

# Staying independent at home

When your health and care needs change, what can you or a relative do to stay at home?

**T**hey say home is where the heart is, and 88% of you told us in a new Which? survey that home's where you want to stay as you get older, even if your needs change. But changing health needs could make daily life more challenging, from changing a light bulb to managing stairs.

It's then that you, or someone you support, might consider what compromises you're prepared to make to stay independent – such as adapting your home or accepting support workers.

## Using technology

Governments across the UK have put money into providing people with 'assistive technology' to help keep them safe and independent.

Emergency or 'community' alarm systems are provided by councils (known as health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland), charities or commercial organisations. These systems alert a monitoring centre when a person pulls a cord in their home or presses a button on a pendant or wristband. The monitoring centre knows their address, may hold a set of keys and organises help by calling a relative or the emergency services. In our survey, the respondents thought alarm systems would make the biggest difference to helping them stay at home.

More sophisticated systems use sensors placed around the home, or on the person, to summon help in circumstances such as fire, falls or floods – even the bath overflowing (see our diagram on p48-49).

We asked a panel of eight older disabled people to tell us what they thought

about assistive technology (see p48), and they agreed that, while it could be helpful, it needs to be right for the individual. Occupational therapist Maggie Winchcombe adds: 'Technology can't replace human contact and can raise ethical issues about the person's privacy.'

## Other issues to consider

Most people get support from family or friends, but many carers experience difficulties as a result – such as poor health, a lower income or problems holding down a job (see 50).

In our survey, 43% of carers had problems getting information to make care decisions, with fewer than one in four rating local authorities as very useful.

Margaret Wallace, author of Which? essential guide *Care Options in Retirement*, says: 'Get as much independent information about your options as possible. The person who needs the care should have the maximum input, even if decisions are made in a crisis.'

## Which? says

Social care – and how it's financed – is the subject of change in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with Scotland already providing free personal care.

We want to see care systems providing what people tell us they want to remain living independently at home, such as more financial and practical support for carers and help with day-to-day jobs. But there is an urgent need for clearer information about care services and options, at national and local level, so that people can navigate the system easily.



## Care options

Types of care that might be available to you

### ■ STAYING AT HOME

If you want to stay at home, there's a variety of support services available, including paid home carers, equipment and day centres.

### ■ RESPITE CARE A

short period of care, in a care home or at home with paid carers.

### ■ RETIREMENT

**HOUSING** Sometimes called 'sheltered housing' or 'assisted living'. You have your own front door, communal facilities and support such as a warden or alarm system. It can be rented or bought, possibly in a retirement village.

■ **EXTRA CARE** or 'very sheltered' housing.

An increasingly popular type of retirement housing for people who are becoming more frail, with facilities such as personal care, meals and 24-hour support.

■ **CARE HOMES** Some provide personal (residential) care, and others nursing care.

Some specialise in care for those with dementia. Inspection reports are publicly available (see Care Essentials, June 2007, p19).

### ■ NHS-FUNDED

**CONTINUING HEALTHCARE** The NHS pays the full cost of care, wherever provided, for those with complex healthcare needs.

