

Electronic efficiency

A new automated timesheet and invoicing system for home care is enabling one council to allocate staff and skills with greater precision. Most importantly, it means a better deal for service users, says **David Batty**

Winifred Hill has relied on the home care she has received since leaving hospital after fracturing her ankle. Hill, 85, who lives by herself in Rainham, east London, is due to receive six weeks of personal care from two care workers who help her maintain her daily routine while she recovers from her injury.

She is particularly grateful for the help she receives in the morning. "It's marvellous," she says. "I couldn't have anyone more helpful. She gets me up, gives me a wash and gets me downstairs. She sees I take my insulin injections. She let's me do what I can. I'll be sorry when she's finished because she's a nice kindly face in the morning."

Unbeknown to Hill, she is the beneficiary of a new, electronic system set up by her local council, Havering, to monitor and improve social care services. The system has allowed care staff both to spend more time providing care and more easily to modify the level of care provided, depending on the service user's needs.

At a time when social care budgets are under pressure, and council chiefs are looking for ways to cut costs, this has been achieved by reducing the bureaucracy involved in commissioning services from the 15 home care providers in the London borough. In 2008-09, the system's first year of operation, Havering recorded savings of £469,000. It is forecast to save an additional £712,000 over the three years to March 2012.

The home care call monitoring and payment system, CallConfirmLive!, developed by electronic monitoring company



Human kindness: Winifred Hill and her carer, Janette Riley Anna Gordon

CM2000, replaces traditional, paper-based time sheets and invoices with an automated system. When a care worker arrives for, and leaves, an appointment, they now dial a pin number from the service user's home phone, or send a text, that automatically logs those times on the council's finance and social care records. This has reduced the number of invoices processed manually by council staff by more than 10,000 a year.

Joe Coogan, assistant director of commissioning at Havering, says the system has meant that the council now has a precise record of how much of the care commissioned is actually delivered.

"We can easily see which of the home care providers is most likely to turn up on time and which has the most consistent level of staffing," says Coogan. "Before, we just had a notional idea of how many of the hours of care we commissioned were actually delivered. Once the system was introduced, we could see the ratio was nine out of 10 hours were actually provided. Now we have real-time proof that a customer may not need as much care as initially thought, and can modify their care plan accordingly."

The monitoring system also has a safeguarding function, Coogan says. "When someone has an appointment at 10am but [the care worker] hasn't turned up at 10.30am, we now have an early warning system and can make contact with the customer to see if they're all right. If someone is diabetic then getting their meal half an hour late can make a big difference."

Julia Scotton, client service manager at Homestead care services, one of the local home care providers, says the system has enabled them to roster visits "more intelligently".

"We had a case where the client had

come out of hospital after a fall and was allocated 45-minute visits," she says. "But after six weeks, the call monitoring system showed they only needed half an hour. So we were able to give back those 15 minutes and allocate the time to someone more needy. We had another client who received four half-hour calls a day, but [call monitoring showed] that they needed more time because the care staff were frequently staying longer than the allocated time."

However, Karen Giles, assistant manager for intermediate care at the council, says that nine times out of 10, the time spent on visits is reduced.

The council says the system will also give service users greater control over both their own care and borough-wide commissioning of home care. Coogan says the system supports the extension of direct payments and personal budgets, where service users are given the money to purchase the help they need or want. Service users receive a Visa card, which is credited with their care budget. The card is linked to the call monitoring system, so when they receive a care package, this is debited from their account.

"This gives them an accurate figure and real-time record of how much money they have left," says Coogan. "They can use that information to reconfigure their care package."

The council is also using the performance data collected from the system to create a league table of the local home care providers, which service users or their relatives or carers can access via a password-protected website. Coogan believes this information will help stimulate the local care market, driving up standards and offering service users more choice. "The system," he says, "is a key piece in the jigsaw as we move towards more personalised care."

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Residential care worker A real sense of purpose



Mandy Thompson: 'You can go home feeling that you've made people happy and improved their lives' Fabio De Paola

Mandy Thompson, 43, is a senior care worker at Greenaces, a residential care home for older people in Crowle, near Doncaster.

What does the job involve?

Caring for people's everyday needs, which might include bathing, dressing and feeding them, as well as working as an administrator: arranging appointments with doctors and other health professionals and generally making sure the home runs smoothly.

How did you get in to care work?

I did a law degree and spent nine years working in the conveyancing department of a law firm until I was made redundant last October. My sister works in care and suggested I give it a go.

How different is it to your previous job?

It's completely different. I used to have targets to meet and now I look after people.

How does care work make you feel at the end of the day?

I feel very satisfied that I've made a difference to someone's life. I feel a real sense of purpose.

What are the downsides to the job?

It's hard work - physically and emotionally - you have to work some weekends and bank holidays, and it's not the best paid job in the world.

Do the negatives outweigh the positives?

Yes, definitely. The job's really satisfying and you can go home feeling that you've made people happy and improved their lives - that's second to none.

What skills do you need?

You need a caring attitude, a positive attitude, you can't be afraid of hard work and you must be willing to learn.

Career high?

I thought an old, partially blind lady was unable to recognise me until one day when she touched my hand and said my name. I joked that she must have recognised my wrinkles but she said: "No, beauty comes from inside and I can tell you're a beautiful person." That hit home and made me feel really appreciated.

What would you like to do in the future?

My ambition is to run a home care business which helps older people to stay in their own home. I'm also applying to become a foster carer.

Jenny Percival