

Learning from older community care clients

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RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM THE
SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH UNIT

SPRU

THE UNIVERSITY *of* York

NOVEMBER 2000

How can Social Services learn directly from older people about the outcomes of community services and what service developments are needed? Increasingly home care services are concentrating on people who are very frail and very old. Many service users cannot travel to focus groups and they may face physical difficulties in completing postal questionnaires. This project tested a consultation method which could suit such individuals and which had been suggested by older community care clients themselves. Home interviews with a small random cross-section of older community care clients were conducted by senior Social Services managers, who were older people's preference for interviewers. The project was conducted jointly by SPRU and Bradford Social Services Elderly Division. Findings were:

- Home interviews could successfully engage very old and frail people. Half the interviewees were aged over 85 years.
- Social Services managers could conduct these interviews well. They often valued the experience and were keen to continue.
- Important benefits arose from using senior managers as interviewers. Often they took rapid action on problems revealed by an interview. Sometimes this could benefit many clients besides the interviewee.
- The interview programme could generate recommendations about specific problems in existing services and about new services which needed to be developed. It could identify differences between catchment areas within the same service.
- Further development of these methods is warranted. Swifter, simpler methods for analysis and reporting need to be sought. Additional uses of managers as interviewers or investigators are worth exploring.

Background

Earlier research in Bradford had explored the views of older community care users about how Social Services should gather feedback from people like themselves. There was a preference for home interviews. These were seen as much more accessible to frail older people than methods which required travel, like focus groups, or the sight and writing ability necessary for postal questionnaires. Also, home interviews would enable older people to have their say in their own words. This preliminary research itself encountered difficulties in involving people aged over 80 in focus groups, whereas they readily participated in home interviews.

Asked who should conduct such interviews, older service users widely favoured senior managers of their own services – to the surprise of both researchers and Social Services. Reasons are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Why older people wished senior managers as interviewers

- Older people would reach directly the real decision-makers and could show them, in their own homes, their everyday problems.
- It would show care and concern if senior managers troubled to investigate personally the outcomes of the services which they headed.
- If senior managers invested their time in the interviews, this showed it was not a token consultation.

Project aims

The aim was to test an interview programme designed to inspire local service development through identifying typical outcomes of current services for older people. A small, randomly selected cross-section of 30 older community care clients received home interviews from senior managers at two Area Offices.

Findings

Reaching very old or frail people

These home interviews succeeded in reaching very old and frail people. Half the interviewees were aged over 85 years. Many suffered serious disabling conditions. Many rarely or never left their homes. Generally interviewees participated well in the interview procedure employed, though sometimes it needed to be shortened. It proved possible to reach samples of interviewees which matched in age and gender the Home Care clientele which they represented.

Managers as interviewers

The managers proved effective interviewers. Their experience of frail older people helped them to handle confidently some unexpected situations. Their experience and knowledge of Social Services enabled them to make judgements and explore issues where an independent researcher might have lacked background knowledge.

At the end of the interview programme all the managers expressed willingness to conduct further interviews. This was despite widespread initial reservations that they could not afford the time. All had enjoyed conducting their interviews. One factor was that random selection of interviewees meant they met some clients who praised Social Services and described much benefit from the care which they had received. Normally, some managers commented, staff of their seniority only met clients when services were failing or being criticised. These interviews showed them their successes as well and some managers felt the fundamental purpose and value of their work was confirmed for them. Some managers felt the interviews had helpfully reminded them of everyday realities among their services' users. Some had gained insights into the importance of particular issues.

A noteworthy consequence of using managers as interviewers was the

interventions which some made on their own initiative as a result of an interview. It had been agreed that, while information gathering was the purpose of the interviews, the interviewers could nevertheless intervene if ever they felt their managerial responsibilities required this. Typical interventions were referrals for additional services or investigations into problems. Most interesting were some interventions which seemed likely to benefit many other service users besides the interviewees who had inspired them. For instance an intervention concerning safety measures at a sheltered housing complex would cover all residents, not just the interviewee who had complained. Likewise examinations of the quality of Meals on Wheels or a day centre's activity programme could benefit many service users besides the interviewees who prompted them. Had the interviewers not been managers senior enough to investigate any Social Services resource or to approach other agencies, such direct interventions would be most unlikely.

The interview schedule

The interview schedule was designed to collect information about older people's lives as a whole, as well as comment on existing services, so that it could generate ideas about what service developments were needed. It was not limited to evaluating services which were already provided. One section examined how satisfactory the interviewee found their current circumstances in the 12 areas of daily living listed in Figure 2. These areas reflected concerns expressed by older people during preliminary research.

Interviewers recorded an interviewee's opinion on a rating scale, plus the reasons for this opinion and relevant sources of help in that area of life, be it Social Services, family, friends or neighbours.

A second component was sets of questions concerning the effects and

Figure 2
12 areas of daily living reviewed

- Meals / refreshment
- Shopping
- Laundry
- House cleaning
- Household repairs / decoration / gardening
- Swift access to help in emergency
- Feeling safe from crime and nuisance
- Managing with money, bills, pensions, benefits and legal matters
- Personal care
- Getting out of the house
- Social life
- Sources of interest in everyday life.

Figure 3
Interview topics about services

- Home Care
- Day centres
- Other significant social care services
- Care following any recent hospital discharges
- Views of any family carer present
- Any additional help sought from Social Services, other Council Services or Health Service
- Rating of satisfactoriness of help received from Social Services.

satisfactoriness of each service received by the interviewee – see Figure 3.

A final component was a set of questions which the interviewer completed on their own afterwards, requiring them to evaluate what they had just heard. Interviewers' notes were collated and analysed to produce a report on the 30 interviews conducted.

