



## **Home Safety Checks – helping to maintain older people’s independence?**

This publication summarises findings from research by David Clancy working with Pauline Jas and staff at Pocklington Place.

Home safety is a vital issue for older people who want to live independently. With a third of pensioner households estimated to be living in sub-standard housing, a pilot service addressed the question: can one-to-one home safety checks make a difference?

The pilot was carried out by Thomas Pocklington Trust with support from Birmingham City Council to assess the benefits of individual home safety checks for older people with sight loss. It concluded that checks filled a gap in the support available. They were useful, practicable and helped to maintain people’s independence.

In the pilot service, householders with sight loss received a one-to-one home safety check by an experienced electrical contractor working with a support worker. A review suggested that:

- Home safety checks support people’s independence. Increased peace of mind among the householders was highly valued. They wanted to remain in their own homes – partly because new or changed environments are hard to cope with if living with sight loss - and they felt that the checks could help them do this.
- Home safety checks are useful for people with sight loss. Although participants could draw on family and friends for support they did not feel it was reasonable to expect them to know about safety issues. Participants had gained reassurance on aspects of safety on which they had previously had no one to consult.
- The service worked well for participants. Householders liked the friendly approach of the team, their expertise and sensitivity to the needs of someone with sight loss. The reports they received gave them peace of mind about their homes.

## **Background**

Research has shown the importance older people place on services which help them remain independent, safe and confident in their own homes. There are also a host of public policy commitments which aim specifically to maintain independence in the home. They prioritise safety issues such as reducing falls and other risks, reducing crime and supporting independent living in order to reduce the need for care home admissions and support hospital discharge.

Some home safety services are already available. Voluntary organisations, home improvement agencies and local authorities provide information and advice, as well as installing aids and adaptations, and specific safety measures such as smoke alarms and external security lighting. But for people with sight loss a more general approach was needed – something which did not rely on leaflets and which widened the focus from a single issue such as smoke alarms to more general safety problems which might otherwise be missed, e.g. damp, or flooring that may cause slips or trips.

In 2006 Age Concern estimated that 32% of pensioner households lived in housing which failed the Decent Homes Standards, and that older women living alone were at particular risk of living in poor or unsafe housing. Ageing of the eye and age-related eye conditions mean that many older people have sight loss which affects their daily lives. This makes safety issues even more important and a need for a dedicated service that would more directly check the safety of homes and portable electrical appliances was identified.

## **The pilot study and review**

Birmingham City Council supported Pocklington to deliver a pilot service to test the idea of home safety checks. Ten householders were recruited through Birmingham Focus, the local voluntary organisation for people with sight loss. Of these, seven were women and three were men, and six lived alone.

The checks were visual only and addressed eleven areas of the home, including gas and electrical fittings and systems, loft insulation and an overview of wall and floor surfaces, windows and decoration. No testing of appliances was carried out. Each check took an average of 30 minutes.

## **What the pilot revealed**

### **Major safety issues were uncovered, all of them requiring action**

Of the ten houses checked, four were found to have a total of seven safety issues:

- Three lacked smoke alarms or had alarms that needed new batteries
- Two had taps which were so leaky they could create health and safety risks
- One had a gas fire that needed vents
- One had safety risks in the garden and exterior of the house.

### **Direct and continued contact by a specialist support worker was crucial**

An initial letter recruited interested householders. Further correspondence and follow-up phone calls provided further information. The calls smoothed the process of providing the service and made it a better experience for the participants. The disadvantage of this was that, although each check could be done in 30 minutes, the preparation time was high so that the total time spent averaged two hours per participant. Overall 40 households were contacted to achieve a sample of ten participating households.

### **Positive messages won the best response**

Presenting the scheme in positive terms was highly effective: supporting independence rather than checking for unsafe or insecure features. This matches findings from previous research about effective falls prevention messages.

### **Value for money was very important**

The pilot service provided free home safety checks. Participants said they would definitely use the scheme as long as the checks or any remedial works were not too costly.

If a service is to address concerns about costs, information and advice about sources of funds, and support to negotiate those, may be needed.

## Reaching those most in need

Although small, the pilot study revealed a fundamental issue – that those who participated were not necessarily those most in need. The safety issues exposed were fewer and less serious than might be expected from statistics about standards of safety in the homes of older people. Staff suggested that people living in less safe houses had perhaps not chosen to participate, or may not have been included in the invitation process.

