

## **Harness new technology to give people more independence**

*Two years ago, **Martin Nicholas** went on a Paradigm study tour to Wisconsin in the USA, a state recognised for high quality individualised services. He returned with some exciting ideas about supporting people at night. It's all about harnessing new technology.*

**Two areas that providers need to focus on is enhancing the independence of the people we support and providing support services that are value for money.**

One of the few benefits of large congregate services is that they provide opportunities to share the costs of support between each person living there, particularly the costs of providing support at night. However, with the move towards individualised support services, it is common to hear questions like:

- How can a support package for someone with high support needs be cost effective if they want to live on their own?
- Surely they need a waking night staff member as the risk is too great otherwise?
- Isn't it much cheaper for someone to live in a residential home?

To me, it seems a total waste of money to pay someone to stay awake during the night. They add no value to people's lives and can be commonly found asleep during unannounced visits!

That's not a criticism of people's dedication – I've done the odd waking night shift in my time and it was more by luck than judgement that I stayed

awake in some services where limited support was required and you were there 'just in case' someone required support.

I was fortunate to go on a Paradigm study tour to America a couple of years ago when I visited services in the State of Wisconsin. The state is recognised for the high quality and individualized services that it provides for people with learning difficulties, particularly in the state capital Madison.

One project that really impressed me which I think should be considered by commissioning authorities in this country was its Intensive Response Centre. The Centre was set up in Madison a number of years ago and now provides nighttime support to nearly 150 people living in their own homes across the city.

The Response Centre, supported by the latest assistive technology, provides a 5-minute response time to each person once an alarm is activated for someone to arrive at the person's home from any of the seven responder locations dotted around the city. Once someone is referred to the Centre, a comprehensive risk assessment is undertaken to identify people's requirements before people are linked into the system.

During the day people are supported by any of the local providers working in the city and the alarms are activated each night by staff or by individuals themselves at a designated time. Failure to activate the system each night automatically alerts the Centre and results in the Response Centre staff contacting the person to check that they are alright.

The Centre is staffed from 9pm to 7am and use various alerts – including smoke alarms, window and door sensors and motion and flood detectors – to put an emergency call through to the main office. The Centre has saved significant amounts of money since its implementation as people no longer require their own dedicated sleep-in or waking night support, increasing their independence in their homes and enabling valuable money to be used

elsewhere. Risks are well managed and people are in many ways safer than if there is someone staying overnight in the building who may or may not be in a position to respond if there is a problem.

The system has built in flexibility; for example, if someone is going to stay out later than normal, they or their supporter would just need to liaise with the Response Centre and activate the system at a later time.

At a time when commissioning authorities and providers in England are under pressure to spread resources further, more attention needs to be given to how assistive technology can provide some of the answers, using either experiences elsewhere or in older people's services. Although I recognise that some services may always require waking night support or sleep-ins I am convinced they could be drastically reduced given the necessary will, dedication and creativity. Providers should try to achieve better value for money while for their part commissioners need to develop more flexible relationships with providers to achieve these benefits.

Authorities may not have the resources to set up an Intensive Response Centre similar to the one in Madison but there are still many innovations that could be adopted. In Hertfordshire we have been working closely with the County Council's Assistive Technology team to introduce assistive technology wherever possible to support people with complex needs to live in their own homes. We use installed motion detectors, epilepsy alarms and wander alarms, successfully eliminating the need for waking night support where initially it was an assessed need for an individual.

Without the infrastructure of Madison's Intensive Response Centre, a sleep-in person is still required over night; however, this has reduced the cost of the support package by around £30,000 per annum. The Assistive Technology team in Hertfordshire has been keen to get involved and all equipment is supplied to people free of charge. As we are only interested in providing individualised services to people who have been failed by traditional services, this support has been invaluable and enabled

packages to be set up at affordable prices in comparison to those of congregate settings.

Having the option of individualised services enables people to benefit from support based solely around their wishes and requirements, something so important to many individuals we are or will be supporting.

*Martin Nicholas is Director of Partners in Support:*

[www.partnersinsupport.org.uk](http://www.partnersinsupport.org.uk)

*Partners in Support is a small voluntary organisation set up in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council, with support from Paradigm and the Valuing People Support Team, to work in Hertfordshire with people unfairly labelled as challenging – many of whom are stuck in inappropriate out-of-county placements or living in campus accommodation.*