

Measuring the Impact of Supporting People: A Scoping Review

Research Summary

Social research

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The 2010 Aylward Review of recommended the review of outcomes measurement and monitoring of Supporting People projects. This scoping study was designed to inform the range, methodology and research questions of a large scale assessment of the impacts of Supporting People across Wales.

The research was carried out between April and September 2012.

Methods

The scoping study explored the Supporting People provision through contacting local authorities and also surveyed service providers. Existing outcome monitoring and impact assessment systems developed both within and outside Wales were also reviewed.

Key findings

1. When the data collection took place between April and September 2012, the research found that there were inconsistencies in how Supporting People projects were defined, classified and recorded by different local authorities and service providers. Some issues appeared linked to the presence of two funding streams and three sets of service commissioning arrangements in operation at the time which did not share recording systems. Wales has now moved to a single funding stream for Supporting People.
2. At the time of the research collecting definitive data on Supporting People projects proved difficult. It was found to not be possible to entirely accurately map Supporting People projects. Data sources on services were sometimes inconsistent and there was some fluidity in data definitions and commissioning arrangements, such as the use of flexible commissioning. However, it was possible to establish a broad picture of the nature and extent of Supporting People projects at local authority and national level.

3. Key points from the data collection were as follows (all points relate to the snapshot date of 30th April 2012):
- Supporting People projects were mainly focused on older people (75% of units).
 - Many of the units in Supporting People services for older people appeared to be in relatively low intensity services, such as community alarm schemes.
 - Services most commonly provided for other client groups included those for people with learning difficulties (9% of units), homeless people (4%) and people with mental health problems (4%).
 - There was quite high use of flexible commissioning arrangements, with some authorities having arrangements that had meant they had a flexible number of Supporting People units available.
 - Nearly 1 in 10 units funded by Supporting People were 'generic' units, designed to support a wide range of client groups.
 - Floating support was widely used for some groups. For

example, 69% of units for homeless people were floating support delivered to people living in the community, rather than direct access, hostel or supported housing units. By contrast, 90% of units for older people were housing with a community alarm or sheltered housing.

4. Existing classifications of project types and Supporting People client groups appeared to not fully reflect the diversity of Supporting People projects and service users.
5. The sampling and the focus of a main evaluation would need to ensure that the relatively smaller numbers of projects that were not designed to work exclusively with older people were represented. In addition, there would be a need to ensure the relatively smaller numbers of people whose 'lead needs' (client groups) included domestic violence, homelessness, learning difficulties, physical disabilities and various other groups were well represented in an

- evaluation of Supporting People outcomes.
6. Sampling for any main evaluation of Supporting People projects may have to take account of both current and future commissioning patterns. For example, lower intensity services for older people were relatively common in 2012, if this pattern were to change sampling for a main evaluation would need to be modified.
 7. The scoping study included an exploration of the kinds of data held by service providers on service users. Knowledge of the nature of data collection by service providers was useful in exploring the extent to which a possible main evaluation of Supporting People would require new data collection and how far it could draw upon data already being collected by service providers.
 8. Data collection by service providers was extensive, but also inconsistent in the sense that they used a mix of data collection systems, some of which were unique. There was good data on basic demographics, but service providers were less likely to collect data on other characteristics, such as religion and sexuality.
 9. Outcomes data collection by service providers was also extensive, but was not standardised as it reflected the different needs of different groups of service users and the different goals of Supporting People project providers. Data on costs were also widely collected, but again the approaches used were varied.
 10. A possible 'main evaluation' of Supporting People at national level would be taking place in a context where service providers were well used to outcome monitoring, although, at the time of the research, capacity to collect further outcome data was limited, which meant service providers could not necessarily provide all the data on Supporting People impacts that might be required.
 11. The findings on outcomes and impact data collected by service providers suggested that at the time of the study, their data

collection was too diverse, specific and also sometimes too limited to enable it to be used to assess the impact of Supporting People at local and national level. Separate outcomes and impact monitoring and evaluation would be required.

12. There was longitudinal outcome monitoring by some service providers (the tracking of service users over time to see if positive service outcomes were sustained). However, this was relatively unusual and did not use a single standard approach.
13. The views of service providers on responding to data requests from service commissioners were mixed. Overall, 44% of service providers called data reporting 'time consuming' and 23% reported it was 'difficult to relate to our services'. Housing associations tended to have more negative views on reporting requirements.
14. The scoping study reviewed existing monitoring systems for Supporting People projects and also included a review of monitoring systems used in Scotland and England. While

housing support services have long been in existence, Supporting People itself is a relatively recent programme and one that is now developing in very different ways across the different UK nations. The review of existing monitoring of Supporting People outcomes found that existing measures were arguably still underdeveloped. Clarity in service definition, clear and validated outcome measurement, the trustworthiness of data and the levels of precision in existing outcome measurement were all concerns in relation to existing outcome monitoring systems.

15. Cost benefit analysis of Supporting People project outcomes is still in its infancy. However, there may be lessons from the field of Health Economics which can be employed in the future evaluation of Supporting People project outcomes.
16. Data collection on service users' experiences and views of services is generally underdeveloped. Beyond

outcome monitoring, large scale sample surveys, including longitudinal surveys, can be used. There are some challenges in getting a representative sample because some Supporting People user groups, particularly older people, greatly outnumber others.

17. A combination of enhanced outcome monitoring and detailed service evaluations would increase understanding of the outcomes and cost benefits of Supporting People projects. Detailed service evaluations should be experimental or quasi-experimental, which means they must be precise, comparative and longitudinal, requiring quite significant resources. However, providing these evaluations are of widely used service models (or new service models that are being considered) they can be generally applicable and help inform policy planning and commissioning decisions. Enhanced outcome monitoring can give a good overall picture of service outcomes and the cost effectiveness of Supporting People, though again there are

resource implications if existing outcome monitoring systems are to be reviewed.

18. A large scale longitudinal statistical sample survey would generate useful data. However, there are challenges centred on the extent to which existing service provision is both simultaneously focused on older people and also at the same time quite diverse in terms of how it supports various client groups and in the range of different groups supported. There is scope to run two surveys, one focused on older people and one on other groups, but this would be expensive and the data on any one service type and any one client group would be limited, even if the sample were large.

19. A sample survey approach is not recommended. There are issues with obtaining a truly representative sample and with describing a complex array of projects and diversity of Supporting People service users with the relatively 'thin' data a sample survey would generate. There is too much risk that a

large sample survey would only 'skim the surface' of Supporting People while at the same time being expensive to undertake.

20. Alternative lower cost evaluative methodologies can be used to assess Supporting People impacts. Relatively large scale qualitative longitudinal work, which follows people using Supporting People projects and explores the outcomes for them over time, could generate useful and detailed data and help provide a 'voice' for Supporting People project users. In addition, observational approaches can be used for service evaluation.

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