Measuring up

The lead article in this issue gives summary findings of an analysis of local codes of practice for the protection of vulnerable adults. And – as AEA’s imminent national conference will focus on standards, registration and practice, it seems appropriate to give this issue the same title as the conference.

On page 3, you will find details of programme highlights and a ‘last chance invitation’ to book for the “Measuring up” conference.

A personal diary (on page 5) of coping with just one week of referrals reminds us that practice doesn’t always comfortably match theory and an item on page 6 about guidance for district nurses shows that in some sectors guidance lags behind reality.

Also on page 6, an outline of the work of Contact the Elderly illustrates how much improvement in older people’s lives can be achieved by a simple, practical, response.
Good in parts ...

Summary of findings of a national analysis of local codes of practice for the protection of vulnerable adults

Keith Sumner

The Government signalled its commitment to promoting greater protection from abuse for all vulnerable adults in its production of No secrets, first published for consultation in September 1999, and as final guidance in March 2000 – and building upon an earlier signalling of such intentions in 1998 as part of the White Paper Modernising social services, and subsequently in the Home Office document Speaking up for justice (1998).

All local authority social services departments were required to ensure the implementation of the requirements of No secrets, and to complete local codes by 31 October 2001. Whilst this deadline prompted a flurry of activity by those who had not invested a great deal of time (and other resources) in taking on this agenda, an extended period of virtual silence from the government followed. So a refocusing of attention in this area is welcome.

The study

In the second half of 2002, I undertook (on behalf of the Centre for Policy on Ageing) a commission from the Department of Health (DH) to analyse the codes of practice for the protection of vulnerable adults produced by England’s local authorities. The analysis covered 92% of authorities in England with a social services responsibility. The focus centred on three main areas of the many detailed requirements and recommendations of the guidance:

- **High level strategic commitments** - Community partners involved in drawing up, implementing and monitoring the local arrangements, multi-agency frameworks put in place and mechanisms for systems development.
- **More detailed strategic and operational commitments** - The designation of agency leads, reporting systems, training programmes and policy integration.
- **Good practice guidance** - Cross-agency information sharing, common operating principles, decisions around ‘mental capacity’ and staff support (whistle-blowing). Ensuring public awareness and the accessibility of local policy and practice.

The findings

High-level strategic commitments

The vast majority of the codes (80%) demonstrated engagement in significant consultation with local partners, these typically included voluntary, private sector and service user/carers groups. The codes can in the main be considered to be genuinely multi-agency products, drawn up in conjunction with and signed up to by local partners (84% and 64%), expressing a shared set of principles around joint working (93%), a commitment to reducing the occurrence of adult abuse, and the right of individuals to respect, self-determination and involvement in decision making processes. It was, however, noticeable that partners in the housing field were quite often left out of these arrangements.

The vast majority of authorities have opted for stand-alone senior management level committees. The majority of these were in place, though most had only very recently been established, and were still putting mechanisms in place to ensure that they are able to function as required.

Detailed strategy programme

Cross-agency role allocation and accountabilities were clear and explicit in most of the codes (89%), with good examples of procedures supported by expanded guidance notes, and prompt questions or checklists to help staff/carers to recognise an abusive situation and what they are required to do about it.

Mainstreaming adult protection policies and principles is an important aspect of changing the culture of acceptable organisational practice.

Though only a minority of agencies had identified a ‘lead officer’ to act as a resource for operational staff, the majority of the codes gave details of mechanisms that had been put in place to ensure data collection, collation and reporting to senior officers/members. However, much progress is clearly required for a
significantly number of authorities. Mainstreaming adult protection policies and principles is an important aspect of changing the culture of acceptable organisational practice. Whilst it was clear that in relation to agency disciplinary procedures this had been taken on board, a recognition of the role of contracts staff seemed largely restricted to individual investigations and not to the overhaul of purchasing agreements and service specifications with contracted providers. Only a minority of codes made clear reference to this. Lower still (16%) were the findings in relation to recruitment policies taking on board these messages.

Anticipating and identifying funding for the shared costs of implementing No secrets was rarely in evidence.

