Carers' needs and the Carers Act

The 1995 Carers (Recognition and Services) Act has been seen as a major step forward for carers giving them important new rights and a firm legal status. In particular, people providing a *regular* and *substantial* amount of care can ask for an assessment of their ability to care when the person they are looking after is being assessed for community care services. This right is also extended to people *intending* to provide care in the future. Researchers from the Social Policy Research Unit investigated what the Act meant for four local authorities and 51 carers who had recently been assessed by social services. The key findings were:

- Around half of all carers interviewed did not fully realise they had received an assessment. Older carers were particularly unlikely to be aware their needs had been assessed
- Some 47 of the carers interviewed had heavy caring responsibilities but limited knowledge of the Carers Act and their entitlements. Only two carers interviewed had requested an assessment themselves
- Carers preferred a personal discussion with a social services practitioner rather than completing a carer assessment form on their own. Preferences varied about who should be present during the assessment discussion, but in practice carers were not always given a choice
- Generally, carers expressed satisfaction with services such as home care, day care, sitting services and breaks. Carers would have liked more emotional support, and for a significant minority, finances were a concern
- Carers were not routinely provided with written results of their assessment.

RESEARCH works

RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM THE
SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH UNIT

SPRU

THE UNIVERSITY of York

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Background

Previous studies on the Carers Act were undertaken shortly after the legislation came into effect. Some of this work restricted itself to looking at distinct groups of carers (young carers, or carers of people of particular client groups). This study, in contrast, takes a generic approach and draws on material from different groups of carers, as well as social services managers and practitioners. It adds to the knowledge from these other studies first, by focusing on a generally representative cross-section of carers who have been assessed, and second, by using in-depth methods.

The government is committed to supporting and caring about carers. Assessment is a key tool in social care; decisions about services and support are based on the results of assessment. It is important to know whether carers are benefiting from the Carers Act, and the extent to which the statutory agencies are providing support to meet carers' assessed needs. Assessment is a central plank of the Carers and Disabled Children Bill due to be enacted later this year, which makes it crucial to know how good the current system of assessment is for carers.

Project Aims

The study aimed to investigate the impacts of the Carers Act first, on changes in local policy and practice; and, secondly, from the perspective of carers who received an assessment under the Act.

Findings

Awareness of assessment

About half of the carers in the study were not fully aware that an assessment of their needs had taken place, or of its implications. Older carers were less likely to be aware of being assessed than younger carers. To help make the process more explicit and encourage carers to participate in a more thoughtful and effective way, practitioners in the study identified key points to cover with a carer (*see Figure 1*).

Figure 1

Issues to raise with carers

- the purpose and the potential benefits of assessment
- the method of assessment, whether it involves a personal discussion and who will be present
- what is involved in completing a carer's assessment form
- what happens to the carer's assessment form, and who will see it

Formally explaining the above points would satisfy the concerns of one carer who said:

> *I think they should tell you they are coming to assess you, and give you a chance to think about it before they come. You haven't a clue what they're going to assess you on . . . is it your needs, or the patient's needs or what? I think they could explain it to you. Like I say, I still don't know if I've had an assessment. I mean I might have had, I don't know.*

Qualifying for and accessing an assessment

The central policy intention was to target heavily involved carers. The four local authorities taking part in the study adopted an open approach towards entitlement to assessment, and developed flexible eligibility criteria that gave practitioners scope for discretion. Despite implementing apparently generous policies, 47 of the 51 carers interviewed provided care for more than 35 hours per week. Whilst policy guidance to staff explicitly stated that carers should be told of their rights under the Carers Act, carers' knowledge of the Act and their entitlements was limited; only two carers had asked to be assessed. Instead, most people's assessment was linked to the assessment of the person looked after. The findings suggest that any fears of a large increase in demand from carers for assessment have not been realised.

Methods of assessment

The process of assessment varied in terms of whether it involved a personal discussion, who was present and the use of documentation. All four local authorities used carer assessment forms to record information describing the caring situation. In three authorities, practitioners generally arranged face-to-face discussions with carers in order to complete the assessment form together. Carers in the study appreciated this arrangement; it legitimised what was put down and they valued the time and attention devoted just to them:

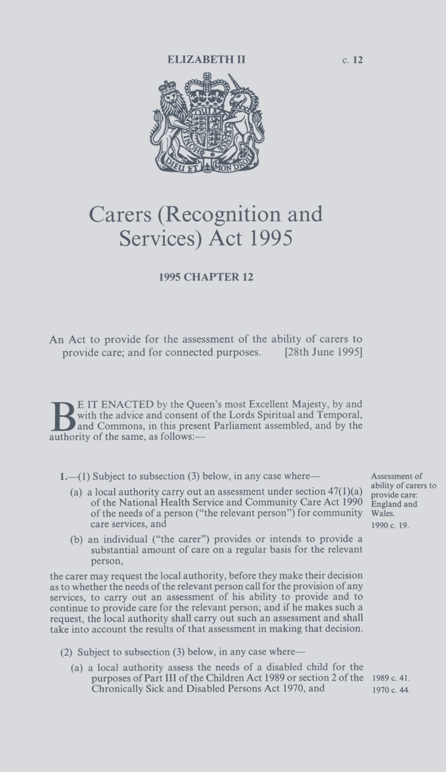
Being assessed is a definite necessity, because even if you don't need anything, you feel somebody cares.