## OUR RESEARCH

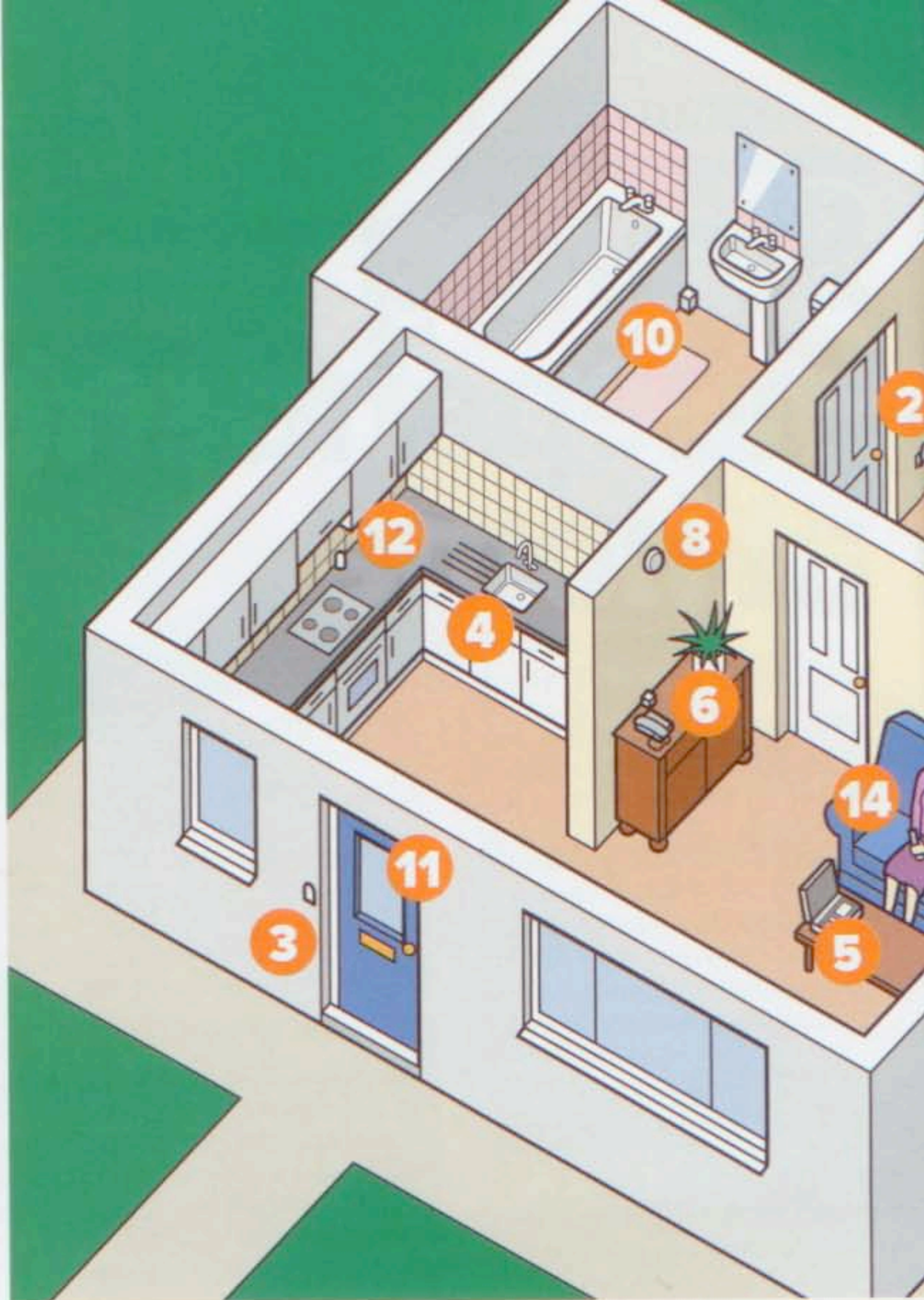
We interviewed 2,639 Which? members online between August and September 2008, and 1,007 members of the general public aged 45+ in October 2008.

# The future of independent living: assistive technology

We ran a workshop for eight older disabled people at Haringey Age Concern Resource Centre, London, who gave us their impressions of a selection of gadgets. We also asked occupational therapist Maggie Winchcombe and Guy Dewsbury, Barnet Council telecare co-ordinator, for their expert views. These gadgets are shown below and on our house diagram (opposite), alongside others designed to help you remain living independently at home.



Eight older people gave their views on a range of gadgets



## 1 LIGHT SENSORS

Masterplug LED Motion Detector PIR Night Light, £9.98 from B&Q, and Lifemax Portable LED PIR Night Light twin pack, £16.99 from Lifemax. Similar products widely available.



### HOW IT WORKS

They light up in response to a person getting up, and illuminate potential trip hazards or a path to the toilet. Masterplug plugs into the wall, Lifemax is battery operated.

### VERDICT

Our experts thought these were a cheap, unobtrusive solution to prevent night falls. The group said that they may help, but you would need to remember to change the batteries on the Lifemax model.

**ONLINE**  
Want to know more about care funding and grants?  
[www.which.co.uk/care](http://www.which.co.uk/care)

## 2 PILL DISPENSER

Pivotell Model 2/06, £111.62 from [www.pivotell.co.uk](http://www.pivotell.co.uk)

### HOW IT WORKS

You put up to 28 days' medication in the box and it sounds an alert when you're due to take it, stopping when you remove the tablets. Aimed to help those with memory difficulties, it can link up to a monitoring centre.