The resulting report was able to make 16 recommendations. Some recommendations concerned specific

issues in existing services. Others concerned the development of new services to meet unmet needs. The interview records could identify important differences between the experiences of interviewees in the two different catchment areas from which they were drawn.

Some findings from the interview programme

While many findings from the interview programmes were specific to the local context, the following findings may have wider relevance.

If interviewees were depressed, distressed or had low morale, it seemed hard for them to experience benefit from standard types of Social Services help which other interviewees found satisfactory. Interviewees with low morale or depression tended to rate many aspects of their circumstances and services as unsatisfactory. Serving such individuals appeared a challenge. Fresh approaches, which address their low morale, seem worth exploring.

A related challenge was how to respond to older people facing circumstances known to create risk of depression – like disabling physical illnesses, especially for people who are also isolated. Many interviewees were experiencing mobility difficulties, which could limit social contacts, or loss of vision or manual dexterity, which could rob them of their valued leisure activities. A minority were isolated. Some interviewees appeared to triumph over such circumstances, whereas others did not. There seemed a case for help which specifically addresses the consequences of disabling health conditions – whether practical help, like help with mobility, or social support for isolated older people facing disabling illness on their own.

Many Social Services Departments have been successfully developing

services which can meet physical survival needs so that older people can remain in their own homes despite severe disabilities. A new priority may be the emotional and social needs of the same individuals.

Limitations and difficulties

A key issue is whether this interview programme can generate findings which can be implemented by management. At the time of writing, the report from the interview programme has only recently been submitted so it is not yet known whether recommendations will be implemented.

The reporting process used in this first test of the interview programme was too time-consuming for routine use. A streamlined approach needs to be developed. In particular, methods need to be explored for involving the manager interviewers in the analysis and report production process. Such an element should augment the persuasiveness of the resulting report.

Since this was an initial test of the interview programme, some key functions like random selection of interviewees, analysis of interview notes and production of the report were conducted by SPRU. For routine use by Social Services, these would need to be undertaken either by the interviewer teams themselves or by a central section. Successful transfer of these functions has yet to be attempted. The care required in planning this should not be underestimated.

The interview schedule needs to be used flexibly. As mentioned, for a minority of interviewees it may need to be shortened appreciably.

During this interview programme, to spread the burden of interviewing, slightly more managers participated than was intended. The two most senior managers were unable to afford as much time as hoped. An ideal for such programmes might be assigning interviewees so that each interviewer sees at least four interviewees, so as

not to be over-influenced by one or two individuals. The most senior managers need to participate – and in the same number of interviews as other interviewers.

Implications

This interview programme

This particular interview programme seems a promising means for reaching the views of Social Services' older community care clients and thus deriving guidance for local policy and service development. However, as mentioned, its routine practical usefulness to Social Services does depend on some factors yet to be tested. Perhaps the most important is devising a convenient procedure whereby Social Services manager / interviewers can analyse and report back from these interviews.

This interview programme could be used to guide service commissioners, as in the test described here. But it could also be used by a provider service, whether Social Services or Independent Sector, to gain ideas for improving client satisfaction or developing new types of services.

This interview programme has potential to yield inspiration for years of service development. Thus it is for occasional use, not annual repetition with the same population.

It is important to recognise what these small sample interview programmes can and cannot do. They can identify important issues but they cannot quantify need, like a survey. They are not an alternative to monitoring services through a review system.

Other interview programmes by Social Services managers

There also seems a case for developing other structured interview programmes by Social Services managers, as a routine method whereby managers can appraise or investigate issues for themselves. There seemed important

benefits in terms of the insights some managers felt they gained and the interventions swiftly made by some managers in response to interviews. Managers might benefit from instruction how to design interview schedules or select interviewees methodically, so that they could design and operate for themselves various different interview programmes as a routine management tool.

Methods

During 1999 a programme of in-depth, qualitative home interviews was conducted with 30 older users of Bradford's community social services. The aim was to learn from the experience of service users so as to improve services. Interviews were conducted by senior managers at the Area Offices responsible for the interviewees' services. Two Social Services Area Offices were involved and 11 managers participated.

Interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour 50 minutes; mean duration was 1 hour and 10 minutes. Interviewees' ages ranged from 66 to 95 years with a mean of 83 years. Almost all used Home Care. Some also used day centres and other services.

Stratified random samples were used to represent people receiving different frequencies of Home Care visits. Steps were taken to represent age, gender and duration of service among base populations. Interviewers' notes were analysed by SPRU, which then produced a report to Social Services containing feedback and recommendations.

The interview programme was evaluated by telephone interviews with the Social Services managers who acted as interviewers. This was conducted by SPRU in an independent exercise.

The SPRU Outcomes Programme was funded by the Department of Health; the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department.

Further information

The following are available from SPRU's Information Office. Please contact Lindsey Myers, Information Officer, on 01904 433608 or email spruinfo@york.ac.uk for further information.

The following *Research Works* summarise work undertaken by the Outcomes Programme:

Introducing an outcome focus into care management and user surveys

Outcomes and assessment with older people

Briefing home care staff about older people's individual needs

Learning from older community care clients

Implementing an outcomes approach to carer assessment and review

Evaluating the outcomes of social care using postal questionnaires

All *Research Works* are also published on SPRU's website: www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/research_works.htm

Recent work of the Outcomes Programme is reported in the *Outcomes in Community Care Practice Series*.

Number 5 *Overview: Outcomes of social care for older people and carers* by Hazel Qureshi, Charles Patmore, Elinor Nicholas and Claire Bamford, £4.00

Number 6 *Outcomes of social care for disabled people and carers* by Claire Bamford, Hazel Qureshi, Elinor Nicholas and Ayesha Vernon, £4.00

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