Carers held different views about who should be present at the assessment meeting: the carer alone; the cared-for person; an advocate. Some carers reported they had not been given a choice. Some, but not all, would have preferred a private discussion where the care recipient was not present so they could say what was really on their minds.

The fourth authority used self-assessment procedures, but many carers – particularly older carers – found completing assessment forms on their own a struggle. They were not aware of the full range of services available and which might be appropriate, tended to understate their needs and other responsibilities, and were concerned to minimise the limitations of the cared-for person's abilities.

Service provision

Carers in the study were provided with practical support services such as home care, day care, sitting services and breaks. Generally, carers reported high levels of satisfaction with support. Any reservations tended to be related to flexibility, reliability, lack of continuity in staff, appropriateness of facilities and transport problems. Carers commented on two gaps in support. They would have appreciated greater recognition of their need for emotional support, someone they could talk to and who would listen to their problems. Finances were a matter of concern for a significant minority of carers. Carers would have welcomed not only benefit advice but also the ability to talk through the financial implications of decisions being considered, such as whether to return to – or give up – paid work.



ELIZABETH II c. 12

Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995

1995 CHAPTER 12

An Act to provide for the assessment of the ability of carers to provide care; and for connected purposes. [28th June 1995]

BE IT ENACTED by the Queen's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:—

Assessment of ability of carers to provide care: England and Wales.

1.—(1) Subject to subsection (3) below, in any case where—

(a) a local authority carry out an assessment under section 47(1)(a) of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 of the needs of a person ("the relevant person") for community care services, and 1990 c. 19.

(b) an individual ("the carer") provides or intends to provide a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for the relevant person,

the carer may request the local authority, before they make their decision as to whether the needs of the relevant person call for the provision of any services, to carry out an assessment of his ability to provide and to continue to provide care for the relevant person; and if he makes such a request, the local authority shall carry out such an assessment and shall take into account the results of that assessment in making that decision.

(2) Subject to subsection (3) below, in any case where—

(a) a local authority assess the needs of a disabled child for the purposes of Part III of the Children Act 1989 or section 2 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, and 1989 c. 41. 1970 c. 44.

Follow up

Despite the stipulation in the guidance accompanying the Carers Act, at least half the carers in the study reported they had not received confirmation of the results of their assessment. They were unsure what, if anything, would happen next, a situation that for some carers had the potential to lead to disenchantment and disillusionment:

It's no good paying lip service to this Act and having people sitting there and filling [the form] in if all [social workers] are going to do is file it in a drawer to collect dust.

Recommendations

The study generated a number of recommendations for central and local government.

Central Government

Entitlement to assessment:
the findings provide support for changes to the law which are currently being considered as part of the Carers and Disabled Children Bill which would allow carers a right to an assessment independently of the person they are looking after.

Eligibility criteria:
there should be a recognition of the value of more inclusive eligibility criteria, and a shift in emphasis away from heavily involved carers.

Multi-agency working:
the policy intention that carer assessment and support is not just a social services responsibility should be reinforced.

Local Authority Policy and Senior Management

Eligibility criteria:
local authorities should emphasise an inclusive rather than exclusive approach to assessment.

Induction and training:
local authorities should reinforce the need for practitioners to

- inform carers of their rights, and help them to take an active part in the assessment

- respond to carers' needs for emotional support and counselling
- provide carers with confirmation of the results of the carer assessment in writing or some other accessible format

A proportion of staff should be trained to give specialist help to carers who want to discuss the financial implications of any decisions they might make.

Services:
carers and service users should be regularly consulted about the quality and appropriateness of services.

Local Authority Care Managers and Assessment Staff

Information:
carers should be given information about their entitlements under the Carers Act, as well as the full range of services available.

Assessment discussion:
carers should be told formally that an assessment is taking place, and decide with the assessor who will be present. Carer assessment forms should be used to aid the assessment process rather than for self-assessment.

Older carers:
procedures for working with older carers should be reviewed.

Follow up:
carers should be provided with the results of the assessment and other relevant information such as named practitioners for future contact, and details of review arrangements.

Methods

The project was part of the Department of Health's *Outcomes for Social Care* initiative. It was carried out over 24 months, commencing November 1997.

Four local authority social services departments in northern England recruited carers on behalf of the study. The fieldwork sites were chosen to reflect a cross-section of authorities, and varied in type, size, location, population mix and policy approach to carers.

One senior manager responsible for policy formulation for the Carers Act, and four practitioners whose duties included carrying out carer assessments, were interviewed in each research site. An examination of documentation relating to the Carers Act and assessment procedures from each setting was undertaken.

Some 51 carers who had recently been assessed took part in the project. Ages ranged from 32 to 87. Over half the carers had been involved in care work for five years or more. Carers were interviewed twice, six months apart.

The total number of care recipients was 54, aged between five and 90. They comprised people with physical or learning disabilities, progressive diseases such as multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's Disease, as well as older people with a range of physical and/or mental health problems.

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Further information

Copies of the full report *Carers' Needs and the Carers Act: An Evaluation of the Process and Outcomes of Assessment* by Hilary Arksey, David Hepworth and Hazel Qureshi are available from the SPRU Information Office, price £7.50.

Contact Lindsey Myers, Information Officer, on 01904 433608 or email spruinfo@york.ac.uk.

RESEARCH works

The Social Policy Research Unit is an independent research organisation at the University of York. Established in 1973, SPRU has an international reputation for excellence in key areas of social policy, including health and community care, and social security. Its Director is Professor Sally Baldwin. For further information about SPRU contact the Director or the Information Office, or visit our website at **http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/**

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