

## Integrating user involvement and multi-agency working to improve housing for older people

This study looked at problems of assessment, information provision and planning in the housing system for older people. It then involved stakeholders in designing improvements, focusing on the integration of user involvement and multi-agency working into an innovative planning and management system.

**f** Interviewees identified key problems of the present housing system as:

- The questions asked in assessments are determined by current resources and spending priorities. Needs that have been given a low priority are generally not recorded, making them invisible to planners.
- The reliability of the quantitative information currently used to plan housing services is questionable. Qualitative information tends only to be accessed on an **ad hoc** basis.
- Multi-agency policy-making is patchy at best, and at worst is virtually non-existent.

**f** There was widespread agreement amongst users, carers, campaigners and professionals on what the ideal housing system should look like.

**f** Based on this agreement, managers from the statutory agencies designed an innovative planning and management system with the following key features:

- **Co-ordination.** The activities of the agencies are linked by a Co-ordinator, who helps people make effective referrals and chairs multi-agency meetings for the dissemination of information.
- **Support and control.** There is a joint assessment scheme, allowing users access to multiple agencies via a single assessment. This is underpinned by a cross-agency training programme for Assessment Officers. There are also quality initiatives, including the use of stories about needs and services collected from older people by volunteers and collated into reports by an Outreach Worker.
- **Intelligence.** Information about internal agency resources and external threats and opportunities (including unmet needs) is gathered and fed into policy-making.
- **Policy-making.** Policy is set by a multi-agency Planning Board whose power is counter-balanced by a Shadow Board made up of user representatives.

This project set out to identify problems affecting housing services for older people and possible ways to address them. Two areas of the country were involved, and these have been called 'Northlands' and 'Southtown' to preserve their anonymity. The analysis of current problems focused on assessment, information provision, and planning and management. The conclusions are based on the views that emerged from a series of interviews and workshops with users, carers and professionals.

### Assessment

Older people are restricted in how they can express their needs when being assessed. A primary cause of this is the nature of the assessment process: the questions that are asked are largely determined by resource availability and current spending priorities. Older people are not encouraged to articulate needs and wishes that cannot currently be provided for, and may not receive an assessment at all if it is known in advance (through an informal pre-assessment screening) that they do not qualify for a service. If an assessment is conducted, and the older person expresses a need or wish that cannot be provided for, then this is rarely recorded: legislation requires Social Services Departments to meet all recorded needs, and to record needs that cannot currently be met would place them in an impossible position. This equally affects any other agency which participates in joint assessment with Social Services Departments. The net result is that the adequacy of the system is not properly open to scrutiny. Although older people and assessors are well aware that some needs go unmet, these remain invisible to planners.

### Information provision

Professionals interviewed generally felt that the sources of quantitative information about housing need currently available to planners are not particularly reliable. However, the use of data collated from assessments does not offer any significant hope of improvement due to the difficulty of recording needs that cannot currently be met: using the information that *is* recorded would paint an artificially rosy picture. There are also other problems with using assessment data to inform planning: assessments do not reveal the needs of older people in the community who are out of contact with agencies, for example. There are also problems of co-ordination within and between agencies that make joint assessment difficult to operate. It therefore appears that there is no holistic picture of housing need available to planners.

### Planning and management

In Southtown (which has a two-tier local government system), problems of planning and management centre around a confusing multiplicity of planning structures and patchy multi-agency co-ordination. Holistic, multi-agency planning of housing services for older people simply does not take place. These problems are made more difficult than they might otherwise be because there is no overall picture of housing need, and therefore no reliable means to validate plans. Interviewees felt that this lack of holism, and some of the lack of co-ordination, stems from legislation requiring different things of different agencies.

In Northlands (which has a newly created unitary local authority), a significant amount of policy-making and planning across the agencies does take place. However, the problems of information provision still result in the absence of an overall picture of the housing needs of older people. This is exacerbated by some remaining difficulties of co-ordination within and between agencies. The lack of an overall picture of housing need means that most planning is short-term and is dominated by financial concerns. Most services are therefore offered in pre-packaged form. They do not generally allow for the kind of flexibility and choice that users say they need.

### Characteristics of an 'ideal' system

There was widespread agreement amongst users, carers, campaigners and professionals on what the ideal housing system should look like (the word 'ideal' meaning the best *possible* practice rather than a vision of utopia). In an ideal system (amongst other things):

- independent living and appropriate housing should be treated as basic rights;
- new houses should be built with lifetime needs in mind;
- housing for older people should be integrated with general housing, although the special needs of older people would still have to be met (and separate accommodation should still be available for those who would prefer it);
- a wide diversity of agencies should co-ordinate their activities;
- a single, participative assessment should generate multiple options from a variety of agencies;
- user choice should be maximised;
- user involvement should be promoted; and

- qualitative information should be systematically used in planning.

