

Home Care Workers: Careers, Commitments and Motivations

PSSRU

RESEARCH
SUMMARY

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BACKGROUND

The home care service is a fundamental building block of the policy to support older disabled people in their own homes. There is widespread concern about the supply and retention of home care workers and the implications of this for the quality of care provided. Planned changes to the home care commissioning arrangements in the local authority of Medway meant workforce concerns were compounded for that council. With plans to reduce the number of contracted home care agencies, particular disquiet was raised among providers that care workers would leave the home care workforce altogether out of loyalty to both their current employer and their own clients. Medway council commissioned a small-scale study to gauge the mood of the current workforce and investigate the factors that might affect people's propensity to leave home care altogether.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall aim was to improve our understanding of care worker commitments, motivations and attitudes towards their work and the provision of quality care. The objectives were:

- To identify whether a significant proportion of home care workers are likely to leave as a result of the changes in commissioning arrangements in Medway, and if so why.
- To identify the motivations of home care workers and their attitudes to training and their future careers.
- To explore care home workers' attitudes and approaches to providing a high quality service.

This summary reports on the results of the first two objectives.

METHOD

In order to establish a picture of Medway's current home care workforce a survey questionnaire was sent to 13 contracted provider agencies in the local authority. The home care organisations were asked to give details about their agency including the size and nature of their workforce, the formal qualifications held by care workers and the numbers working towards formal qualifications. Based on this information four providers were initially selected to represent a spread in terms of size and sector. Information provided by the commissioners in an earlier study was used to ensure the providers reflected a range of service quality. Care workers were invited from those agencies to participate in the research.

In total 30 care workers were interviewed. Due to recruitment problems they were drawn from three

rather than four agencies. Care workers were sampled for the study on the basis of age and length of service with their current employer. All interviews were one to one and were tape-recorded, with the consent of the care workers. Care workers were interviewed about their previous and current employment, their motivations and commitments towards home care and their attitudes to training.

FINDINGS

- All respondents held contracts giving them statutory sick pay, holiday pay and maternity/paternity leave. However, over two-thirds had so called 'zero hours' contracts where no employment or pay was guaranteed. Seven people said they needed more care hours from their agency. To compensate, nearly half of the entire sample reported having second jobs.
- Travel time was a problem. Two-thirds reported that travel time was not incorporated into their schedule of visits. There were implications for their clients, affecting the quality of care delivered.
- Most felt the supervision in their jobs was adequate. However, there was a concern that younger care workers were being sent to new clients alone and with little guidance or information.

The Research Team

The PSSRU staff who conducted this study were Ann Netten and Jennifer Francis at the University of Kent. The project secretary was Lesley Cox (01227 823963; email L.A.Cox@kent.ac.uk).

- People were motivated by both the flexibility of jobs in home care and the fact that it is a 'people job'. Care workers enjoyed helping clients and making them happy. Nevertheless problems with care work were raised. Some complained about insufficient hours of work and others about the lack of communication and organisation in their agency.
- The majority of care workers felt their loyalties lay mainly with their own clients. However in the event that their agency closed, over half said they would remain in home care even if it meant having new clients. Almost a third reported that they would leave home care out of concerns about signing new contracts committing them to unfavourable work patterns.
- Medway's intentions to ensure that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) apply should go a long way to reassure those care workers concerned about transferring to new employers but it is worth noting that requirements to work evenings and weekends might be linked to informal arrangements and these expectations will need to be addressed.
- One third of respondents had undertaken no induction training. The older care workers, in post for the longest time had done the least amount of in-house training in the last year and in many cases, none at all. Many carers would welcome refresher training courses.
- At the time of interview no care workers were working towards their NVQ2. All but four felt National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) training was a good thing. Those four felt that being a good care worker is more to do with the kind of person you are than about a qualification on paper.
- If they were required to do so, two-thirds reported that they would happily embark on NVQ training and a small number said they would begrudgingly do so. However a number felt they would leave their agency, and if necessary the home care sector altogether, if the NVQ2 was made a requirement.
- Commissioners and providers of care might go some way to address these problems by educating care workers about the implications of care standards and about what is involved in NVQ assessments and associated training.

PUBLICATIONS AND RELATED RESEARCH

A report (Francis and Netten, 2003) of the findings from the fieldwork has been completed and submitted to Medway council. The report is publicly available as a PSSRU discussion paper and can be downloaded from the unit's website, www.pssru.ac.uk.

An article drawing on the findings from the fieldwork will be submitted for peer review and publication in early 2004.

The home care worker research drew on the findings of earlier work, which investigated the quality of home care from the service user and provider perspective. The report (Francis and Netten, 2002) on that study is also available from the unit's website.

An article drawing on the findings of the earlier work on home care quality will be published in May 2004 (Francis and Netten, 2004).

REFERENCES

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The views expressed in this summary are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Medway council or the Department of Health.

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