

Adult safeguarding practices

Outline of a research project
funded by the NIHR School
for Social Care Research



Improving the evidence base for
adult social care practice

How can the systems for protecting adults with learning disabilities from abuse and poor practice be better understood and implemented?

People with learning disabilities are more vulnerable to abuse and 'poor practice' than other adults, and specific governance arrangements have therefore been put in place for their protection. These arrangements rely on drawing a distinction between abuse and poor practice, yet in reality the difference may be blurred and misunderstood by frontline staff. Various commonplace types of poor practice in residential care homes and supported living settings are degrading and dehumanising, but may not constitute abuse.

This lack of clarity creates problems both by allowing poor practice to flourish within some learning disabilities services, and also by generating significant numbers of inappropriate referrals of poor practice to an adult safeguarding system that is designed only to deal with abuse. This wastes scarce resources and also fails properly to address the poor practices in question.

This project

- will help to reduce abuse and poor practice in services for adults with learning disabilities, and to clarify the appropriate reporting response for different types of malpractice.

It aims to

- identify poor practices which people with learning disabilities commonly experience in residential care or supported living settings, which may not fall within the standard definitions of abuse but which are nevertheless unacceptable
- explore the extent to which such actions and structures are commonplace
- investigate staff understanding of the distinction between abuse and poor practice and their ability to challenge poor practice and report allegations of abuse appropriately
- provide advice on when to instigate formal adult safeguarding procedures over suspected abuse, and when to address poor practice matters by notifying the regulator, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), or through an organisation's own management processes.

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WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

Two distinct governance systems exist for addressing, on the one hand, suspected abuse of vulnerable adults and, on the other, 'poor practice' in the provision of care. Allegations of abuse are investigated by local authorities under adult safeguarding processes within the framework introduced by the *No Secrets* guidance in 2000. Meanwhile, matters relating to poor practice are the responsibility of the regulator, the CQC.

There are various shortcomings in the implementation of these systems in the context of adults with learning difficulties in residential care and supported living settings. Firstly, some poor practices may not be recognised by some learning disability services as being unacceptable, and can go unchallenged.

Secondly, the distinction between abuse and poor practice lacks clarity and this has contributed to a significant rise in the number of inappropriate safeguarding alerts by frontline staff – the reporting of matters which, upon investigation, were not abuse but 'just' poor practice. After investigation these alerts are treated as 'inappropriate referrals' that fall outside the scope and redress of the adult safeguarding system. At the same time these referrals have the undesirable consequence of wasting scarce resources and exacerbating workload pressures on statutory adult social care teams, all of which has encouraged the development of negative attitudes among some social workers to the whole issue of adult safeguarding.

Thirdly, some poor practices may fall into the 'gap' not covered by adult safeguarding or CQC regulation. While registered care homes and domiciliary care providers are subject to CQC inspection, there are no specific national quality assurance standards for services designated as 'supported living'.

As a result of issues such as these, poor practice can be hard to define and eliminate, despite having a profoundly negative impact on the lives of people with learning disabilities. In order to address this challenge, frontline

Abuse vs poor practice

The distinction between abuse and poor practice is not always clear cut.

Examples of abuse include:

- direct bodily abuse (physical or sexual assault)
- material abuse (theft of money or possessions)
- psychological abuse (including bullying)
- neglect (failure to provide adequate care).

Examples of poor practice include:

- acts of 'commission', such as changing TV channel without consultation
- acts of 'omission', such as service users being ignored
- issues relating to the structure of service delivery, such as imposing bedtimes to fit with shift patterns, or insisting people eat at set times.

staff and service providers need to be equipped to identify and respond effectively to both abuse and poor practice. In particular, greater clarity is needed about which aspects of poor practice might rightly be addressed through an organisation's own line management; at what stage the CQC should be contacted regarding poor practice; and the circumstances in which a formal safeguarding alert about abuse should be made to the local authority.

HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

People with learning disabilities and their families will be directly involved in shaping the project. The research will have four phases.

STAGE 1: Identifying poor practice

The project will work with a group of adults with learning disabilities in Nottingham, supported by a regular member of staff who knows the participants well. Research will focus

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on identifying practices and/or organisational restrictions within residential care and supported living services which the participants find unacceptable. The participants will range in age from early twenties to late sixties, live in a variety of support settings, and are all likely to have some degree of verbal communication.