### VERDICT

The experts pointed out that although reassuring, such devices can't check the medicine has actually been taken.



## 3 OUTDOOR KEY SAFE

Keyguard Securities outdoor key safe £39.94, [www.safeoptions.co.uk](http://www.safeoptions.co.uk). Similar products available.

### HOW IT WORKS

A house key is stored in a covered metal box outside the person's house, and released by tapping a code into the keypad.

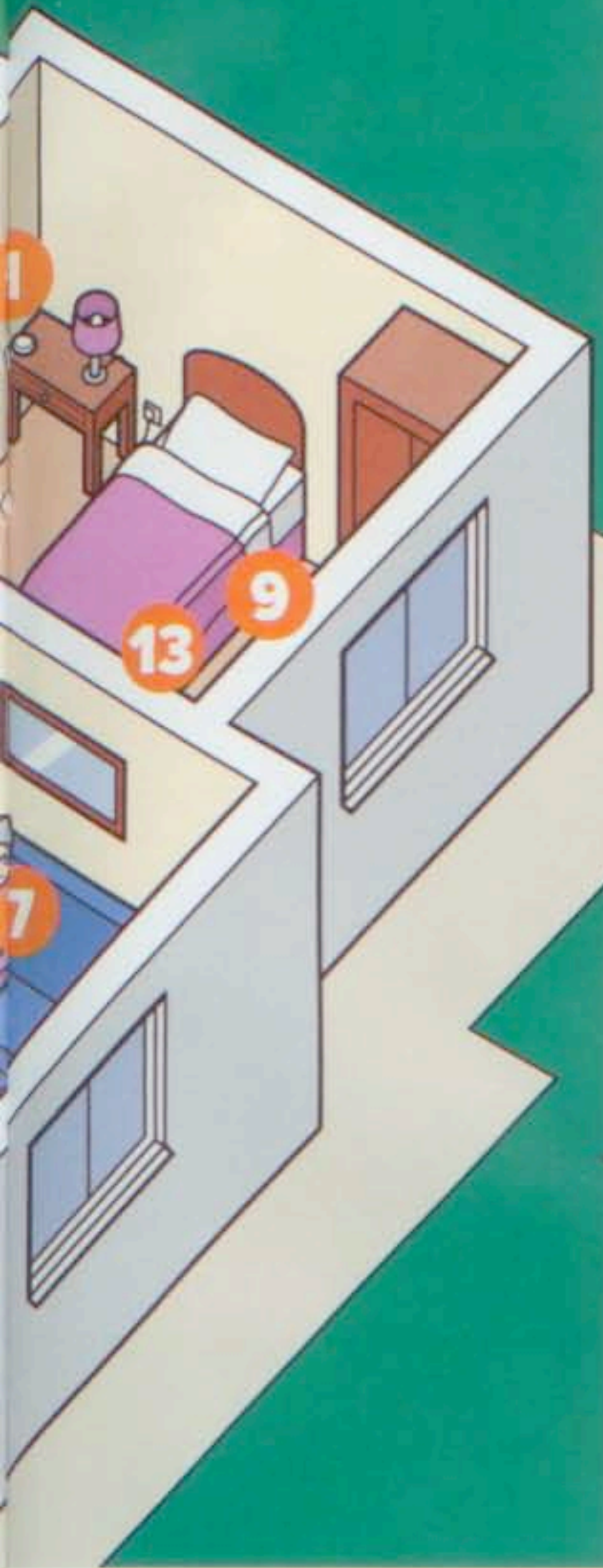
### VERDICT

One expert felt that it was ideal in an emergency, but the person would no longer control who entered the house. Some of the group said it would be useful, including one who had needed ambulance staff to enter her home.



## Alarm system extras

These sensors are part of alarm systems provided by companies such as Chubb, Tunstall and Tynetech

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- 1 ALARM CALL SYSTEM** (pendant or bracelet) Person presses button for assistance
  - 7 FALL SENSORS** (necklace or belt) Alert monitoring centre if person falls
  - 10 SMOKE/HEAT SENSORS** Alert family/monitoring centre to fire
  - 9 BED EXIT/OCCUPANCY SENSORS** (underneath mattress) Alert monitoring centre if person does not return to bed within set time
  - 10 FLOOD DETECTORS** (on floor by bath) Alert monitoring centre to flood
  - 11 DOOR EXIT SENSORS** Alert monitoring centre if person leaves the house
  - 12 NATURAL GAS DETECTOR** Provides warning and can automatically cut the gas supply off if a leak is detected
  - 13 EPILEPSY SENSOR** Detects seizures and alerts family or monitoring centre
  - 14 REMOTE CONTROL** (infrared device) Controls anything powered by electricity, eg TVs, heaters and curtains


### 4 SAFETY PLUG

Magiplug £7.95, [www.magiplug.com](http://www.magiplug.com).

