

Top Ten Tips when choosing a support provider

This is a guide to help anyone who needs to buy social care support for themselves or a friend or relative (an adult or a child).

It aims to help you learn what to look for when choosing a support provider and the questions to ask in developing and paying for the support you need. It has been developed by VODG – the Voluntary Organisations Disability Group – a membership organisation which provides support to charities and not for profit organisations that work with disabled people, and promotes best practice.

Top ten tips:

1 Think about how you want to be supported. Do you want a support worker or a personal assistant (PA)? Will you employ them through an agency or directly?

2 Note your first impressions. Initial conversations with your support provider will be a good indication of future relationships. Does the provider do what they promised? Did they get back to you when they said, or can you get hold of them when they say you can?

3 Check how they will develop your support package. Your support provider should spend time getting to know you, to find out about your needs and wishes. They should develop a person centred plan with you and you should receive a contract that sets out your support.

4 Check how your support will be monitored – and changed. Your support provider should carry out a review of your support – sometimes called a ‘person-centred review’ – annually, and this should be led by you.

5 Check the price and what it includes.

Your support provider should confirm a price that will not change after you and they have signed the contract, unless by mutual agreement.

6 Check the staff who will be supporting you. Your support provider should arrange quality staff that will support you based on your individual needs.

7 Check how they will make sure you are safe and supported properly. Check your provider is registered with the appropriate regulator and what other quality tests they carry out.

8 Check your right to complain. Who do you contact if things go wrong?

9 Check how you can end your agreement. Find out what notice period is required and any ‘exit fees’ such as staff salaries or other costs.

10 Find out more. There’s lots more information below. And learn some terminology (see our jargon buster section) as care and support can include lots of jargon.

1 Think about how you want to be supported

First of all, you will need to talk to your Care Manager to agree your personal budget and how you spend it. They will agree a support plan with you. You can then choose how you want to be supported.

There are two main options available to enable you to have a support worker. You can either:

- Employ a support worker or PA directly, or
- You can pay an agency to provide you with a support worker.

There are important differences between how these work so make sure you think about what's best for you.

Employing a support worker or Personal Assistant directly

- You will be classed as your support worker's employer if you are employing somebody directly – i.e. if there is no other agency involved in your support.
- If this is the case you need to ensure you are able to pay their wages on a regular basis – and this must be at least the National Minimum wage at the current level. You must also pay their tax and National Insurance. You could buy in support from a payroll service to help you do this.
- You will need to make sure they have a contract of employment.
- You also need to check your responsibilities to make additional payments – for example, sick pay or maternity pay.
- If you are employing a support worker or Personal Assistant directly, check what will happen if they are off sick. Will someone else be able to support you? Will you be able to choose who that will be?
- You are legally responsible for your support worker or Personal Assistant as their employer and so you need to check that you have the right insurance in place.

Make sure you are clear about all your legal responsibilities and that you can meet them before employing anyone.

Buying support from a provider agency

- If you are buying your support from a provider agency – a charity, a not for profit organisation or a private company – they will usually be your support worker's employer.
- Make sure that the provider agency will be responsible for paying your support worker's wages, tax and National Insurance contributions and all other payments including sick pay and maternity pay.
- Agree with them at the beginning how you will be involved in recruitment and support decisions.
- You can also buy your support from more than one agency. For example you could buy support for your specialist needs from a specialist provider and your general care needs from another, less specialist, provider.

Other ways you can spend your money

- You don't have to buy support from a support worker or provider agency. You could choose to use your personal budget to buy assistive technology to support you or to take part in other activities e.g. going to a day centre or using local clubs and facilities. Or you can choose to spend your budget on a mix of things. You can talk to your Care Manager about this.

2 Note your first impressions

Your support provider/worker needs to offer long term, quality support. The initial conversations you have will be a good indication of your future relationships and how easy it will be to talk to them.

What should I look for?

- They do what they promised; get back to you when they said they would; you will be able to get hold of them when they say you can.

