

Shifting the balance of power

There has been a welcome paradigm shift in working with vulnerable customers. Saba Salman investigates how Look Ahead is now led by its customers

Text: Saba Salman

A quiet playground in West London, empty apart from a young man gently swaying back and forth on the swings as he chats to his companion. Who would guess that this scene is in fact a support session between a customer with mental health needs and his Look Ahead Support Worker?

The traditional approach to support and risk management would have made this scene almost unthinkable, yet for Look Ahead this is just part of the journey that seeks to empower customers and give them real choice and control over their lives.

But like every great idea, the underlying principle is simple. Those who receive the service are best placed to know what works for them. So by becoming active customers with purchasing power and exercising greater choice and control over their own support, they can harness their skills and ambitions to make a real and meaningful change in their lives.

For Look Ahead this mantra is central to everything it does. Customers choose their Support Worker, decide when and where they receive support and have direct control of resources. This may be through a core-flexi model, where customers receive an individual cash allocation that

money should be spent on. This principle of choice and control is being mainstreamed across all Look Ahead services and client groups.

At its heart is person-centred planning. This encourages customers to take complete ownership of their support

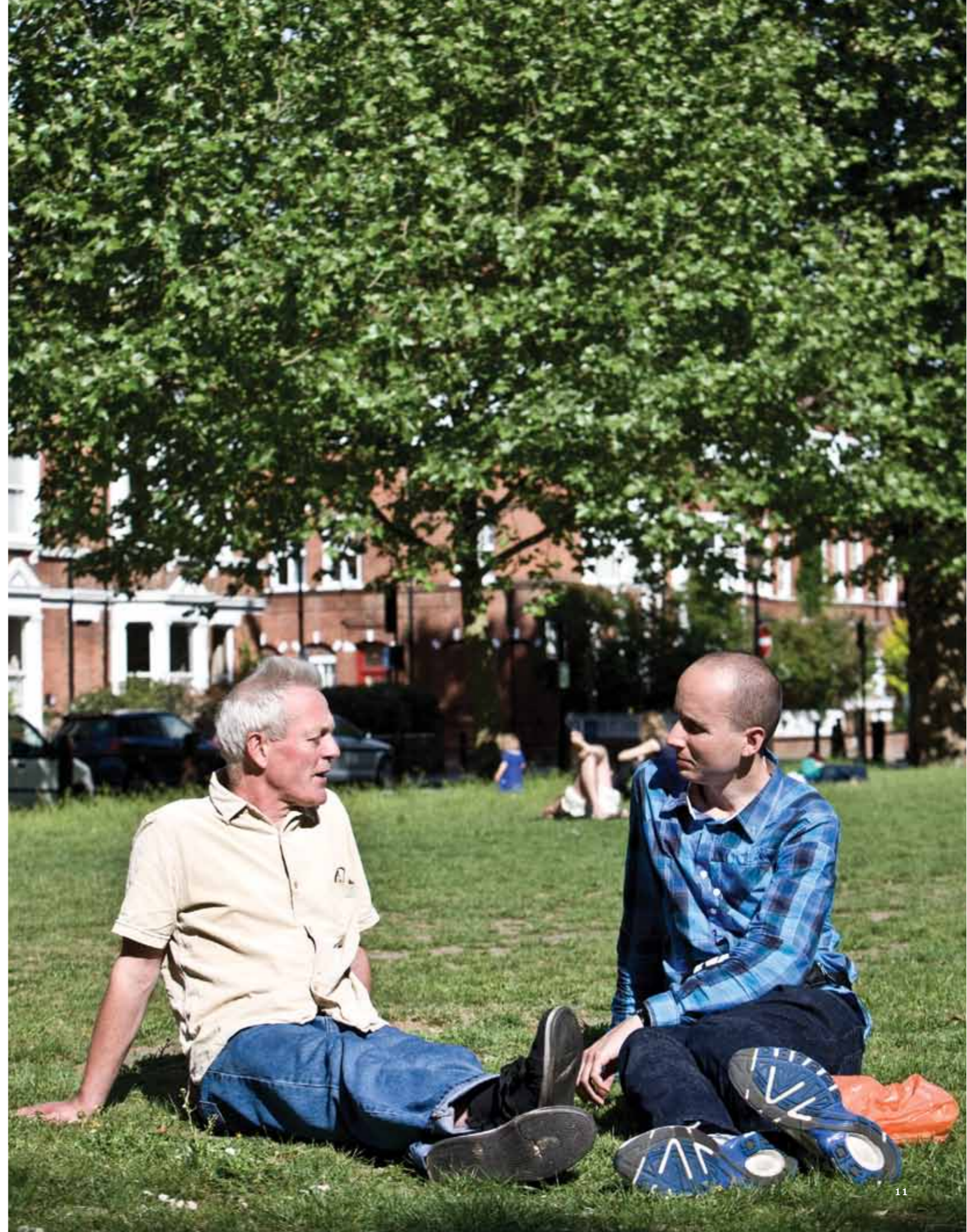
It's about trying to move the balance of power away from staff to recognise that customers are experts in their own lives

Ceri Sheppard, Transformation Manager at Look Ahead

they can spend on additional support hours or on activities or things that help them work towards the goals in their support plan. In other services, customers have direct control of the service's activities budget – making joint purchasing decisions about what that

plans and develop creative, live documents that reflect the things that are important to them. As Ceri Sheppard, Transformation

Photo: Stephen (right) says it's easier for him to open up to his Support Worker in the park



Augusto: “For the customer, the benefit is having more power and control”

Augusto D Mello, Transformation Consultant at Look Ahead, delivers staff and customer training on personalisation and recovery. He first accessed mental health services 13 years ago when he was diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder. He is passionate about how people like himself can make a full recovery following a long period of serious mental health problems. His training sessions involve, amongst other things, getting customers to talk about their own talents and skills, and what is really important to them, while his work with staff includes asking how much they feel they inspire those they support. Mello reinforces how important it is to put the customer at the heart of support and shows both professionals and customers how worthwhile the personalisation drive is.

