

Developing and maintaining specialist electronic assistive technology provision in North West England

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Electronic Assistive Technology North West (EAT[NW]) was set up in 1994 as a collaboration between twenty five District Health Authorities and eight rehabilitation medicine consultants working across the five counties of North West England and their population of 6.6 million people. The Health Authorities, providing between them environmental control systems [ECS] for 536 severely disabled people, readily understood that a more effective, efficient and equitable provision was required.



From its base at the Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Liverpool, the service provided administrative and technical support to fourteen locality based rehabilitation medicine consultants, each with a range of inter-disciplinary colleagues and contacts. These networks were to prove invaluable in the identification, assessment and support of potential service users.

Environmental control systems are now more equitably available in different parts of N.W England

1995	Average availability	80/million population (range 45-110/million)
2006	Average availability	150/million population (range 81-183/million)

Equipment provided and maintained by EAT[NW]

	1995	2006
Old hard-wired ECS	413	43
Modern remote controlled ECS	123	796
Simple and smart house systems		67
Electronic communication aids and computer access systems		66
Total	536	972

EAT[NW] has grown substantially since its inception thirteen years ago.

It now employs six specialist clinical technologists, a speech and language therapist, three w.t.e. service coordinators and 0.1 w.t.e. consultant in rehabilitation medicine.

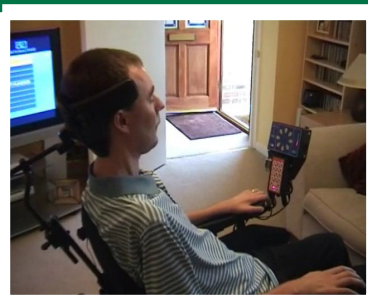
It provides and maintains equipment for 972 severely disabled users that is almost exclusively modern, remote controlled and safe.

Environmental control systems continue as its main provision. With such equipment, many people unable to manage standard remote controls become competent to safely operate electrical and electronic equipment offering comfort, entertainment and security, to make and receive telephone calls and to access computers.

Individual users display specific needs so there can be no one pattern of provision, but by considering the causation of a user's disability, it is usually possible to anticipate future requirements and to provide equipment that can be modified appropriately at a later date.

The cost of installing an environmental control system averages some £3,500 and there are on-going support costs of around £500 per annum. There is therefore advantage in identifying those for whom the modification of standard domestic or workplace technology is practical and safe. Additionally with many potential users now being computer literate, there is increased demand for specialist computer access software. This costs around £400, but can prove more suitable and far less costly than older technologies.

Ian has motor neurone disease. He is very dependent and has no speech. He has minimal head movement to the right and minimal flexion in the left forefinger.



With switches for head and left forefinger operation, he can safely manage his electric wheelchair with his ECS and specialist software can send text access the Internet, television channels door.

Disabling conditions requiring equipment provision as a percentage of service users

	1995	2006
Multiple sclerosis	29	25
Spinal cord injury and disease	18	14
Cerebral palsy	17	21
Muscular dystrophy and spinal muscular atrophy	15	13
Motor neurone disease	5	5
Cerebro-vascular disease and brain injury	4	9
Friedreich's ataxia and cerebellar disorders	2	3
Other	10	10

The ready availability of EAT[NW]'s equipment, professional advice and support, enables many people with profound levels of disability to attain and maintain a degree of independence.

Although focussed initially on the timely, cost-effective provision and maintenance of environmental control systems, the service now offers communication aids, computer based technologies and smart house systems in addition to an extensive programme of education and training.

Established users and those seeking advice on provision are encouraged to contact the service and satisfaction surveys consistently highlight its impact and that of its equipment upon the quality of life experienced by both users and carers. All appreciate the ready availability of reliable advice, help and technical support from competent, experienced personnel.

In a rapidly changing health and social care environment, EAT[NW] has adopted a positive, pro-active approach, liaising closely with The Skills Council, with specialist commissioners and with health, social service, charity and voluntary sector personnel.

It recognises the need to work with a wide range of disciplines and organisations and is presently discussing how to develop further its commitments to communication aid and computer access technology.

Funding

EAT[NW] is funded jointly by twenty four Primary Care Trusts [PCT] – each contributing in proportion to its population.

An average PCT serving 250,000 people currently contributes £42,000 to the service's annual budget. In return that PCT can expect an average of eleven new system installations and support for forty existing service users throughout the year.

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Reference

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