#### HOW IT WORKS

A bath or sink plug that drains excess water over a certain level, preventing floods. It also changes colour when the water is hot.

#### VERDICT



The group thought that it was 'good for someone forgetful', and the experts said it could be useful to prevent flooding and scalding. However, they warned that although it claims to, it doesn't fit every sink.

### 5 ACTIVITY MONITORS

Just checking Equipment £590, plus 12-month web subscription (£310), [www.justchecking.co.uk](http://www.justchecking.co.uk). Similar products available.

#### HOW IT WORKS

For people with dementia. Sensors round the house detect their movements and send information about their activities to a computer web page, accessible to others using an agreed password.

#### VERDICT

The experts said this can be ideal in the short term, but had some concerns about privacy.



## Organising support

We look at how you can convert your home and get extra support to meet your needs

Equipment or adaptations, from gadgets to help you get dressed to installing a downstairs bathroom, may help you to stay independent.

### Get an assessment

First, get an assessment from your council. This is usually done by a specialist, such as an occupational therapist, who can advise on housing grants for adaptations.

Older and disabled people can also get advice on adapting, improving and repairing their home from a local Home Improvement Agency (called either 'Care and Repair' or 'Staying Put' schemes).

A council may supply equipment, such as bath lifts, or you may be able to get the cash to buy it. Even if you buy privately, shop around and get advice on what you need, for instance from a council or a Disabled Living Centre (see Mobility Aids, August 2008, p24).

### No VAT

If you have a long-term illness or you're disabled, you don't have to pay VAT on certain goods and services for your own use (see [www.hmrc.gov.uk/vat](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/vat)).

So you can buy a £1,000 mobility product for a disabled person, and save £175 on VAT (17.5% rate).



### Personal organiser

Once a council has agreed you need support and are eligible, they will give you a

written care plan detailing the type of care needed.

Required services, such as a day centre or alarm service, may be provided or arranged by the council.

Around half of those surveyed said they would want to organise their own care in the future. Those who are eligible could do this by getting a 'Direct Payment' from their council, which must offer eligible people money to arrange and pay for their own support services,



instead of receiving them directly from the council.

Alternatively, you could organise services privately yourself – for example, by employing a home carer through a 'domiciliary' or home care agency.

Ask if alternative schemes – such as Homeshare schemes, where a tenant lives in your home in return for giving you support – are available.

See [www.which.co.uk/care](http://www.which.co.uk/care) for more information about housing grants, benefits and social care assessments.



## TECHNOLOGY TO HER RESCUE

### Ivy Gordon,

retired housewife

When Ivy Gordon got up in the middle of the night she fell, hitting her face on a glass-topped table, which caused severe bruising and swelling.

But a piece of technology called the Supra Voice Alert System had registered her movement as she left her bed, via motion sensors, and sent a spoken message to wake her live-in carer in the next bedroom.

The equipment – which works on a similar principle to a baby alarm – was installed at no cost by Barnet Council after a

previous fall, which caused a deep brain bleed. It keeps Ivy, who has balance problems after a stroke 10 years ago, as independent as possible.

Her daughter, Sharon Davis, tells us: 'The carer was up and with her in seconds and could get emergency medical help rather than Mum lying on the floor all night. It gives us all peace of mind.'