If a service is to have real impact, it is essential that it reaches those most likely to have home safety problems. Work would be needed to target geographical areas or neighbourhoods where poor and unsafe housing is known to be concentrated, and to work with people who are not in touch with helping services.

## Reaching those in need – how other services can help

Some people may have needed the service but been reluctant to take part. Anxieties about becoming involved with unknown services or the consequences of exposing necessary remedial work, or whether a check may raise concerns that could lead to loss of independence, may have put people off.

Forming partnerships with organisations already trusted by people with sight loss may help address some of these concerns. The use of local networks and local publicity might increase participation, while people's confidence might be increased if the home safety checks could be promoted through a range of links with well-known local services and organisations such as:

- 'Age UK' groups, BME organisations, carers' groups, cultural and religious groups
- Local authority benefits advisers
- Vision rehabilitation officers
- Occupational therapy teams.

Integration with other services, especially those which already enter people's homes, might also be more efficient, since it was the setting up of visits that took the most time. An annual home safety check could perhaps be part of or linked to existing work, such as:

- Occupational therapists' assessments
- Home improvement or handyperson services
- 'Supporting People' services

- Care packages
- Energy efficiency assessments.

Explaining the help that is available to deal with necessary remedial work could also assist in overcoming reluctance. Providing advice on getting remedial work done could also be helpful. This would require a staff member with good knowledge of available services and resources.

### **Further research needed**

This pilot study was too small to evaluate several important questions. Further evaluated pilots will be needed to address these, as summarised below.

**Specific needs for people with sight loss** - Further trials should investigate whether the needs of people with sight loss differ in terms of home safety from people without sight loss.

**Outcomes** - Trials should assess the impact of the service on aspects of people's lives that they have defined as important. For example, measuring mobility, both inside and outside the home, before and after checks and any resulting remedial work could provide useful evidence on an area of impact.

**Enlarging the 'check'** - Previous research suggests that crime, and fear of crime, are issues that worry older people and people with sight loss. It may be useful to extend the checks to include security measures.

**Extending services** - With such a small study, this initial pilot could not hope to answer the question of whether such a scheme could be offered and prove beneficial on a wider scale. To answer that requires further work about how to engage people who are most in need and how to deal, in those cases, with what might inevitably be more serious safety problems. Such information would inform business planning for a larger trial and an evaluation of impact and outcomes.

## Author

Sue Cooper

## How to obtain further information

For more detail on the research project discussed above, *Home safety checks for independently living elderly people with sight loss: an evaluation of a Thomas Pocklington Trust pilot service in South Birmingham*, contact:

Thomas Pocklington Trust  
5 Castle Row  
Horticultural Place  
London  
W4 4JQ

Tel: 020 8995 0880

Email: [research@pocklington-trust.org.uk](mailto:research@pocklington-trust.org.uk)

Web: [www.pocklington-trust.org.uk](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk)

Copies of this report in large print, audiotape or CD, Braille and electronic format are available from Thomas Pocklington Trust

## Background on Pocklington

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a leading provider of housing, care and support services for people with sight loss in the UK. Each year we also fund a programme of social and public health research and development projects.

Pocklington's operations offer a range of sheltered and supported housing, residential care, respite care, day services, resource centres and volunteer-based community support services.

We strive to improve continuously the quality standards in our operational centres to meet the changing needs and expectations of our current and future service users. We are proud to be an Investor in People and a Positive about Disability organisation.

Our research and development programme aims to identify practical ways to improve the lives of people with sight loss by improving social inclusion, independence and quality of life, and improving and developing service outcomes as well as focusing on public health issues.

*In this publication, the terms 'visually impaired people', 'blind and partially sighted people' and 'people with sight loss' all refer to people who are blind or who have partial sight.*

## Thomas Pocklington Trust



Housing and support for  
people with sight loss

5 Castle Row  
Horticultural Place  
Chiswick  
London W4 4JQ

Tel: 020 8995 0880

Email: [info@pocklington-trust.org.uk](mailto:info@pocklington-trust.org.uk)

Web: [www.pocklington-trust.org.uk](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk)

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