static information the more it’s go to be reviewed and checked and all the rest and it’s not written into anybody’s job that that’s what they have to do.

Interviewer: So do you think that there’s anyway it could be made a lot easier, to make it more easily updatable or dynamic? Have you had any feelings from talking to people and you’re probably hoping that that’s something that you guys might come up with, a magic wand.

P6: I don’t like loads of written stuff because my experience, particularly with teenagers when I worked on this other website is that certainly teenagers don’t read it and I know my 16 year old, if it’s not instantly in front of him on a website, the thought of reading pages and pages of text just does not happen, So I question the value of having it all on like that. Unfortunately, the legislation says you have to have it on there somehow. It doesn’t quite say that it has to be in full text. Are people going to watch video clips of someone talking about ‘short breaks’ I don’t know. But that’s for me is the problem, what happens is that people produce reams of text but then it does have to be constantly updated. But I question how much people read it and I’m sure if somebody really needs that information then it’s good that they can find it, but how many people actually use it?

Interviewer: I guess in a way it’s a question of who is the envisioned users of the local offer, because if it’s an exercise of ticking boxes and it leads to these long, I mean that could be useful for certain people, all that type of extensive information, but like you say people who are using it to sensitise themselves to what’s available or get a snap shot of what a place might do for their kid, maybe they don’t have the time or…

P6: It’s a lot to take in. Again I think it’s trying to do too many things, because I think you’ve got professionals using it, so it’s trying to meet that professional’s market, it’s trying to meet the parent who wants more information, now that could be on a what social activities, or it could be my child has just got this diagnosis and I need to find and then you’ve got young people and I do think that kind of 14 plus age group, I’d love to see what the stats are as to whether they’d use it because I’m not convince that it is what they’d go for.

Interviewer: Do you think that they even know it exists though?

P6: I’m not convinced they do actually and it’s funny because in the Connexions office, the way young people use websites, I don’t think they do research stuff in the Internet, a lot of ours. I don’t think the idea of trawling though a website to find information, no. I think they Google it and if they don’t get an instant answer, they don’t go much beyond that.

Interviewer: I have to say I’m getting a bit like that myself these days, if I;m searching for research purposes I’ll go to normal Google and then I’ll go to Google Scholar, I’ll maybe go three pages and then put in another word. That element of immediacy, you won’t find the local offer itself as a word is a bit weird, you won’t find the site unless you type that in.

P6: No, if you don’t put, ‘[anon.] local offer’, you won’t go instantly to that page. And I don’t think that will be most people’s starting point.

Interviewer: There’s obviously an issue there around signposting to it, to think about how we do that better and also maybe embedding it in the social network services that they might be using already? I’m not sure if young people use Facebook anymore

P6: As I say, I have a 16 year old at home and he’s on Facebook but he’s not on it a lot.

Interviewer: I’m not sure if it’s like and I’m not sure how you would embed it in things like Snapchat or whatever, there’s something to think about going forward. So that was a challenge then kind of, we got the commissioning issue, and we’ve got the engaging colleagues in other departments, were there any other problems that you felt throughout the course of the year?

P6: Time, time. We had to shift an awful lot and that, as I say, on top of my job, so my job was there and then suddenly I had this bolt on and I had to start chairing the meetings and then [anon.] leaves in the February and it was like, okay. In the initial days it was literally having the time to actually plan what we would do and stuff like that. [anon.] and I would suddenly be meeting for lunch and having business lunches, in the only time where we could discuss what was coming next and following up actions and stuff like that. That was the biggest pressure, because it was a bolt on, on top of everything else you still had to do.

Interviewer: And I have to say, from [anon.] and I’s perspective, it was always really apparent you had a lot to do in a short amount of time and actually combined with the fact that [started properly yet? 33:18] made us hesitant to intervene, because you all had so much to do that for us to do something which might complicate things, even a little bit more in the sake of adding a layer of innovation we were just like, we didn’t want to disrupt it because we knew, you didn’t look stressed but we could see how much had to be done.