“Personalisation is a big change and, as any change is a challenge, we have to support people to find new ways of doing things. The great thing about personalisation is that you can see the results and feel more enthusiastic about it. For staff, what you are doing is producing real results, promoting and improving people’s lives and seeing them moving on quicker or having more control over the recovery process.

“For the customer, the benefit is having more power and control. I work with them to promote empowerment and self-confidence so they can make the most of personalisation.

“Having been a customer, it was difficult at times to find hope and imagine that things could be different. So what we’re trying to do at Look Ahead is to empower customers to find in themselves not only hope, but the drive to be a leading force in changing their own lives for the better. Personalisation is about giving people the tools and opportunities to improve their own lives, and we want to ensure they’re ready for that and the chance doesn’t pass them by.

“For many years the system has concentrated on maintaining someone’s health, which means trying not to let that person get worse. Personalisation and co-production – and by co-production I mean working together to produce something, a dynamic process – is more about improving someone’s life. Things are changing and Look Ahead is leading this change.”



► Manager at Look Ahead, explains: “It’s about trying to move the balance of power away from staff to recognise that customers are experts in their own lives.”

The question is how it impacts on customers’ lives, and the initial results are impressive. According to a recent evaluation of 102 customers, all but one became more engaged with their Support Workers while 83 per cent of customers at Look Ahead’s registered care home in Saltram Crescent, now administer their own medicines – none self-medicated before.

So clearly the idea of increased choice and control is having a positive effect, but for Look Ahead there is an opportunity to go further. For them the next stage is customers actively designing and delivering their own services – it is the concept of ‘experts by experience’ or, as some call it, co-production.

As Mark Goldstone, Head of Operations for Generic

Personalisation is about giving people the tools and opportunities to improve their own lives

Augusto D Mello, Transformation Consultant, Look Ahead

Floating Support at Look Ahead, observes: “Co-production means the customer being involved in deciding what kind of service they want, how it should look and in some cases providing these services to their peers.”

In many ways co-production can be seen as the next stage of public service reform and has the potential to deliver real and sustained improvements in the way services operate. Indeed this was a finding from the recent People Powered Health programme, a project by Nesta (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the

Arts) and Innovation Unit, a social enterprise, to support the creation and delivery of innovative, co-produced services for people with long-term health conditions. [see www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/coproduction for related reports].

This is not to say that there aren’t challenges with this new agenda. Staff need to get used to changing their approach to working much more flexibly and the culture for customers with higher needs can still be quite paternal. As Anne Lawn, Head of Operations for Learning ►

Stephen: “It is important to have a say in your support”

Stephen, 33, lives in Look Ahead’s supported housing complex for vulnerable customers in East London. He has completed training with Augusto D Mello (see opposite) and takes minutes at meetings to improve the service where he lives.

“Training with Augusto was really good. He got us to talk about negative and positive experiences, and when we feel vulnerable or isolated. We talked about what qualities we think we’ve got and did a singing session, which made it a lot more entertaining.

“I would say I have more choice in the service now. I’ve decided to go on an assertiveness training course. I want to do it because in the past I have been financially exploited as I was vulnerable. I’m thinking of doing that soon because I want to be completely ready for the outside world and getting my own independent flat. I’ve planned all of this well, we plan it all together – me and my Support Worker – so this is coming from me and not just my Support Worker. It is important to have a say in your support.”





John: “[Staff] back me up so I have a smooth life”



John, 46, lives at Look Ahead’s Kwanzaa House, an accommodation-based service for people with mental health needs, in Hammersmith and Fulham. He has spent his cash allocation on a laptop so he can study for his European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), a computer skills certificate that will be valuable for John when

seeking employment.

“I like the way the staff are always available to help when you have a problem or a need. I think they are hardworking and dedicated to helping. They back me up so I have a smooth life.

“At my service...I saved up and got a laptop, which helps when I want to practise for my ECDL. I can use it to email or write, or when I want to listen to music.

“Why is personalisation so good? Because...you have more control over your life. I have been able to do something (use a computer and develop skills) that I never thought I could do.”

► Disabilities at Look Ahead, explains: “If you come from a long stay hospital where you’ve not had much say in your service, you have to get used to someone saying ‘What would you like for breakfast?’”

Ultimately, however, this does not stop Look Ahead in its mission and view of the potential of its customers. Deborah Antwi, a Support Worker based at Saltram Crescent, was initially skeptical about this new approach: “I was a bit apprehensive about how vulnerable people would take more control of their own care.”

But Antwi soon saw the benefits: “With person-centred

planning, we found out what customers really wanted from life. When you find out what someone really wants, you discover amazing things about them. You realise that you didn’t really know the person you have worked with for weeks, even months.”

Shifting the balance of power to put customers in control of the services is what drives Look Ahead forward. It is clear that self-determination and a move away from passive support are central to customers’ development – or, as Antwi simply puts it: “We support people to express themselves as individuals, not just as people who use your services.” ■