

RESEARCH INTO *practice*

News from The Scottish Office about research in social work and social care

March 1999

Strengthening professionalism

This newsletter is the first of a bi-monthly series that will provide you with signposts to research findings which might find a reflection in your work.

Social work and social care services in Scotland are changing and will continue to change with the coming of the Scottish Parliament and the establishment of new, independent regulatory bodies.

There is widespread support, not least from the Government, for strengthening the professionalism of social work and social

A message
from Angus
Skinner, Chief
Inspector of
Social Work
in Scotland



care services, and the evidence bases for what we offer.

Ministers are keen to see rapid implementation in practice of the lessons learned from research.

Each of us has a responsibility to

respond to these opportunities in the interests of the people who use our services.

To give you fast, easy access to new research findings, we have arranged with the National Institute for Social Work for its Caredata database to be made available to every social worker in Scotland via the Internet. From 1 April, this will bring the latest information about social work research in Scotland – and elsewhere – right to your desk.



Evaluation of the National User Involvement Project

The National User Involvement Project was carried out by national user consultants working in co-operation with joint commissioners, local organisations of disabled people and users of community services. One of its major achievements was a further move towards the perception of disabled people less as service users than as experts to be consulted.

The project aimed to extend the range of service users involved in commissioning decisions to include members of ethnic minorities, older service users and people receiving services following hospital discharge. People with learning difficulties and mental health service users were included.

The evaluation found that many commissioners were still unaware of key aspects of

facilitating user involvement, such as ensuring wheelchair access, providing information in appropriate formats, and the way cultural and religious needs might affect the involvement of people from minority ethnic communities.

Even after the project, people using services were typically involved at the general planning level rather than at the points of decision-making in commissioning. Service users needed a range of support and training in order to be fully involved in decision-making.

The researcher concludes that experienced user consultants can help local groups involve a wider range of people using services if the work is well planned in advance, undertaken in full partnership with local organisations of disabled people and if systems are in place to continue the work afterwards.

◆ More details from Dr Vivien Lindow; 0117 942 5278; email: vivien@lindow.demon.co.uk

Young carers missing part of their education

One in five young carers are missing some of their schooling and 28% display some kind of educational difficulty, new research shows.

A survey for the Carers' National Association identified 2,303 children aged 18 or under who were in touch with 69 young carers' projects. The projects provided data on the young carers and a 1% sample were then interviewed in depth.

Young carers supported by the projects were on average 12 years old. Tasks included domestic chores, undertaken by most, and personal intimate care, undertaken by a fifth. Girls, 57% of the sample, were more likely to be involved in domestic and personal care. The gender of the person being supported, and availability of other carers in the family, affected the likelihood of the child adopting a caring role. Most young carers support a par-

ent, 58% of recipients being mothers. In lone parent families, 76% support ill or disabled mothers, in the absence of another adult. Twelve per cent of the sample support more than one person.

Only a minority of the young carers had their own needs assessed: neither age, gender, ethnicity or caring tasks affected the likelihood of this happening. Most were unaware they had been assessed, and few had been actively involved.

Those caring for someone with mental health problems, missing school or in lone parent families were most likely to have an assessment.

◆ Young carers in the United Kingdom: a profile; C. Dearden and S. Becker, Carers National Association, 1998; 0171 490 8818

Older people want a say in decisions about support

Older people attach great value to being able to decide for themselves about the support they need.

Research carried out in two Scottish cities found that health and social services were not always providing enough information and contact to allow older people to make these decisions. Users of social services were often unsure about what extra help was available. The experiences they described suggested an inconsistent approach to assessment and monitoring of their support needs on the part of both social services and primary care teams.

The targeting of statutory services means they now focus on providing care for older people with high levels of complex needs – personal rather than domestic help. Lack of housework and regular social contact is not seen as top priority by social work.

Low level preventive services bring contact with the formal network of service provision and at least the possibility of engaging more support when it is needed. The research found that voluntary, community based groups were often

able to provide that essential level of support. Restricted funding for such groups and the shift away from domestic help by social services could deny many older people the opportunity to live independently with adequate support.

◆ Views of older people about their needs and access to support; C. MacDonald; forthcoming: more details from Social Work Research Centre, University of Stirling; 01786 467724

Easing the return to the family home

Although the majority of children looked after by local authorities go back to their families, little is known about the process. This study looks at the children's return experiences and considers how professionals and carers can make the transition as easy as possible.

It takes forward ideas first reported in *Going Home: the return of children separated from their families*, which looked at the experiences of 875 children. The new study charts patterns of separation and return, and considers the experiences of those involved. As an aid to practice, it includes checklists of factors associated with the likelihood of return and its

success, such as the age of the child, the type of family, the length of time spent away from home and the quality of social work. It raises, for example, the complex issues surrounding children returning to their old school after being looked after by the local authority and considers what social workers can do to ease the transition.

◆ Children going home: the reunification of families; Roger Bullock, Daniel Gooch and Michael Little; Dartington Social Research Series; November 1998; £30

Complaining about complaints procedures

Research into complaints procedures in five authorities in Yorkshire and North East England has highlighted young people's feelings of powerlessness and lack of involvement in decision making.

