Caring for older people - has the Carers Strategy made a difference?

All Wales Alliance for Research & Development
Bangor University

For further information please contact:
Diane Seddon (d.seddon@bangor.ac.uk)

Funded by the Wales Office of Research & Development
Carer research programme

Three core aims:

- Improve our understanding of the experiences & support needs of carers.

- Inform the development & implementation of the Carers Strategies in England & Wales.

- Strengthen the links between research & practice.

- Collaborations with statutory and independent sector organizations, as well as carers.
Carers Strategy in Wales - Aims

- Empower carers by giving them greater control over the range, nature & timing of services.

- Mobilise community support to carers & give them a break.

- Respond to the diversity of caring contexts.
A Study of the Carers Strategy in Wales: aims & objectives

- Explore carer experiences of the process & outcomes of carer assessment.
- Highlight good practice in carer assessment & service delivery.
- Infer whether the Carers Strategy has been successful in promoting a wider range of services to carers in Wales.

Funded by the Wales Office of Research & Development
Method

- Multi-method approach:
  - Three postal surveys of carers \( n=387; n=310; n=160 \)
  - Two sets of in-depth interviews with carers, set 20 months apart \( n=107; n=76 \)
  - Two sets of in-depth telephone interviews with staff, set 15 months apart \( n=58; n=62 \)
  - Survey of carer services \( n=136 \)
  - Carer focus groups \( n=6 \)
Older carers in our study

- **Postal Survey 1:**
  - 156 carers aged 60 years & over

- **Postal Survey 2:**
  - 136 carers aged 60 years & over

- **Postal Survey 3:**
  - 75 carers aged 60 years & over
Findings

- Explore older carers’ experience of carer assessment.

- Explore older carers’ experience of new services that have been developed under the auspices of the Carers Strategy.
Findings - assessment process

- Less than half of carers aged over 60 received a carer assessment.
- Practitioners are reluctant to complete separate carer assessments:
  
  “Many social workers are involved with carers but they often shy off from doing assessments because assessments throw up a need that they can’t fulfil.” Voluntary Sector Representative

- This is confirmed by older carers:

  “Carer assessments are legally required but go nowhere; they’re a waste of time.” Carer
Findings - assessment - eligibility criteria

- To qualify for an assessment, carers must provide a *substantial* amount of care on a *regular* basis.

- But - practitioners describe a reactive approach to assessment to the detriment of early intervention & ongoing support to older carers:

  “Things would have to be pretty drastic. The carer would have to be providing a high level of care, night & day, & I’m afraid to say they’d have to be on their hands & knees.” Care Manager
Findings - assessment - carer experiences

- Carer experiences of assessment are variable.

- For some, the carer assessment offers the opportunity to:
  - have their caring role formally recognised
  - access services

  "Professional & supportive. I now have the help I need." Carer

  "The social worker found excellent carers for us and was very kind and helpful." Carer
Findings - assessment - carer experiences

- For others an assessment is seen as a test of their ability to care:

  “I didn’t really understand why I was having one. I wasn’t sure whether they felt I was incapable. I wasn’t sure whether they were assessing my abilities or what it was all about.” Carer

- Practitioners report that some older carers view the assessment process with suspicion:

  …they see it as policing their ability to care.

  LA Representative
Findings - new services

- Staff report that the Carers Strategy has provided the impetus for change:

  “That Strategy was the impetus to get people together to actually talk about carers’ issues and I think there’s a lot of progress been made since then.”  
  Local Authority Partnership Manager

- A key change is the development of new services for carers.
Findings - new services

- Staff suggest:
  - The range of support to older carers is expanding & becoming more innovative.
  - New services extend the parameters of support & seek to accommodate carers’ personal preferences.

- However, this is not supported by evidence from older carers completing the postal surveys. The number receiving new services is low.
Findings – new services

- **Practical support:**
  - Helping older carers with domestic activities, as well as one-off payments to cover the costs of purchasing equipment.
  - Whilst staff report on the expansion of practical support, this is not reflected in the experiences of older carers who completed our postal surveys.
  - Older carers emphasise that simple types of practical support can make a substantial difference to their everyday lives.
  - Older carers identified outstanding requests for practical support – e.g. large digit telephones.
Findings – new services

- **Support to enable carers to remain socially active:**
  - Legislation notes the importance of supporting carers *in & beyond* their caring role.

  - This is reflected in the development of new services:
    - arts clubs for carers
    - book clubs for carers

- **Carer breaks:**
  - Bargain Break packages & one-off payments that contribute to the cost of a holiday.

  - Contingent upon the carer having completed a carer assessment.

  - The need for *further* expansion of break schemes is highlighted by carers. Many older carers in receipt of a break still identify a break as an unmet need.
Findings - new services

Preventive health measures:

- New initiatives that aim to prevent ill-health amongst older carers:
  - Look After Me Courses
  - Carer Healthy Living Schemes
  - Flu immunization programmes
  - Gym membership
Findings – experiencing new services

- New services were highly valued by carers in receipt of them:

  “The garden is wonderful now and we get a lot of joy from the garden.” Carer

- But - there are problems relating to their organisation & delivery.

- For example, carers are sometimes required to pay in advance for driving lessons. Other carers are offered one-off garden makeovers rather than a regular gardening service.

- One older carer received a contribution towards the cost of a holiday - the nearest departure point was 1 hour away & the taxi fare prohibitively expensive.

- Concerns were raised over the sustainability of new services & financial constraints were identified as a barrier to future service development.
Findings - unmet needs

Almost half of older carers responding to the 1st postal survey identified unmet needs; there was little change in reporting of unmet need by older carers responding to a 2nd survey.

Carers’ unmet needs include:
- practical needs for more flexible breaks
- emotional needs for counselling support
Summary - key findings

- Growing commitment from staff to develop more creative approaches to supporting older carers.

- Increasing recognition of carers as individuals & as service users in their own right requiring services that are designed to meet *their* needs.

- But - considerable scope to improve the range of services, their organisation & delivery.
Bridging the gap between policy & practice

- The ambivalence of practitioners towards carer assessment must be addressed.

- The tenuous security of voluntary organisations who deliver many new services must be addressed.

- Embrace the potential of direct payments, personal budgets & wider community resources in supporting older carers.
Bridging the gap between policy & practice

- Organizations are thinking more broadly about outcomes for older carers – they must:
  - Capture carer perspectives on the *quality* as well as the *quantity* of new services - do these services make life easier?
  - Build upon the modest successes accomplished by listening to carers & drawing on carer expertise.