

# How can we avoid the price of Personal Budgets being a greater risk of abuse and neglect?

**Our research is looking for good practice to help resolve possible tensions between freedom to spend your own care budget and the dangers of someone taking advantage of your vulnerability.**

The rise of direct payments as the main form of personal budgets has generally been greeted enthusiastically. However, there are inevitable concerns among practitioners that the risk of abuse, exploitation, fraud and neglect may be heightened.

There have been some alarming, although rare, stories in the media, for example of a direct payment going to an older man, who was murdered by a family member. 'Before he was killed, Mr C had been receiving direct payments,' explains Professor Jill Manthorpe, who is part of the research team from King's College London. 'When social services looked at what happened, they found that no-one knew what the money was being spent on, which prompted concern more generally. On the other hand, there have been many other press stories about the lack of care and abuse of various kinds by staff working in regulated services. These explain why many practitioners think that choice and control over budgets can also reduce risks'.

It is important to pinpoint what are the real day-to-day issues that need to be addressed. SSCR has commissioned the King's College London team and researchers from the Universities of York and Coventry to investigate the nature of



anxieties among practitioners, carers and users and to explore what risks are emerging.

'We want to know whether people are worried, for example, about fraud and exploitation,' adds Dr Stevens, who is leading the study. 'Or is their main concern the quality of care that personal budget holders may be purchasing perhaps from well-meaning neighbours or family?'

Understanding concerns and tackling them well are important because personalisation must have the confidence

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Professor Jill Manthorpe, researcher

of the public, politicians and practitioners. 'Our project is exploring how practitioners support people in distinguishing between high and low risk and how they make decisions about their wellbeing.'

Across four sites in different parts of the country, the team is asking practitioners how they manage safeguarding people alongside the shift to personalisation. It is a subtle process. The old view that you can take a person to a place of safety has disappeared. Today, social care practice is about managing risk rather than providing the illusion of total safety.

The study is gathering examples of good support for people with personal budgets. 'One voluntary sector agency has developed a recruitment pack setting out how to manage your own care worker' explains Professor Manthorpe.

'Another is funded by the local authority to offer help with paper work – that can be an important area of safeguarding practice. So there are good examples, but many systems are not yet geared up for large numbers of people who find managing money difficult and may be at risk of exploitation. It is, for example, difficult to sort out with the banks which are the best approaches to protect people's money while not undermining their freedoms.'

The King's College London team has come across dilemmas in practice, she says: 'For example, someone might want to employ a care worker with a criminal record. That person may be related to them or live next door. The person might not be employable by a care agency. How do you help the person needing care to assess and manage the risk? The person might be the best care worker available, or might just be reasonable and "reasonable" would do, or they might be very inappropriate. It could be important to know the nature of the crime – whether it involved the misuse of drugs or violence or theft.'

The research also aims to highlight 'positive risks'. 'For example,' says Dr Stevens, 'instead of spending my money on a cooked meal delivered to my home, I might ask my daughter to make me a sandwich, so I can save the money to take a taxi to a football match. Social workers might readily agree to 'sign off' such a change or see that as something that is entirely the person's choice. That would be managing the risk.'

The team plans to publish guidance for practitioners about what seems to work well. They hope to produce materials for different types of social care practice, tailored to people's jobs. The learning will feed into training for social workers and continuing professional development.

**Project:** Risk, safeguarding and personal budgets: exploring relationships and identifying good practice

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