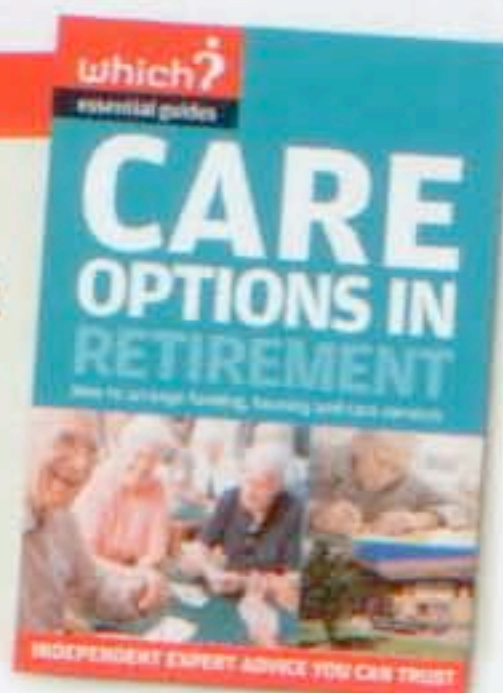
Ivy says: 'Initially I wasn't keen, but it's good for when you have a blackout and can't reach an alarm cord or summon help yourself. I feel quite unique in having this to help me.'

## MEMBER BENEFIT

### Which? books

#### Care Options in Retirement

Order your copy of *Care Options in Retirement* and pay just £9.99 including free p&p (normal price £10.99). Call 01903 828557 and quote CRW0209. Offer closes 28 February 2009.



## BECAUSE YOU CARE

Up to six million people care for others, with more than one in five looking after someone for more than 50 hours a week. We look at the support available for carers

**Q** What financial help can I get?

**A** You may be entitled to the Carer's Allowance of £50.55 per week if you spend at least 35 hours a week caring. Call the Carer's Allowance Unit on 01253 856123 (02890 906186 in Northern Ireland) or claim online at [www.dwp.gov.uk/carersallowance](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/carersallowance).

If you care for an adult with a Disabled Persons Railcard (UK, not Northern Ireland), you receive the same discount as them when travelling together.

**Q** What practical help is available?

**A** Arrange a Carer's Assessment with the council of the person you care for. You might be offered counselling, a regular respite break from caring, housework, equipment to help you, or even the cost of driving lessons. If a

cared-for person refuses care, you can arrange your own assessment to see if you can get extra help, such as a cleaner.

**Q** What are my employment rights?

**A** You have the right to request flexible working if you care for an adult who's a relative or lives with you, and have been an employee for 26 weeks. Write to your employer with a request. You're entitled to take a reasonable amount of time off to deal with an emergency involving a dependent, though this could be unpaid.

**Q** Where else can I get support?

**A** Let your GP and local council

know that you're a carer, and discuss with family and friends how they could help. You can chat to other carers at local carers' groups. Member Heather Elbourn, who cared for her husband, says: 'Use other carers for advice. I discovered a weekly carers' group where the one you cared for could be looked after in a separate room. Each week a speaker talked about an aspect of caring.'

There are several internet discussion forums, including Carers Connect, Carers UK and the

Princess Royal Trust for Carers (see contacts).

Charities offer help for carers of people with certain conditions. For instance, Admiral Nurses from charity 'For Dementia' specifically support carers.



## Contacts

**Age Concern**  
0800 009966; [www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk)

**Carers UK**  
Carers Line 0808 808 7777  
[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)

**Citizens Advice**  
[www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk)

**Counsel and Care**  
0845 300 7585  
[www.counselandcare.org.uk](http://www.counselandcare.org.uk)

**Crossroads**  
0845 450 0350; [www.crossroads.org.uk](http://www.crossroads.org.uk)

**Disabled Living Foundation**  
0845 130 9177; [www.dlf.org.uk](http://www.dlf.org.uk)

**Elderly Accommodation Counsel**  
020 7820 1343; [www.housingcare.org](http://www.housingcare.org)

**First Stop Care Advice**  
0800 377 7070  
[www.firststopcareadvice.org.uk](http://www.firststopcareadvice.org.uk)

**For Dementia**  
0845 257 9406; [www.fordementia.org.uk](http://www.fordementia.org.uk)

**Foundations, national co-ordinating body for home improvement agencies**  
01457 891909; [www.foundations.uk.com](http://www.foundations.uk.com)

**Home Improvement Trust 'Houseproud' scheme** 0800 783 7569  
[www.houseproud.org.uk](http://www.houseproud.org.uk)

**Princess Royal Trust for Carers**  
0844 800 4361; [www.carers.org](http://www.carers.org)

**Ricability**  
020 7427 2460; [www.ricability.org.uk](http://www.ricability.org.uk)

**Telecare Services Association**  
01625 520320; [www.asap-uk.org](http://www.asap-uk.org)