- They should be interested and show an understanding of your needs and wishes.
- They recognise that you are the expert in your (or your relative's) support needs.
- They offer you the opportunity to talk to other people they support or other family members about their experiences.

3 Check how they will develop your support package

Your support provider should be willing to spend time getting to know you, to find out about your needs and wishes and what is important to you.

What should I look for?

- Ask how they will approach getting to know you.
- If you are a family member, ask how they will involve you.
- They should develop a person centred plan with you, which details what you want to achieve.
- You should receive a contract that sets out what support you will get and when.
- A decision making agreement should also be developed which clarifies who needs to be involved in decisions or making changes to the support you receive.
- Ask what happens about holiday arrangements both for the staff member and for you or your relative? You might want to choose another support worker for when your usual support worker is on holiday. Or you might want to wait until they get back and perhaps get support from a friend or family member in the meantime. Make sure you discuss this when you are drawing up the contract.

4 Check how your support will be monitored – and changed

Your support provider should carry out a review of your support – sometimes called a 'person-centred review' – every year and this

should be led by you. They should be flexible and able to provide support that meets your needs.

What should I look for?

- Find out how your support will be reviewed.
- Ask how people who are important to you will be involved.
- You should be able to easily contact your provider to make changes to your support at any time – not just at your annual review.

5 Check the price

Your support provider should confirm a price that will not change after you and they have signed the contract unless the contract allows them to or this is by mutual agreement.

What should I look for?

- Check how the price is put together.
- If it is an hourly rate for support, is this for 1:1 support or shared support?
- Check what the rate includes and what is 'free'.
- Check if there are any extra charges that you need to know about.
- Check that the rate covers everything you will need e.g. personal care, finding somewhere to live, etc.
- Check what you will get for your money – bear in mind that specialist provider agencies may cost a bit more but they may have more skills to support you and so be a better choice – make sure you consider this when making a decision. Check what extra specialist support you would be getting and how this would differ from a 'standard' agency.
- Check what will happen if you or your relative needs more support during the contract – how will this be charged?
- Check who pays for the support worker if you or your relative is in hospital and still needs support to be provided.

- Check how the agency will look after the money you pay them. Will the money you pay be used only for your support (often called an Individual Service Fund)? Will they send you a regular statement, telling you how your money has been spent? Do you want them to invoice you or will you pay another way?
- Your support provider might want to put in an annual review of prices to allow for staff pay uplifts in line with inflation or to agree an annual percentage increase up front. Make sure you are aware of this and how it will be agreed with you.
- There may be circumstances when prices need to be reviewed – make sure that there is a clear process for how you will be consulted on this.

6 Check the staff who will be supporting you

Your support provider should arrange quality staff that will support you based on your individual needs.

What should I look for?

If you are buying your support from a provider agency:

- Check that all support workers have up to date criminal record checks. If you are buying support from a provider agency you shouldn't be charged for this.
- Check that staff training complies with, or exceeds, the legal requirements.
- Find out how staff will be trained to provide the support you need if they do not have the required skills already.
- Check that each staff member has regular supervision and a development plan that sets out their personal training requirements.
- Check how the provider plans to involve you in the recruitment process. How will your views be listened to and actioned? Will you be able to be involved in drawing up the job description of the person who supports you? Will you be able to be on the interview panel, if you want to be?

- Check who pays for the staff training – and what will happen when your support worker is away being trained? Who will support you?

If you are employing a support worker directly:

- Your support worker doesn't have to have a criminal records check but if you want them to have one you will need to pay for this yourself.
- There is no legal requirement for your support worker to have specific training, but if you think they need training so that they can support you, you will need to arrange and pay for this and for any supervision or support that they need.

7 Check how they will make sure you are safe and supported properly

If you are working with a provider agency, they should provide a service which meets certain standards. This will increase your confidence that you will receive the highest standard of support possible.

What should I look for?