In order to ensure that the experiences of people with profound and multiple learning disabilities are also included, a focus group will be convened for parents/family members of adults with learning disabilities who are non-verbal and/or have more severe learning disabilities.

STAGE 2: Developing interview questions

A set of interview questions will be developed, including a number of vignettes, based on findings from Stage 1. For example, a vignette might describe a scenario in which “a staff member walks into the living room and switches TV channels without permission from service users”. The interviewee would be asked to identify whether the scenario described was abuse, poor practice or acceptable practice; whether they have ever witnessed such practices; and whether they have either directly challenged such practice or would report it to managers or to a regulatory body.

The questions and vignettes will be piloted and adjusted as necessary.

STAGE 3: Data collection and analysis

Interview data will be collected from a total of 15 residential care or supported living services for adults with learning disabilities. These will include large voluntary and private sector providers and ‘family run’ private homes. At least five establishments will include service users with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

Interviews will be conducted with service managers and frontline staff to explore:

- similarities and differences in understandings of abuse and poor practice held by people with learning disabilities and family carers and those held by frontline support staff

- whether the same or different acts, omissions and institutional practices are regarded as poor practice in services for people with PMLD (profound and multiple learning disabilities) as compared to people with less severe learning disabilities
- potential discrepancies between an organisation’s stated policies in relation to standards of care and safeguarding, and the everyday practices of frontline staff
- the barriers, whether individual, cultural or institutional, which prevent staff from taking action to reduce or eliminate abuse and poor practice
- staff awareness of existing regulatory frameworks, including the roles of CQC and adult safeguarding.

STAGE 4: Implications for safeguarding

A one-day workshop will be held with senior and experienced adult safeguarding and quality assurance officers from across England. The event will help in formulating the project’s findings into advice and resources for frontline support staff, service provider organisations, and adult safeguarding authorities.

These outputs will help both individual support workers and service provider organisations not only to identify and prevent poor practice, but also to determine when to tackle matters via internal management processes, when to refer to the CQC and when to refer cases under adult safeguarding procedures.

Project publications

Summary findings, together with any recommendations from the workshop, will be sent to the lead adult safeguarding officer in every local authority in England. In addition, articles will be published in academic peer-reviewed journals and publications targeted at professionals and service users, and papers will be delivered at relevant academic and practitioner-oriented conferences. The research findings will also be incorporated into future training on adult safeguarding delivered by the Ann Craft Trust.

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HOW DOES THE PROJECT FIT THE AIMS OF THE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH?

This project addresses issues of empowerment and safeguarding. It will provide evidence of what types of staff behaviour and service delivery frameworks people with learning disabilities find unacceptable. It will also identify how frontline staff understand poor practice and whether they are able to identify and challenge both poor practice and abuse. The findings will therefore be of immediate value for equipping staff and managers with the knowledge and skills necessary for improving practice, both in terms of raising awareness of unacceptable poor practice and ensuring that they choose the appropriate pathway for referring suspected abuse or poor practice. While this project focuses on adults with learning disabilities, the outcomes are expected to be applicable to all adult social care user groups.

The project will also reduce the amount of resources currently wasted on inappropriate adult safeguarding alerts. In addition, raising staff understanding will also improve the interface between the adult safeguarding system and the CQC quality assurance regime.

The NIHR School for Social Care Research

The School for Social Care Research was set up by the National Institute for Health Research to develop and improve the evidence base for adult social care practice in England. It officially launched on 1 May 2009 with funding of £15 million over five years.

The School conducts and commissions high-quality research across five overlapping programme areas:

Prevention and reduction – How can we best prevent or reduce the development or exacerbation of the circumstances that lead to the need for social care?

Empowerment and safeguarding – How can we best empower and safeguard people who use social care services?

Care and work – How can we best equip and support people – practitioners, volunteers, informal carers – to provide optimum social care? How can we ensure that people who use social care and their carers are enabled and supported in paid work and other types of meaningful activity?

Service interventions, commissioning and change – What interventions, commissioning and delivery arrangements best achieve social care outcomes?

Resources and interfaces – How can social care and other public resources best be deployed and combined to achieve social care outcomes?

Further information about the NIHR School for Social Care Research is available at www.sscr.nihr.ac.uk

Project title:
Safeguarding and best practice in services for adults with learning disabilities

Timescale:
January 2011
to August 2012

Budget:
£156,991

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