

# Personal budgets and older people

Outline of a research project  
funded by the NIHR School  
for Social Care Research

Improving the evidence base for  
adult social care practice

## Are personal budgets always the best way to deliver personalised social care services to older people?

Personal budgets aim to achieve personalised care by providing service users with defined budgets that can be used to purchase their preferred types of support. Although personal budgets can take different forms, including being managed by professional care-co-ordinators or other assisting individuals, there is an expectation that the policy will increase the number of people taking greater control over the use of public funds allocated for social care.

Advocates of personal budgets argue that they empower individuals, give greater autonomy and lead to better opportunities to pursue chosen lifestyles. However, although there is evidence to support these claims for younger adults, for older people, evidence is less strong. Indeed, the best study to date suggested that many older people with personal budgets do not achieve good outcomes. That study was unable to establish conclusive reasons for this, and better evidence is needed about whether older people face specific challenges as budget holders, and what strategies can be put in place to deal with these.

### This project

- will examine whether personal budgets are always the best way to deliver personalised social care services to older people (aged 75+) or whether alternative approaches might work better for some.

### It aims to

- determine the extent to which local authority social services departments recognise the problems older people face in the use of personal budgets, particularly if taken as a 'direct payment'
- examine how these problems are addressed, or if there are obstacles to doing so
- consider the criteria used by departments to assess their success in achieving personalised services for older people
- explore the experiences of older people, unpaid carers, and social services staff with personal budgets and personalisation, including the perceived benefits and disadvantages
- offer evidence-based recommendations about ways in which personalised services can be achieved for older users of social care services.



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### WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

The goal of person-centred social care services was introduced two decades ago, but its fulfilment has proved elusive. Such services are customised around the needs and preferences of the service user, rather than expecting an individual to fit in with whatever services are on offer. The introduction of personal budgets, which give individual service users direct control over a budget, is the most recent mechanism designed to achieve personalisation.

Advocates of personal budgets argue that they are a more effective way of organising support and care than the traditional approach whereby a care professional designs and arranges a care package for the dependent person. Possession of a budget confers direct control over and choice of services and support, and it is argued that this promotes empowerment and dignity instead of inducing dependency. The policy has broad political support, with the previous and current governments promoting personal budgets for people needing social care.

That said, the enthusiasm for personal budgets as the means for achieving personalisation and the political support it attracted seemed to owe more to policy-based thinking than to the research evidence, which though growing, is currently limited. There remains a lack of robust evidence. Areas of uncertainty include risk management and cost effectiveness, and the gap between aspiration and realisation in terms of outcomes.

In particular, the best study to date, the IBSEN evaluation in 2008, found little evidence to support the effectiveness of the approach among older people across a range of measures – and some evidence to suggest that possession of a budget may have caused stress among this group. The positive evidence that does exist relates to younger disabled people.

It has been suggested that to make best use of what budgets offer, an ‘entrepreneurial’ approach to constructing support plans may be needed, which may require energy that some older people do not possess. Despite such

#### Personal budgets

A personal budget is a sum of money given in lieu of services to a person eligible for social care.

Local authorities can offer personal budgets in a number of ways, depending on the wishes and/or mental capacities of the eligible person, including:

- money is transferred directly into the bank account of the eligible person, who is then responsible for planning and implementing their own support package, subject to approval by the local authority
- funding is allocated to a third party – for example, a relative or a local advocacy organisation – who can provide support in making decisions about spending and implementing the budget
- services can be arranged ‘in house’ by the local authority.

findings, the Department of Health has continued to press local authorities to offer budgets to people from all age ranges.

Older people are currently the single largest group of consumers of social care services, and their share of expenditure is set to rise over the next decades. This makes it important to determine whether personal budgets are the right mechanism for achieving personalisation for all older people and, if not, whether there are alternative ways of personalising services that might work better for some.

### HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

This study will combine quantitative and qualitative methods. It will obtain data from multiple sites in order to generate findings that can be generalised, while also using qualitative techniques to probe more deeply into underlying issues.

#### STAGE 1: Local authority interviews

A total of 36 Councils with Social Services responsibilities (CSSRs) in England and Wales will be selected: 12 from each type of CSSR –

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Shire, Unitary and Metropolitan. Within each type, six will be CSSRs with high proportions of older people and six will have low proportions.

