

Research and policy: Never the twain shall meet?

Jo Moriarty, a Research Fellow at the *Social Care Workforce Research Unit* at King's College London and *SSCR* Fellow, spoke at the Greenwich Pensioners Forum at Woolwich Town Hall on 26 October 2012. She talked about some of the issues relating to the government's plans for care and support services and how research must be used to inform these plans.

"We all want to live a full and active life, to live independently and to play an active part in our local communities. Supporting people to live this way is a central ambition of the Coalition Government. It is also the purpose of this White Paper."

This opening line of the July 2012 White Paper *Caring for Our Future* sets the stage for reform of the care and support system. For these reforms to be successful as researchers we must find a way to get our voices heard so that our research can positively affect the Government's care and support plans.

Three areas of the government's plans for care and support that would benefit from insights gathered from research are:

- Personal budgets and direct payments
- Promoting independence and wellbeing to avoid people needing support at time of crisis
- Need for better information.

"Empowering people to take control through personal budgets and direct payments"

The White Paper sets out a vision of giving people who need care services more control over their care through personal budgets or direct payments and allowing them to choose providers best equipped to support their individual needs.

So what does the research say?

On the whole, research has found that personal budgets do improve the quality of life for most service users, as they feel more in control of their care (Glendinning *et al.* 2008).

However, a more in depth look at research evidence shows that the effects of personal budgets are less positive for older people who require more help arranging and managing them (Moran *et al.* 2012). Results from the National Personal Budget Survey by Hatton and Waters (2011) found that councils were less likely to promote and support direct payments as a personal budget option for older people. This resulted in reduced satisfaction, as older people were less likely to know the exact size of their budget and did not feel involved in their support plan.

In light of statistics showing that 55% of the gross current expenditure on adult personal social services goes to those aged 65 and over (The Information Centre 2012), it is clearly imperative that we use research findings to develop ways to support older people with personal budgets and direct payments to ensure they lead to the purchase of effective and appropriate care.

"The focus of care and support will be to promote people's wellbeing and independence instead of waiting for people to reach a crisis point"

Integration is a topic that seems to go in and out of fashion. The White Paper aims to increase the integration of services in a way that will ensure those involved in the care and support system will be supported to maintain their wellbeing and independence. We need to ensure the existing

extensive research evidence base on what works best in integration is utilised in achieving this aim.

One of the purposes of integration should be to avoid people ‘falling between two stools’ in terms of the support they receive. Services must provide flexible support to those who require dynamic care. Research should be used in the development of consistent eligibility criteria that would help people to access the services they need.

Another aspect of ‘crisis avoidance’ that must be explored is the health and wellbeing of family carers. Most carers are aged 65 and over, and the majority of people accessing services are older. It is therefore important for us to use available research on older people when planning for increased independence and wellbeing. The plans for new rights to assessments and eligibility rights to support must be mindful that the majority of those entitled to access that support are older and may require additional/flexible support.

“Better national and local information will help people to understand the options available to them and help them to plan and prepare for their care and support”

The White Paper states that better information is crucial in enabling people to make informed decisions about care providers. The majority of research seems to suggest that people do not know very much about social care services until they need to use them.

The Government supports this aim through the development of websites that will allow those who use services to provide feedback and user ratings directly to providers and commissioners about good or poor quality care.

However we can also see evidence of a digital divide. Research indicates that only 60% of people aged 65-74 have ever used the internet and this drops to less than 30% for those aged 75 and above (ONS 2012). Thus there is a challenge for organisations such as pensioner forums to share information with other older people to tackle this digital divide.

“So looking to the future, our biggest priority must be to transform what we offer to meet the challenge of an ageing population” (Jeremy Hunt, Speech at the Conservative Party Conference)

It is important for us to be mindful in the planned reforms of the care and support system that the majority of people who make up that system are older. We must therefore use the research that is available to us to ensure the system is user friendly and effective for that group to ensure the success of the system and improve quality of life for older people.

References

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