### Developing a responsive organisation

Based on the above 'ideal', managers from the statutory agencies produced an innovative model of integrated multi-agency working and user involvement that should be able to deliver all the desired properties of the ideal housing system, either directly (by instituting them in its design), or indirectly (by providing an organisational means by which they could be discussed and realised in the future). Their model can be summarised as follows:

- The activities of the various service providers are linked by a Co-ordinator, who helps people make effective connections and referrals, and chairs multi-agency meetings for the dissemination of information.
- There is a joint assessment scheme, allowing users access to multiple agencies via a single assessment, which is underpinned by a cross-agency training programme for Assessment Officers.
- Support and control is exercised through quality initiatives, including the use of stories about services collected from older people by volunteers and collated into reports by an Outreach Worker (the volunteers can also aid co-ordination by providing information to older people).
- Information concerning internal agency resources and external problems and opportunities (including information about unmet needs) is gathered and fed into policy-making.
- Finally, policy is set by a multi-agency Planning Board whose power is counter-balanced by a Shadow Board made up of user representatives. Both Boards receive the same information to inform their planning, including reports from the Outreach Worker on the views of older people in the community.

### Addressing the current problems

The main problem with assessment is the disincentive to record needs that cannot currently be met, making those needs invisible to planners. The above model suggests that assessment is not the only vehicle through which needs can be highlighted, and the proposals for user involvement built into the model of multi-agency working (user representation on the Planning Board, participation on the Shadow Board, and outreach into the community to gather the views of older people) provide an alternative

means to achieve this. Nevertheless, current assessment practices *can* be improved, and the model of multi-agency working has joint assessment (and training) built into it.

Another problem is that sources of quantitative information are generally perceived as unreliable. While there is no magic formula for providing reliable quantitative information (short of repeatedly conducting time-consuming and expensive surveys), the model of multi-agency working maximises use of the information that does exist. It identifies key areas of information about external conditions and the agencies' readiness to deal with them that, if provided to policy-makers, would make co-ordinated planning easier. In addition, the model demonstrates how useful qualitative information, previously accessed haphazardly by individuals, can be systematically gathered and distributed, via the Outreach Worker and his or her volunteers, to those who need the information most.

Finally, multi-agency planning is perceived as problematic. The model deals with this issue directly.

### Recommendations

The model of integrated multi-agency working and user involvement provides a template which can be used as the basis for designing specific multi-agency systems for local use. Although it has been developed with housing services for older people in mind, the model may be adapted and applied in any multi-agency service system. However, the researchers make the following recommendations for adapting and applying the model:

- in tailoring the design for local use, it is vital that consideration should be given to processes of participation and user involvement;
- it would be useful to evaluate the first efforts of implementation.

In addition, two recommendations are made to central government:

- multi-agency working should be facilitated by a review of legislation with a view to harmonising (where possible) the requirements placed upon the statutory agencies so that unnecessary obstacles to co-operation are removed; and
- to facilitate informed planning, Social Services Departments (and other agencies linked with them) should be encouraged to record needs that cannot currently be met. For this to happen, the legislation should be amended so that it is only mandatory to provide a service when an

assessment records a need that there is a *statutory obligation* to meet. This would allow other needs to be recorded, creating the potential for these to become visible to planners.

#### About the study

This study was undertaken by Gerald Midgley, Isaac Munlo and Mandy Brown from the Centre for Systems Studies at the University of Hull. To identify problems in the current system, 131 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse variety of stakeholders. To facilitate the design of improvements, workshops were undertaken with three groups: older people in receipt of housing services; carers and representatives from relevant community groups and voluntary organisations; and managers and front-line professionals drawn from statutory agencies. These workshops focused on what the 'ideal' housing system for older people should look like. A further workshop was then held with a group of managers from the statutory agencies whose task was to design a form of organisation that would be capable of delivering the housing system described in the previous workshops — and would address the problems of assessment, information provision and planning that had already surfaced.

#### Further information

A full report, *Sharing power: integrating user involvement and multi-agency working to improve housing for older people* by Gerald Midgley, Isaac Munlo and Mandy Brown, is published by *Community Care* and The Policy Press as part of the *Community Care into Practice* series (ISBN 1 86134 050 8, £11.50 + £1.50 postage and packaging).

#### Related *Findings*

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- 135 Housing management, community care and CCT (Jan 95)
- 136 Housing needs of people with physical disability (Feb 95)
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- 148 The relationship between housing benefit and community care (Jun 95)
- 155 Community care and housing for disabled people (Sept 95)
- 168 Housing choices and community care (Feb 96)
- 183 Inter-agency working for housing, health and social care needs of people in general needs housing (Jun 96)

##### *Social Care*

- 64 Moving from hospital into the community (Mar 95)
- 66 Housing and support for people with learning difficulties (Apr 95)
- 74 Health and housing: the extent of inter-agency working (Nov 95)
- 92 Joint planning for housing and community care (Mar 97)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 615905 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).



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