Most codes acknowledged the importance of training, stating the clear need for partners to ensure training was available to staff, but only 21% of partnerships provided evidence that a strategy had been put into operation. Anticipating and identifying funding for the shared costs of implementing No secrets was rarely in evidence.

Local partnerships appear to be performing less well in terms of producing publicly available information (14%), having a dissemination plan that extends beyond agency boundaries to the wider community (21%) and devising reporting mechanisms

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regarding the activity in this area of practice (4%).

Key elements of good practice guidance

Detailed and illustrative ‘triggers’ to guide staff as to when to intervene in support of an ‘abused’ adult and when to involve colleagues, are contained in almost all the codes.

Similarly high levels were achieved in terms of guidance around working with individuals considered unable to make their own decisions, addressing consent, capacity, and ‘best interests’.

An encouraging finding was the generally high level of inclusion of information-sharing guidance across agencies (77%), as the area of ‘patient confidentiality’ has long been an issue of debate between health and social care agencies. This is, however, so fundamental, that nothing less than 100% can be considered satisfactory.

... particular attention needs to be paid to the full engagement of housing providers.

The concept of ‘whistle-blowing’ has begun to take root over the last few years following the exposure of a number of establishments where poor practice had become endemic, or institutionalised. The lack of support for ‘whistle-blowers’ has highlighted the need for agencies to embrace such policies. The presence of such policy statements in two thirds of the codes provides a good foundation from which to progress.

The stated availability of summary versions of the policy for staff (8%), for the public (4%), its availability in local community languages, (6%) or Braille/audio versions (8%) was very low. The highest scoring item in this section, though still poor, was for the production of leaflets (14%).

With a few exceptions, this area of work is clearly not recognised in terms of its key role in changing the climate of ignorance about, or tacit tolerance of, abuse. The very limited evidence of developed dissemination strategies (21%) supports this conclusion.

Some conclusions

Whilst a significant number of authorities are clearly making good progress and considerable efforts to address the central requirements and issues highlighted in No secrets, the remaining majority of authorities clearly have to address a range of issues. The ‘ratings’ for these authorities give cause for concern, in that they indicate very little progress across a broad range of areas identified as key to realising the aspirations of No secrets.

There is good evidence of a strong commitment to engaging and working with both statutory partners and local voluntary and private providers. The dialogue with service users and carers is also encouraging. The production of genuinely multi-agency codes should in time facilitate much better communication and practices.

However, there remain too many exceptions to be complacent. Many authorities need to engage partners beyond the statutory sector and particular attention needs to be paid to the full engagement of housing providers.

Of most concern is the very patchy performance in thinking through how to enact a comprehensive strategy to disseminate the work of the partnerships.

Great effort has been put into developing detailed procedures for staff - identification, alerting, investigating and care planning for risk reduction and protection - essential if a person-centred approach, based on inter-agency communication and co-operation is to be achieved. Good progress has also been made with recognising the need for comprehensive data collection and analysis, integration of the codes aims with other policy areas and staff training. However, the full implementation of these stated goals remains aspirational for many authorities.

Of most concern is the very patchy performance in thinking through how to enact a comprehensive strategy to disseminate the work of the partnerships. Widespread familiarity with policies is fundamental for local partners and the broader public. This is frequently the case within agencies, and predominantly the case with consideration of informing and engaging the public.

Whilst the initial focus on investigative aspects of the work has been absolutely necessary, and an understandable priority, local partnerships now need to build on these foundations to...
address areas highlighted in this report that contribute to the prevention of abuse.

Through raising awareness, attitudinal change, tight administrative and commissioning practices, securing the necessary pooled resources to equip staff with the skills and support they need, we can progress to bring about these changes.

If this commission signals a renewed commitment from Government to lift this area of great concern back up the crowded agenda of the statutory agencies, it has come not a moment to soon. This and related work undertaken by colleagues at King’s College London (Dinah Matthew) and Wolverhampton University (Professor Paul Kingston) should be supported by the DH to drive local implementation forward as a priority during 2003.

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