The research explored how procedures could be made more responsive to the needs of young people and suggests that new ways of complaining other than complaints forms may need to be found for young people in care.

It analysed 264 complaints and interviewed staff and young people in foster care, respite care, residential care and secure accommodation. Although practice varied between authorities, patterns of awareness among young people were similar: 93% of those in

residential care were aware of the complaints procedure, compared to only 20% of young people in foster care. None of those with disabilities said they knew about the procedure.

A very low proportion of complaints came from those in foster care: they were more isolated, and lacked information and support, apart from that provided by their foster carers. They were afraid that if they complained they might be removed from the family into residential care.

Young people said they would prefer to make complaints to those who visited them, and would like to see someone regularly, rather than having to complain in writing. Many had no access to private phones.

Some young people were unclear what was happening during the investigation of their complaint.

◆ Cause for complaint: the complaints procedure for young people in care; Lorraine Wallis and Nick Frost; Children's Society, 1998; Edward Rudolf House, Margery Street, London WC1X 0JL; ISBN 1 899783 12

Learning difficulties and ageing carers

As their life expectancy increases, a growing proportion of adults with learning difficulties will continue to live with – and outlive – very elderly family members, usually parents.

Impact of bail supervision

An evaluation of two pilot bail supervision schemes shows they successfully targeted people who would otherwise have been remanded in custody and they contributed to reduced breach of bail. It found that detailed assessment is important in identifying suitability for supervised bail.

The schemes have been piloted in Glasgow and Edinburgh Sheriff courts and are now permanent. Accused at risk of remand in Glasgow or on remand in Edinburgh were assessed by bail officers and had to attend regular appointments while on supervised bail. As well as supervision, they were given practical advice on matters like housing and finance.

Most people referred to the schemes had a history of breaching bail (82% in Glasgow and 73% in Edinburgh).

A higher proportion of supervised bailees in Glasgow were charged with further offences during their release – 40% compared with only 18% in Edinburgh. Accused on the Glasgow scheme tended to be younger and faced less serious charges than those in Edinburgh.

Overall, younger accused were more likely to breach their supervised bail, though most supervised bailees were not charged with further offences during their bail.

◆ Evaluation of experimental bail supervision schemes; Ewen McCaig and Jeremy Hardin; The Stationery Office; £6

A review of research, policy and practice has found that the failure of services to adjust to the changing situation in the family home means that the life of the person with learning difficulties becomes more restricted while the burden on the family carer becomes more onerous precisely at the time when their ability to cope is diminishing.

Older family carers are under greater physical and mental pressure because of their age and frailty, and they become increasingly anxious about the future. But they are often reluctant to seek help.

The research concludes that very basic, practical help and information are required. In addition, the independent sector needs to look at the way it works with older family carers and, in particular, at the extent to which they are accepted as equal partners in the provision of support to their relatives.

◆ **Uncertain futures: people with learning difficulties and their ageing family carers;** Carol Walker and Alan Walker; Pavillion Publishing/Joseph Rowntree Foundation; ISBN 1 900600 90 0; £12.95

Unsuitable housing and disabled children

The first in-depth study of the impact of housing on the lives of disabled children and their families, carried out by researchers at York University, has found three quarters of them live in housing that is unsuitable in one or more ways. The research concludes that social services professionals need to be more aware of the impact of unsuitable housing.

Four families out of ten reported that their housing was poor. Unsuitable housing affected families with children with a wide range of impairments, not just physical disabilities.

The research was based on 250 families in the North of England, 40 of whom were interviewed in depth. Families said their housing problems made the task of caring harder and contributed to their high stress levels. Parents felt they would have needed fewer support services if their homes had been more suitable.

The children in the study wanted to be independent in their self-care, and wanted more privacy.

Lack of resources and shortage of good advice constrained those families who wanted to adapt their homes. Referral, assessment, and funding processes were fragmented and hard to understand. The families in the study spent a lot of their own money trying to address their housing difficulties.

Just over a third of the families had made changes to their homes and there was a high incidence of moving house: 60% of families had moved since their disabled child was born.

Families which had carried out adaptations often found the process problematic. Many of the families which received public sector funding felt that professionals did not understand their needs. Some felt they had reluctantly agreed to adaptations which gave their homes a hospital-like feel.

◆ **Homes unfit for children: housing, disabled children and their families;** Christine Oldman and Bryony Beresford; The Policy Press/JRF/Community Care

The Scottish Office is keen to publicise recent, relevant research about social work. If you know about such work, please send details to The Scottish Office Central Research Unit, Room 53, James Craig Walk, Edinburgh EH1 3BA. Mark your envelope 'Research into Practice'.

RESEARCH INTO practice is published by The Scottish Office every two months as a contribution to good practice and debate within the profession. It can be freely photocopied. Extra copies can be ordered from The Scottish Office Central Research Unit, Room 53, James Craig Walk, Edinburgh EH1 3BA. Tel: 0131 244 5397. Fax: 0131 244 5393.

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