

“A home fire safety visit may have saved a life”

Vera

Vera was 98 years old and lived on her own in her flat. She used a walking frame to help her with moving around and she showed signs of suffering from Alzheimer's. Her health had begun to deteriorate in recent years which led to her spending a substantial amount of time in hospital and care homes. However, Vera had never settled in her placements – she was sometimes agitated and aggressive toward staff and made every effort to return to her own flat.

Due to the high level of care needed to support Vera's return to her flat, her local authority were initially reluctant to support the move. To allow Vera to move back to her own home, a night time carer was funded by her family in addition to the carers that visited Vera three times during the day.

Vera had a very restless first night back in her own home. Her carer had to lock external doors and remove door keys as Vera made several attempts to leave the flat. She had also made attempts to light the cooker and hob during the night so Vera's carers had disconnected it from its power supply to prevent misuse.

Twelve minutes after Vera's carer left the flat in the morning, London Fire Brigade received calls to a fire at Vera's address. Vera was taken to hospital suffering from smoke inhalation but succumbed to her injuries later that same day. The fire started in Vera's electric meter cupboard and was caused by a match coming into contact with clothing stored on a shelf in the cupboard. While she was being treated by paramedics, a box of matches was discovered in the sleeve of Vera's jumper. Vera didn't smoke or use candles so she had no practical need for matches and it isn't clear why she had them or why she was lighting them in her meter cupboard.

Although Vera had a monitored alarm system in her flat, it wasn't linked to a smoke alarm. In addition, the hard-wired smoke alarm in Vera's flat wasn't heard during the fire. Vera wasn't known to the Brigade, but if we had been invited to carry out a home fire safety visit as part of the risk assessment carried out to support Vera's move back to her flat, we would have been able to provide advice specific to Vera's needs.