

A 'secret citizen' experience of contacting Essex County Council for information on care options and residential homes

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Introduction

Good quality, timely information is important to everyone, even more so when they are seeking to make choices that may have a big impact on their lives. The Department of Health paper *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say* (2006) highlights 'choice' as one of the fundamental outcomes for adult social care services. Hence, the provision of quality, timely information is a high priority for adult social care.

A study carried out by the Office of Fair Trading in 2005 showed that people usually approach their local authority in the first instance when they are looking for information about care services. In addition, the study found that most people approach the council in person or by telephone.

In 2007, a mystery shopping exercise carried out by the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI) found that information provided by councils on adult social care was sometimes inconsistent and that there was no clear pattern of responses across areas. Recommendations relating to the provision of printed information were also made.

In order to determine whether the CSCI findings were of local significance, a mystery shopper study was commissioned in Essex to see how people are treated when they request information by telephone and to see if the processes in place are adequate for service users to make an informed choice.

Methods

During August 2008, a mystery shopping exercise known as 'secret citizen' was implemented and the fieldwork for the study was undertaken by the 'Why Not' Older People's Research Group. In order to carry out the exercise effectively, it was necessary for the mystery shoppers not to disclose their true identity or purpose. Ethical consideration was given to these factors and full ethical approval was obtained from the Essex Social Care Research Governance Group.

Each telephone call made by a member of the Group represented a person's initial contact with Essex County Council enquiring about care options for an elderly relative and the callers were provided with a relevant scenario to base their enquiry upon. There were six scenarios in total and twelve calls were made, each scenario being employed twice. Six calls were made to the Contact Essex 'Adult Social Care' general enquiries number and six calls to the main 'Contact Essex' general enquiries number.

Findings

Each call was assessed by the mystery shoppers in terms of:

- Helpfulness of advisor;
- Information provided on residential and other types of care;
- Advice about an assessment;
- Funding advice;
- Impact of financial situation on response.

While, in the CSCI study, the information provided by councils was reported as being inconsistent between calls, the information provided to the mystery shoppers in this study was viewed as generally consistent. However, only printed materials were offered for information on residential care and not all care options were mentioned. The standard of printed information met the recommendations made by CSCI, although printed information was not received in all cases.

On the basis of these findings, a number of recommendations were made regarding the provision of verbal and printed information.

The original full report detailing findings and recommendations can be requested from:

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References

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