- Check they are registered with the appropriate regulator e.g. the Care Quality Commission or SCSWIS (Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland).
- Check what other quality tests they carry out; these should include health and safety and may also include fire safety etc.
- Find out if they have a whistle-blowing policy and what safeguards are in place if there is an emergency.
- Check what reporting is done; this should include reporting on health and safety incidents and complaints.
- Ask if they carry out any regular surveys or questionnaires on the support they provide – will you be able to take part in this?

8 Check your right to complain

If you are buying support from a provider agency and things go wrong you want to be certain that any problems can be solved quickly and efficiently.

What should I look for?

- Check if there is a complaints procedure and who you can contact if things go wrong.
- Check that the complaints procedure is written in an accessible way.
- The procedures they have should provide you with reassurance that potential complaints would be taken seriously and properly investigated.
- The procedure should also tell you how they will feed back to you about what is happening as a result of your complaint – and what you can do if you are still not happy.

9 Check how you can end your agreement

People's circumstances change and there may come a time when you need to cancel your support agreement. You need to know that you can do this easily.

What should I look for?

- Check the procedure for ending your agreement.
- Find out what notice period is required.
- Check if there are any 'exit fees' such as staff salaries or other costs.
- If you are employing a support worker directly and wish to terminate their contract you need to make sure that you follow Employment Law. Ask for advice if you are unsure about this.

10 Find out more

- Skills for Care, together with Association for Real Change (ARC), has developed a toolkit to support people to employ their own personal assistants and to help you get started http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/entry_to_social_care/recruitment/PAtoolkit.aspx
- For further information or advice visit **www.vodg.org.uk**. Or you can email **info@vodg.org.uk** or telephone **07917 670 509**

Learn some terminology

There's a lot of jargon in social care. It can be useful to learn a few key terms such as:

- **Agency/provider/support provider** – this is a term used for organisations who provide social care and support. They may be charities, not for profit organisations or private organisations. They will employ the staff who support you.
- **Broker** – this is a person or organisation who can help you find a care provider and to draw up a support contract. It's important that they are completely independent of any support provider, so they can give you impartial advice. If their organisation also provides support, there should be a clear separation between the broker and the provider.
- **Care Manager** – this is the person employed by your local authority who is responsible for commissioning and reviewing your support. You will need to talk to your Care Manager to agree your personal budget and how you spend it.
- **CRB** – this is short for Criminal Records Bureau. All staff working with children and vulnerable adults must have a check of their criminal record with the CRB or Disclosure Scotland before they are allowed to provide support.
- **Direct payment** – this is where you get the money directly paid to you so that you can then pay it out for your support.
- **Domiciliary Care** – this is where you get support provided to you in your own home that you either own or rent. This would include support to a child or adult who lives with their parents in the family home.
- **Individual Service Fund (ISF)** – this is where you use your personal budget to buy support from a provider who then holds the money for you on your behalf. You decide how to spend the money and the provider is accountable to you. The provider commits to only spend your Individual Service Fund on your support and on any management costs they incur in organising and delivering your (shared or individual) support service and not put your funding into a general pooled budget.
- **Personal Assistant** – this is a person whom you employ directly to provide support to you.
- **Personal budget** – this is a way of getting social care support. It means that you know exactly how much money you have to spend on your support. Your local authority is responsible for deciding how much you have to spend but you should be able to choose how you spend it. You will need to agree how you spend the money with your local authority first and they may ask you to agree support outcomes with them. You can choose to have your personal budget as a direct payment or you can ask the local authority to manage the money for you. If you would like a personal budget, contact your local social services department.
- **Person-centred** – this means that support packages are developed around and tailored to each individual's needs, rather than being an 'off the peg' service. Being person-centred should involve creating a detailed plan with each person being supported
- **RAS** – this is short for 'Resource Allocation System' – the method that local authorities use when deciding how much funding each person should receive for their social care.
- **Safeguarding** – this means ensuring that people being supported are safe and protected from potential abuse, including physical or financial abuse. It should not be confused with health and safety and is not about preventing people from doing things.

For further information or advice visit
www.vodg.org.uk