
Introduction

The **Information for users of social services** project forms part of the **Caring in Homes Initiative** which has been established by the Department of Health to promote the development of residential care following the report of the Wagner Committee.

While the Initiative as a whole is concerned specifically with the issue of residential care, the remit of this particular study has been broadened to include the whole area of personal social services. There are two, related, reasons for this. First, the Wagner Report emphasised the importance of users making a positive choice when selecting residential care. Such choice can only be exercised when appropriate information is available to, and understood by, those making the decisions. An important element of this information is that which covers alternatives to residential care - in other words, personal social services which are available to people who do not live in residential homes. It would have been artificial, therefore, to address the issue of information about residential care without considering other personal social services.

The second reason for broadening the scope of this study is the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. Under the Act, local authority social services departments are required to provide a great deal of information about their social services generally, and the departments will consequently be approaching the issue of information about residential care in this broader context. A more detailed discussion of the Act is included in the preliminary chapter of this working paper, 'Information about personal social services: a review of the issues'.

The Information for users of social services project aims to explore the nature of the information which is needed when people require some form of personal social care. Then, building on this understanding, to develop appropriate mechanisms to ensure that the information is provided to recipients and prospective recipients of the services, and to their carers, relatives and representatives.

A key element of the project is a survey of the information needs of residents and potential residents of residential care homes. This covers not only the subjects on which information is needed but the constraints that inhibit people's use of information. We have also tried to identify the patterns of information-seeking behaviour. The information needs survey was carried out during the first quarter of 1990.

In parallel with the survey of the information needs of residents and potential residents we commissioned an information audit of a sample of documents produced

by social services departments and others to convey information about residential care. This has helped us to identify the key features which influence the effectiveness of the documents.

In the second phase of the study, having established a view of the need for information and the effectiveness of printed information sources we will work with a small number of local authorities to explore the practicalities of developing mechanisms which will allow the information to be communicated to people when they need it and in a form which is easy to assimilate.

We will develop draft guidelines for use by local authorities. We will work with a sample of authorities to test the guidelines and to evaluate their effectiveness.

The final stage of the project will be the production of tested and revised guidelines for local authorities and others with a responsibility for providing information. The guidelines will cover the nature of the information needs which the information mechanisms are seeking to meet; the ways in which the information can most effectively be collected and processed; the nature, style and formats of the materials themselves and guidance on the most effective ways of disseminating the information.

Our intention is to enable local authorities and others to produce high quality, effective information materials within acceptable limits of time, cost and effort.

The project forms part of PSI's Information Policy Programme. The work is being carried out by Nick Moore, Jane Steele, Sean Roberts and Ian Rowlands with assistance from appropriate staff associated with the Institute.