

# Calling the shots

The concept of personalisation, where vulnerable tenants are given choice and control in tailoring care packages to their own specific needs, could be one of the great success stories in supported housing, says **Saba Salman**

**T**he Coventry Road project in east London may well be at the forefront of supported housing, but for one of its tenants, Richard Ash, it can be summed up in just one word: "brilliant".

Ash, who has schizophrenia, adds: "It's a nice place with nice staff. I've used money from my personal budget to buy tickets for West End shows, and that's something I wouldn't have done before." The 59-year-old is a beneficiary of personalisation, an approach that allows vulnerable tenants choice and control over support. His home at Coventry Road is one of 20 self-contained flats run by housing association Look Ahead Housing and Care for those with mental health issues.

"Personalisation is about challenging the existing approach within social care, and recognising that real choice and control is best exercised when it's in the hands of the customers," says Look Ahead chief executive, Victoria Stark. "They become active agents with the ability to direct their own support in a way that suits them."

Traditional service-led care means people may not get the right help at the right time; personalisation aims to turn passive recipients of care into active customers with purchasing power.

Purpose-built almost 10 years ago,

If personalisation is to survive the spending squeeze, providers have to be determined and to focus resources



Coventry Road tenant Richard Ash with support worker Angela Adamo Richard Lewisohn

Coventry Road has total funding of £500,000 from the government's housing-related support budget, Supporting People and local authority adult social care funding. Look Ahead pilots personalisation in partnership with Tower Hamlets council, which commissions the service.

Tenants with complex needs, including substance misuse, are referred to the project by community mental health teams. The first step is a person-centred planning session where tenants discuss their needs. This leads to a personalised support plan explaining how tenants will use the support and cash.

Staff are on site 24 hours a day, helping tenants towards independent living with an intended maximum stay of two years. Tenants receive £40 a week to buy support from outside - such as a personal assistant to help with shopping - or money can be spent on equipment for hobbies. They also

receive three-and-a-half hours of individual support with a support worker.

As for the challenges, providers have to be more flexible about rotas and staff terms and conditions. Funding is another challenge. Supporting People money, paid through councils to help the vulnerable live more independently, is no longer ringfenced. If personalisation is to survive the spending squeeze, providers have to be determined and focus resources.

The effort will be worthwhile. A recent Look Ahead report showed that 14 people - 70% of Coventry Road tenants - reported significant involvement in making decisions about their care. Staff, meanwhile, welcome personalisation as it increases tenants' wellbeing. Back at his flat, Ash certainly agrees. Life at Coventry Road is "great", he says. "I feel more independent."

Look Ahead: [lookahead.org.uk](http://lookahead.org.uk)

## In practice Staff culture change

**Ceri Sheppard, transformation manager, Look Ahead**

People often feel their lives are dictated by professionals, even if professionals don't feel that's the case. Someone might sign up to a day centre just because they feel it's expected, not because they like it. Personalisation puts them in the driving seat.

Before, customers wouldn't know how much they had to spend on care. They'd be allocated a support worker and a time and place for a meeting that was convenient for the organisation.

We wanted to challenge that. They can draw up their own plan of how they

want to spend their £40 a week to buy support. The sense of ownership and engagement is tremendous.

Culture change among staff is a big factor when you bring in personalisation. There was a fear that customers would become more demanding, and if we're giving choice and control to customers, by definition we have to relinquish some.

We had to do more staff training around managing risk. One customer used his allocation to buy train tickets to see his grandson. A conventional response might be that it's too risky; we say 'let's see how we can make it happen'.

Interview by Jo Adetunji