P6: But on the other hand I think this is now what has to be the buy in from the council, from the project board, I think there has to have a buy in that they recognise that they have a local offer website at it’s most basic because at the moment I think we have got a directory and very little else and, let’s be honest, it says we’re not supposed to be a directory, but I think there has to be some recognition that somebody has to be appointed to look after the local offer and work with you on that innovative stuff and that is part of their job. And unless we get hat buy in I don’t see how the website is going to develop into what it should be. And you’re quite right because then at the moment I’m kind of thinking, ‘Hang on a second, Jen has just gone.’ It’s funny cause I was talking to Nicola Potter about this the other day and we were like, ‘Whoa, is this heading in our direction again?’ That’s the fear. You can see people looking round thinking, ‘Who are they going to put as chair in that local offer?’

Interviewer: And would you want to do it again?

P6: I haven’t got the capacity. I could be on the group, but as to be the driving force for doing work with yourselves or making sure the stuff is kept up to date, no. I do not have the capacity to do that at all. I’m quite happy to be involved in the group and give a perspective on the post 16 side of things, because I think that’s another thing, there’s been a lot of concentration on parents and parents consultation and all the rest, but I do think that 16 plus age group have a very, very different view on how they operate. And do they use websites? And do they use it? And what do they want from it? And I do think that’s been overlooked. So, I would be happy to get involved in that but being the driving force, no. I do not have the capacity, because since [anon.] ’s left, I’ve picked up some of his work.

Interviewer: It almost sounds like to me the thing with the local offer that there needs to be three different versions, well three at least all serving different purposes. And there is kind of like one which is professional, building into practice. Then a more useful for parents version, information seeking, and peer to peer support between parents, a half way house between parents, pass it on parent. But then to engage young people it needs to be something completely different, almost like a plP6ing tool, accessing what’s available in your local area and building in setting goals and achievements, I mean they’re going through a critical transition and that requires something completely different.

P6: That and also being able to actually talk or contact somebody somebody who can give them some information or advice. Because when we had the other website, we had a form on there contact us, and I used to regularly get young people: can I speak to somebody; can somebody ring me; I want information on this, that and the other. They could probably have found it on the website, but obviously couldn’t find it but having that facility now, then you get into the whole thing of could they be doing video conferencing, or remote interviews, that kind of thing? But I think that’s what young people probably want more. They want, I still maintain that a lot of young people actually want to deal with a human being, particularly ones with special needs, because I think you’ll find that literacy levels, concentration levels or whatever, they struggle with. But somewhere they know that they can go and if can’t immediately find the information, well I can get hold of somebody or I can leave a message and somebody is going to get back to me and talk to me, I think that’s probably if you talked to teenagers, what they would like.

Interviewer: You almost like a pass it on support system and they pass it onto there’s.

P6: Or you end up with a frontline support service like ourselves.

Interviewer: Yes

P6: And we did used to take all those enquiries, but then the problem is that we’re only funded to work with certain young people, if they’re vulnerable or have special needs, the moment you’re on a website, anybody can look at it, will those people meet our criteria for service? And that’s the problem you have, but, as I say, I think if you talk to a lot of young people, there is that stuff about empowering them and giving them the information, but I’m not entirely convinced websites do that. What they want, I think is social contact, however it is. As I say, I look at my teenager and it is on Facebook, it is chat times, it is this that and the other and that is how they find information out.

Interviewer: It’s embedding the information in the things that they’re already doing rather than making a website that is essentially database fits in with a model of an organisation which probably likes to have databases and probably not very accessible databases at that.

P6: But, as you say, trying to have one tool that meets all those needs, my fear is that it falls between a stall and doesn’t meet anybody’s true need.

Interviewer: So, going forward then, if you were able to start afresh, if you were to do things completely differently, what do you think would be the most critical thing to do differently compared to the local offer last time?

P6: What, on the same timescales?

Interviewer: Good question

P6: Because in the timescales we had, with the need to be statutorily compliant, I don’t think we could have done much differently. If we’d had two year lead-in and people had been given the time to properly do consultation and stuff like that then I think we would have possibly have ended up with something different and that’s the problem. I think that you would have needed a core of two or three people, with dedicated time, with the contacts to do various consultation properly to then have the time to develop something. And I just think that without, we had too many constraints to do anything other than what we did.