A single telephone interview with the Head of Personalisation or equivalent in each CSSR will be sought and information gathered to address the project's first three research objectives:

- To determine the extent to which problems in the use of personal budgets among older people are recognised in CSSRs. Each interview will seek to establish the level of a CSSR's awareness of the issues, any specific problems encountered, and whether there is local evidence that either supports or challenges existing evidence relating to the use of personal budgets by some older people.
- To examine how CSSRs are addressing identified problems. This will include whether a CSSR is adopting specific approaches to the use of personal budgets with older people and, if so, how these differ from those used with younger adults. The interview will also inquire about any models of personalisation that are not based on personal budgets, and the circumstances when these alternatives are deemed appropriate.
- To describe and critically analyse the criteria that CSSRs use to assess their success in achieving personalised services for older people. This will include whether CSSRs are collecting any local evidence for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of personal budgets for older people, and what measures are being used.

The project will use the answers to these research questions to map out the extent of heterogeneity and variation in CSSRs' approaches to offering personalised services to older people.

#### STAGE 2: In-depth investigations

Three CSSRs with high populations of older people will be invited to participate. This phase of the project will take the form of postal surveys of older service users and their carers, followed by interviews with a proportion of the survey's respondents and with social care staff in the three CSSRs.

A comparison group of older people and unpaid carers who are not in receipt of a direct payment or personal budget will be sought in each of the three sites.

This phase of the work will explore in greater detail the research objectives covered in Stage 1, this time from the perspectives of older people, their unpaid carers and CSSR staff. The survey and interviews will also investigate the positive and negative experiences of older people who have used budgets (or alternative ways of achieving personalised services which may emerge) and individual experiences of personalisation (including among the comparison group without personal budgets). Budget holders will be asked about the perceived impacts and outcomes of the services and support provided via the budget, and whether budgets lead to greater personalisation and better outcomes. Staff interviews in the three sites will explore the issues emerging from the surveys of users and carers.

The data collected will enable a critical analysis of the ways CSSRs seek to deliver personalised services to older people. The anticipated outcome will be a fuller understanding of the scope and limitations of personal budgets for older people, and information on any emerging alternatives.

#### Project publications

Dissemination of the project's findings will be aimed at three audiences: practitioners in social care departments, the research community, and service users and carers.

A written summary of the main findings and any recommendations will be available to all participants who request it. Each of the 3 main fieldwork sites will be offered written and oral feedback on the findings for their department. Additionally, a copy of the final report will be sent to the Director of each local authority social care department in England and Wales and to the Department of Health. Reports will be prepared for SSCR on findings and methods, and at least two papers will be submitted to peer review academic journals. Two workshops to discuss the findings will be held to which members of each host local authority will be invited.

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#### HOW DOES THE PROJECT FIT THE AIMS OF THE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH?

The project directly addresses the question of what approaches to the personalisation of care and support work best for older people aged 75 and over. It will provide much needed information to improve the evidence base regarding the outcomes of personal budgets for older people, thereby informing one of the most significant change in personal social services over the last two decades.

The proposed study is relevant to people using services and their carers because it will look very closely at the impact in practice of personal budgets upon older people and explore whether there might be other, better ways of achieving personalised services for some older people. It is relevant to social care practitioners because it will provide evidence to support the development of personal budgets, both by addressing the question about the ways in which budgets could be 'made to work' for older people, and also by considering whether different forms of service delivery besides budgets could work better.

The findings of the study will offer evidence that may challenge existing policies and encourage policy makers to consider developing a more nuanced approach to personalisation – providing guidance on how best to deliver personal budget based support for older people, or on effective alternatives to the personal budget itself.

#### The Research Team

The project is led by *Dr John Woolham* at the Faculty of Health & Life Sciences, Coventry University. Dr Woolham has over 20 years experience of conducting research in local authority settings, including a large study of the impact of self directed support and personal budgets in a single local authority.

*Dr Guy Daly*, Dean in the Faculty of Education and Health Science, University of Derby and leader of the Social Inclusion in Social Care Applied Research Group, will advise throughout the project. Dr Daly previously led an evaluation for Coventry City Council of its individual budgets pilot and has been part of the national evaluation team of the LinkAge Plus pilot programme.

*Professor Gill Furze*, Professor of Adult Nursing and Health Care at Coventry University's Faculty of Health & Life Sciences, will advise and support the statistical analysis and contribute to some of the outputs from the study. She has wide-ranging expertise in the field of quantitative research gained within NHS settings.

*Sharon Middling*, Research Assistant at Coventry University, will assist with data collection and analysis and report writing. She has nine years experience of working in social care settings.

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