Resource allocation

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

Improving the evidence base for adult social care practice

What factors should determine the allocation of resources to individual service users, and what does an evidence-based approach look like?

Matching resources to needs is a longstanding concern within adult social care services. Current policy requires resource allocation mechanisms that promote choice and control, and are demonstrably fair and objective. In particular, the introduction of personal budgets has focused attention on the need for greater transparency in the allocation of resources to individuals so that service users can shape their own support plans and choose the services they subsequently receive.

In practice, however, the resource allocation process is not underpinned by objective criteria and there are inequities between, and within, different user groups. The national evaluation of individual budgets highlighted the complexities of developing reliable and acceptable mechanisms for allocating resources between people in different circumstances. There is therefore an urgent need for an improved evidence-based approach to resource allocation at the level of individual users and carers.

This project

• will promote a greater understanding of resource allocation in adult social care.

It aims to

• describe and classify approaches to resource allocation at the micro-level in adult social care in England

• identify the determinants of variation in this allocation, with comparisons between, and within, the principal adult social care groups

• investigate the priorities of local authority budget holding managers for social care resource allocation

• gather the perspectives of users and carers on patterns of resource allocation and its determinants for different individuals

• compare models of resource allocation derived from primary data, user/carer perspectives and budget holding managers

• publish evidence-based guidance for resource allocation at the individual level in adult social care.

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

At the heart of social care practice is the need to determine how public resources should be allocated in response to the various competing demands, local conditions, and needs and circumstances of users. The challenge is to develop a transparent mechanism whereby the needs (and possibly also the aspirations) of individuals are related clearly to the resources expended.

Policymakers, local managers, practitioners, service users and their carers all have a vested interest in developing a system that is clear, fair, defensible and workable. This is particularly the case within a policy context that seeks to promote personal budgets, thereby enabling service users to choose and control the support they receive. The mechanism for deciding the monetary value of a recipient's budget needs to recognise the diverse circumstances and multiplicity of needs of recipients of adult social care services. It is also important that it offers a means by which an identification of need and allocation of a personal budget in one local authority will be accepted in another.

The criteria which underpin decisions about resources must therefore be both valid (with resources allocated accurately according to level of need) and reliable (where the methods used on similar groups of people produce broadly similar findings). The evidence with which such a resource allocation method can be developed may be based on experience (empirical), on informed opinion (normative), or on a combination of both approaches.

In practice, knowledge of the different forms of resource allocation methods currently available for social care is partial and not widely available. The resource allocation systems used in the individual budgets pilot projects, for example, were typically locally-developed, did not employ validated assessment tools and were often conducted in a manner that lacked integration with the broader social care policy agenda.

Moreover there has been little evaluation of how resource allocation systems have worked in practice, including testing the validity of the assumptions on which they are based. Problems

> **Evidence for allocation methods**
> - Empirical evidence examines the impact of relatively objective criteria on how resources are allocated.
> - Normative evidence provides informed judgements on how resources should be allocated, with input usually coming from professional staff, service users, and the public.

can arise if resource allocation does not accurately reflect conditions such as depression that are not correctly identified, or if it neglects factors such as sensory needs that have cost implications.

The proposed project is intended to address these issues by providing an evidence-based approach to resource allocation. For users and carers, the research offers the possibility of improvements in the allocation of resources following an assessment of need and greater scope for the matching of resources to need in the subsequent support plan.

HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

A mixed methods approach will be employed incorporating a literature review, analysis of secondary data at both the individual and local authority levels, and primary data collection.

STAGE 1: Existing practice

A postal survey of Directors of Adult Social Care Services will identify the ways in which local authorities currently determine, for each user group, the level of resources to which an individual is entitled. It will include a request for assessment documents which will be used to capture the key features of different approaches. A literature review will also be undertaken on existing resource allocation methods. Overall, the different approaches will be described and classified.

STAGE 2: Determinants of variation

This stage will model the relationship between personal characteristics and actual resource allocation. Anonymised personal data will be used covering a minimum of 6,000 assessed

individuals (at least 250 from each of 25 local authorities) for whom assessments have been conducted and care packages assigned. The sample will reflect the principal user groups: older people, and those with physical and learning disabilities and mental health problems. Data on service use and costs will be available for each person.

The analysis will estimate the relative contribution of different factors (needs and personal circumstances) in determining the resources received by the service user in terms of budgets and care packages through time. Exogenous variables, such as aspects of locality, will also be collected to determine their impact. The analyses will develop 'best fit' predictive models of resource allocation. Time horizons of 6 weeks, 3 months and 6 months after assessment will be used.

Overall, these analyses will provide models, broken down by user group, of the way resources are routinely allocated at a micro-level in social care according to a range of needs-related and personal circumstances.

STAGE 3: Budget manager views

A Delphi questionnaire process will be used to elicit the perspectives of budget-holding managers in adult social care. Participants will be asked their opinions on various aspects of resource allocation systems; this will also assist in defining areas for further enquiry. Responses will be analysed to determine the extent to which each manager agrees with the issue or point of view under consideration, and the degree to which they agree with each other. Models of resource allocation will be produced in line with the responses.

STAGE 4: User and carer views

Consultation with users, carers and citizens will utilise information that has emerged from earlier stages of the study regarding characteristics that are currently important in determining resource allocation. Participants will be asked to prioritise the factors they think should have influence. Around 200 people will be included, with data collection through e-survey, postal survey, telephone interviews

and meetings. Models of preferred resource allocation will be produced.

STAGE 5: Comparison of models

The factors behind the current allocation of resources in social care (Stage 2) will be compared with the priorities identified by budget managers (Stage 3) and users/carers/citizens (Stage 4). Areas of agreement and divergence will be identified. Questions to be addressed include:

- How do stakeholders' priorities fit with the experience of how resources have been routinely allocated?

- What factors account for any discrepancies between prioritised areas and observed practice?

- In what sense do any discrepancies reflect local approaches to resource allocation?

- What importance do these findings have for approaches such as individual budgets and self-assessment, which are currently being configured across English adult social care?

STAGE 6: Evidence-based guidelines

Based on the analyses above, evidence-based guidelines on resource allocation at the micro-level will be produced. This stage will incorporate an advisory group which will review the findings of the two consultation processes, performing a reliability and validity check.

Project publications

The primary output of this study will be the production of evidence-based guidelines to inform the ongoing development and use of resource allocation systems in adult social care. This will be freely available, and published online. Additionally, there will be a report of the study; the production of articles for peer-reviewed journals; a research summary for local authorities available on line and as a paper document; and summary findings available for all who participated in the consultation exercises in appropriate formats.

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

Guidelines published by this project will enable local authorities to make decisions on methods of resource allocation based upon sound evidence that reflects both current practice and the normative perspectives of different stakeholders. The use of these objective criteria to determine allocations will contribute to a more equitable and transparent system, and may enable social care resources to be deployed so that they achieve more effective outcomes. Additionally, the guidance will empower users and carers enabling them to understand the criteria employed in determining the size of personal budgets.

The guidance will permit local flexibility in its application, and will have the potential to influence decision-making at many levels of adult social care services. For example, the decisions of frontline staff about the allocation of personal budgets could be shaped by the study findings. It has the potential to assist operational managers as they seek to promote the equitable allocation of resources between service users within and between each of the principal adult user groups.

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

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Resource allocation at the micro level in adult social care: determinants, methods and guidance

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