SSCR Scoping Review: The role of the third sector in delivering social care

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Third sector providers have been important in the delivery of social care services for some time. Long before the advent of the 'contract culture' that started to emerge in the 1980s, third sector organisations have been involved in the delivery of what we would today define as social care. But this role is changing as the personalisation agenda takes hold and there is a push for closer integration between health and social care services within a context of constrained financial resources.

Although a number of researchers have written on the subject of social care delivery by third sector agencies, there is no single account of the state of knowledge in the area or a clear account of the research agenda for the future. This review was designed to address this and is organised around the following objectives:

- to review the significant contributions to the academic policy and practice literatures in order that we might establish the existing state of knowledge in terms of the third sector in delivering social care in England;
- to conduct semi-structured interviews with a number of key contacts to verify challenges identified from literature and assist in horizon scanning;
- to identify the research agenda, including an indication of the main questions to be studied and the types of studies that might be needed to address them.

This was not a formal systematic review of the literature, but the literature review sought to be as comprehensive as possible in drawing together the significant contributions to this area. The 1990 NHS and Community Care Act brought far reaching changes for social care, and given that this point in time meant such significant change for social care and consequently third sector organisations operating in this area, we start our review at 1990 and have only included items which have been published since this date.

A search was conducted of relevant databases and a snowballing technique adapted alongside a call out to the Voluntary Sector Studies Network requesting relevant materials. In total 91 articles were identified that met the inclusion criteria. Items were included where they focused on English adult social care services and they made some mention of the role of third sector organisations. Items were excluded from the review where they did not focus on social care or the third sector or where they were principally concerned with children's services.

The literature review was complemented by eight semi-structured interviews with leading individuals from academia, policy and practice. These interviews were designed to test out existing findings but also to complement the largely retrospective research base with some prospective perspectives of what the future challenges would be for third sector organisations involved in delivering social care.

Findings are set out in the review in relation to the themes of: approaches to research in third sector and social care; the distinctiveness of the third sector in delivering social care; relationships with commissioners of social care; and the role of volunteers. These were the main areas of discussion within the literature, although the evidence base relating to these different themes is far from conclusive, with these providing a basis for debate rather than robust evidence.

Many of the items we retrieved as part of this review were not robustly designed research projects in good quality peer-reviewed journals, with those retrieved being either pieces from the trade press, policy documents or pieces published by particular bodies with an interest in this area. Even when articles appeared in academic journals they were often discussion pieces or did not go into much detail as to what process had been gone through to generate the evidence set out in the article.

In general we found a limited range of methodological approaches within existing research studies and a failure to theorise key concepts and critically challenge previous work. Clearly there were exceptions to this rule and there were some well-designed and in depth pieces but on the whole this is not an area which seems to have suffered from overresearch.

The overall conclusion from this review is that there is a relative lack of robust research relating to the role of third sector organisations in delivering social care services. This is despite the long history of this role and its growing, and changing, importance in recent and current policy contexts.

There are significant gaps in the approaches to researching the third sector and social care. There is a theoretical lacuna in the literature. There is a need to clarify the different organisational forms involved in the delivery of social care and to explore the different roles that third sector organisations have played in delivering services and campaigning.

There is also a significant empirical lacuna – in particular there needs to be a better mix of research methods employed in investigating this area. The use of large-scale quantitative data sets in this area has been rare. However, these are needed to provide a quantitative picture of the current scale and spread of third sector organisations involved in social care at a national and regional level.

Comparative study of the third sector is required in order to determine the degree to which the third sector is distinctive across a range of different parameters. There has also been little research on the use of volunteers in delivery of social care within third sector organisations and the particular (added) value that volunteers bring. Qualitative research with volunteers and case study analysis of their involvement in delivery of services could provide important new evidence about the potential for, and the challenges of, voluntary contribution.

Read the full scoping review (PDF).

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