A national study of eligibility criteria for social services to older people was commissioned by the Continuing Care Conference. Historically, such eligibility criteria have often been implicit but their importance was stressed in the 1989 White Paper, Caring for People (CM 849) and following the implementation of the community care legislation eligibility criteria have achieved a greater salience. A number of factors account for this: budget constraints placed on local authorities, the debate about the future funding of long term care and the formalisation of continuing care arrangements between the health service and social services departments. The study explored the following areas: the different forms of eligibility criteria used by local authorities for different service sectors; the link between eligibility criteria and assessment systems; and the utility of the systems of eligibility and assessment which are in operation and the difficulties associated with their implementation.

The eligibility study was based on an analysis of eligibility criteria supplied by social services departments. A template was devised for this purpose which identified key domains. This was informed by a literature review. In the second stage of the research, four proxy indicators of quality were devised which would permit an equitable and transparent means of deciding who should receive publicly-funded services. The extent to which these local authority eligibility criteria met these standards was determined on the basis of information the local authorities had supplied.

This study revealed that eligibility criteria devised by local authorities varied in terms of structure, content and quality. Furthermore, they are difficult to operationalise. In practice this means that it is difficult to integrate them with the screening and assessment tasks of the care management process. Additionally, the link between eligibility criteria and long term care is tenuous. In their present form local authority eligibility criteria are not integral to the assessment of need for people receiving residential and nursing home care. Finally, it is difficult to establish their compatibility with eligibility criteria for long term care insurance, which is often based on an assessment of an individual’s functional abilities.

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