

Study asks key questions about whether social care personal budgets are right for older people

Our surveys and interviews with local authorities and over 500 service users explore whether personal budgets or traditionally delivered services work best for this group.

Few would quarrel with the Government's vision of social care services, customised around individual need, with users firmly in the driving seat, enjoying choice and control. And it is pressing ahead with the roll out of personal budgets – preferably in the form of direct payments in lieu of automatic service provision.

But Dr John Woolham, research fellow at the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at the University of Coventry, wants to know if personal budgets are really the best way to deliver personalised care to the elderly, whose needs consume more than half of the social care budget.

And when money is tight, it is even more important to make sure that it is being spent to best effect, particularly among the largest group of service users, he adds.

'The evidence seems to suggest that they are a good way of delivering personalised services for younger adults, but there is not much evidence that they work well and produce good outcomes for older adults, and there is even some evidence to the contrary,' he says.

Other research indicates that the stress of suddenly being faced with choices – or lack of them – and the responsibility of having to manage their own care might

make personal budgets unsuitable or unappealing for some of the 75+ age group.

While the evidence is far from exhaustive, there's enough to indicate particular problems around the delivery of personal budgets to older people, he suggests. 'But we don't really know if personal budgets produce poorer outcomes. And if it is just stress, additional support could be provided – assuming the resources are available – to alleviate that.'

Checking impact on older people

And the push to increase uptake of personal budgets is increasingly becoming an end in itself, rather than a means to achieve personalised care, which might also be achieved in other ways, he thinks.

He plans to carry out a telephone survey of the heads of personalisation in 36 representative local authorities in England and Wales with social care responsibilities, to ascertain their grasp of the issues, as well as any solutions they have deployed, and whether they have considered other forms of personalised care.

Crucially, the personalisation heads will be probed on how they evaluate the impact and effectiveness of personal budgets for older people, and what criteria they use to measure success.



'Person centred services are about designing services and forms of support that put the user right at the centre of the process, so that they have control over the services they use and can lead more independent lives. The concept is simple, but achieving it isn't.'

Dr John Woolham

Armed with these findings, he will select three local authorities with a high proportion of elderly residents, with the aim of getting the other side of the story. The plan is to survey 500 service users in receipt of either personal budgets or traditionally delivered services, in each local authority, to explore the pros and cons of both types of provision, and how far they meet the stated aims of personalised care, using validated scoring systems. This will then be followed up with in-depth interviews with a selection of budget holders, their carers and operational staff.

The questions will address issues such as how much stress they generate, support and information needs, and whether choice is all that it's cracked up to be.

'Everyone likes the idea of choice. But there's another side to it. Making very important choices about whether to remain in your own home or move into assisted accommodation is much more important than selecting a brand of tea, and that can be very stressful,' argues Dr Woolham.

'There are some concerns that the cuts local authorities are having to make will find their way through to the amount of money available for personal budgets, and that these sums won't be enough,' he adds. And some staff may find the cultural shift from gate-keeper to facilitator that comes with the territory, challenging, he suggests.

Project: Are personalised budgets always the best way of delivering personalised social care services to older people?

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Completion: Spring 2013