Interviewer: So lets take off the time constraint in that case. What would you think would be the most critical thing to get right this time?

P6: I think more consultation with a wider variety of people, what did we really need, what do they really want? I think is the big thing for me

Interviewer: But you did do some consultation.

P6: We did do, but we’d already got some ideas, I mean it was like consultation on a website, so they were already given a foregone conclusion, it was a website

Interviewer: And actually that’s part of the problem with the local offer, cause people do think of the website and not the local offer. For me the local offer is what’s on offer in the locality not the website, the website just represents part of what it is by identifying the gaps sometimes, but people do think of it as a website.

P6: For me that’s what’s never been cracked that the local offer is about that provision but that’s the commissioning issue, is what are the gaps? And if you ask people, ‘What are the gaps?’ Do you then raise an expectation that you are going to fill those gaps? And then how does that get done? And is there a budget there? I mean that for me would have been the time to explore that better is how to handle that? I mean the whole feedback thing that was another one that I think we fudged as well.

Interviewer: So what went wrong with feedback, when you say fudged, what do you mean?

P6: Well the whole feedback thing, I’ve listened to some of the regional people and they’ve talked about having the Tripadvisor stars, or should it be live feedback or should it be edited? I don’t think we’ve ever really had a proper discussion about how do you, and if you do have feedback what do you then do with it? I mean yes we’ve got facilities on there for people to add comments and things but to me that’s not really feedback because you’ve got to do something with it.

Interviewer: Has [anon.] ever told you about some of the feedback she’s got and what she’s done with it, so she’s had, I can’t remember the exact thing, they said there wasn’t a certain type of service in their area, so [anon.], this says it all about [anon.] really, she a was phoning around places to find out this information that wasn’t on the local offer website just to send back to this person. So it’s interesting just how, she must have said she only had three or four feedback comments over the last six months, but the amount of effort that goes into six comments is remarkable.

P6: Yeah, but you see I think that some people in other authorities envisioned you know people would say, ‘I’ve used this service and these are my comments on it.’ I think the problem with that is, you’re more likely to get the people that are complaining than the people who are happy with something and you then get an imbalanced view. And for me that never really got explored and how could that be done? And what are we looking for feedback on? Are we looking for feedback on the website? Are we looking for feedback on provision? Are we looking for feedback on the general offer? Is it on specific provision? You know what does that mean? And I don’t think that was ever really got drilled down as to what we as an authority wanted or what we are compliant with

Interviewer: So without any promises at all, if there was something that you wanted us to go off an focus our attention on, what would that be?

P6: Is suppose with my connexions hat on, it’s the work with young people, how can it be a tool that is useful for them and empowers them in a more creative way than just a website. So, these days we’ve got to in theory young people are supposed to have five day a week offers after they leave school so we have colleges that only offer three days a week and then they want to construct a week that has got more offers and has got more flexibility in and stuff like that and it takes a huge amount of our time, but it’s giving the young people the awareness that they can do that and how they can help start constructing that for themselves, but I don’t think a static website does that.

Interviewer: So when you try to engage people creatively or you try to get organisations to think creatively what does that often mean?

P6: It means dragging them round a table and saying this is a problem we have and how are we going to solve it? And then usually get things like, well how will the funding work? How will the paperwork, work and things like that. But, now I think for me the local offer, I maybe wrong, and [anon.] may have stats that would prove me wrong, but my suspicion is that 16 to 25 year olds group don’t use it and don’t see it as relevant and I think it could be relevant to them and I think it’s getting out to them, how do they get to know about it and is it through social media? Or is it something else?

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to say which you think you should say which we haven’t covered?

P6: I do think we achieved a lot, I think we achieved a lot in a short space of time and I suppose my fear is now that unless we get things sorted rapidly within the authority that a lot of that work is going to suddenly get lost. Which would be a pity, because I do think that what we had is a platform but I do think it’s got to grow.

Interviewer: Brilliant. Thank you very much P6.

P6: You’re welcome.

END AUDIO