

Quality measurement: a user approach

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Background

The Caring at Home Scheme is a home-based service for carers of older people with mental health problems/pre-senile dementia sufferers. The scheme is managed and coordinated by Age Concern. Care attendants employed by seven private nursing homes provide care on an outreach basis. The service runs 52 weeks of the year, 7 days a week and 24 hours a day. The Caring at Home Scheme is now on the council's accredited list of providers.

The target service capacity for the scheme is 340 hours per week. At present the scheme is providing an average of 200 hours of care a week to 40 clients. Fifty per cent of the care hours are provided to clients eligible for care management, the other 50 per cent of care hours are purchased privately by individuals.

Although the project originally aimed to meet the needs of Asian elders, of whom there are significant numbers in Rochdale, the scheme has not yet recruited any Asian care workers nor has it any Asian clients.

Quality standards

Lake View Learning, an independent consultancy, was commissioned to undertake a range of activities to establish a Quality Framework within which the Rochdale Initiative would function. The activities undertaken to establish the framework involved:

- establishing selection criteria for participating homes/care staff
- establishing comprehensive quality assurance systems both within the participating homes and within the Age Concern management structure
- external auditing of the quality assurance systems
- training of all staff participating in the project

The Quality Framework that has been established comprises procedures and service standards for the project's four principal functions. These functions are personnel and administration; referral and assessment; direct care and support and monitoring.

The procedures and service standards were established through a range of mechanisms including, carer consultation, key worker policies, training programmes, client support/follow-up, staff supervision and development, flexible/reliable service provision, conditions of service, referral/assessment and information sharing.

The standards of service delivery take into account:

- local authority tendering requirements
- legal requirements
- needs of client group (eg key worker)
- needs of carers (eg 24 hour availability)
- needs of staff (eg 24 hour support)

The monitoring of quality standards

Both internal and external mechanisms are used to monitor the implementation of the quality framework. Three methods of internal evaluation were used. The views of service users were canvassed; situations in which care was being given were observed; records were also examined.

The external auditing of the project was undertaken by Lake View Learning. Policy Studies Institute, appointed by the Department of Health to monitor and evaluate the work of the Initiative, have also an ongoing role in the evaluation of the Rochdale Care at Home Scheme.

The Caring at Home scheme recommended that the local authority contracting unit should develop formal inspection policies which would enable a 'quality' comparison with competitors. It was felt that comparisons with competitors on the basis of quality would demonstrate the amount of time and energy invested in ensuring that the Caring at Home scheme was a quality service.

Establishing and maintaining a quality assurance framework is expensive, with the result that the unit costs of the service are frequently higher. It is harder however to compete with other providers on the basis of quality because the local authority does not have the formal registration and inspection policies by which it can judge the quality of a service and thereby assess value for money.

A comprehensive quality service will only have positive results when it is integrated into the ethos of a service and not seen as the icing on the cake.