Preventing challenging behaviour of adults with complex needs in supported accommodation – a follow up study

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Background
SSCR provided funding during 2012-14 for a trial of a new approach to the prevention of challenging behaviour in residential social care settings for people with learning disabilities. The trial (organised as a cluster RCT) was carried out in collaboration with Dimensions who seconded two staff to the University of Kent to support the trial. While challenging behaviour is often managed as though it were a problem of individuals, there is widespread recognition of its frequent relationship with the quality of social care. The trial set out to evaluate the impact of a strategy for improving social care on challenging behaviour and associated outcomes.

Twenty four settings were randomly allocated to experimental or control group. Within the experimental group social care practice was reviewed. Improvement programmes were operationalised as standards to be achieved during intervention. Their achievement was supported through a range of activities centred on coaching managers and staff to enhance their performance and draw more effectively on existing resources. Progress was monitored monthly over approximately 9 months with a visual record of change being fed back to each setting. Data on people with learning disabilities and the staff supporting them allowed comparison of experimental and control groups before and after the intervention.

80% of standards set were achieved across settings. Structured observations blind to group membership showed substantial improvements in staff performance (e.g. in activity provision, choice and demand presentation). Ratings of challenging behaviour showed substantial and significant reductions in the experimental group. Staff reported a better quality of working life and many said they had gained skills and found the intervention enjoyable.

It was concluded that some challenging behaviour in social care settings may be prevented by relatively simple interventions which attend to the quality of social care support, especially with respect to communication, health, activities, relationships and the wider social and physical environment.

Subsequently, Dimensions is seeking to implement the approach more widely and more routinely within their social care provision. It remains the case, however, that evidence to support the approach is limited to this one trial in which final data collection occurred immediately after the end of the intervention. The current study will explore the extent to which the gains found in the experimental group have been maintained over time.

Summary of study
The aim of this follow-up study is to establish to what extent the changes found in the original study (including service processes, staff experiences and adult outcomes) have been maintained. Data gathered will include the primary outcome measure (scores on Aberrant Behaviour Checklist) of challenging behaviour. It is proposed to collect a subset of the data previously collected at baseline and immediately after the intervention in both experimental and control group settings, as follows:
Data will be gathered on the maintenance of the Standards set in the experimental group through half day visits to each residential setting. These visits will be carried out by the original research workers. The data to be gathered regarding maintenance of the standards will be a mixture of quantitative and qualitative. Typically it is gathered through working with the manager of each setting for approximately half a day and seeking to identify evidence for the continuing achievement of each of the approximately 140 standards originally established in that setting. Evidence will sometimes be found in documentation (e.g., the use of personalised activity schedules), sometimes come from direct observation (e.g., the availability and use of garden facilities) and sometimes from records of checks directly carried out by the manager (e.g., from observations by the manager of staff interacting with service users). In the course of this, the manager will typically provide many reports of both positive and negative outcomes which will inform the overall scoring of the standards and also provide rich background data on why some have been maintained and others not. This data will allow an evaluation of the extent to which, without external involvement, managers of residential settings have been able to maintain specific elements of the original intervention;

Staff (approximately 300) in all experimental and control group settings will be asked to complete a slightly reduced version of the Staff Experiences and Satisfaction Questionnaire which they completed at previous data points. This data will provide information on a range of aspects of staff experience including quality of working life and extent to which they were subject to, or witnesses of, challenging behaviour. Even during the original study, there was considerable staff turnover. Data will be gathered from all consenting staff, both those who were in post at earlier data collection points and those who were not. We have used a coded response system so that it is possible to match up questionnaires anonymously with those completed by the same staff previously;

All staff in experimental settings who have been in post long enough to have experienced the intervention (approximately 60) will be asked to complete a one page questionnaire reflecting on the impact of the intervention. This is intended to be a measure of Social Validity – the extent to which staff saw the intervention as useful and beneficial to them and the people they support;

Keyworkers for service user participants (N=81 though likely to be some attrition) in experimental and control group settings will be asked to complete a shortened version of the Individual Schedule completed at previous datapoints. This data will provide information on challenging behaviour and the way in which this is typically managed.

Funding, ethics and governance

Dimensions has indicated its willingness to support the process of data collection and provide the time of two of its staff (Emmett Smyth and Will Clover) at no cost to collect Standards data and facilitate the process of obtaining further consent from staff and service users in the 50% of the residential settings where they originally carried out these tasks. The third of the original research workers (Leah Vanono) is being re-employed on a short term contract with funding from the School for Social Care Research, who funded the original study. A Master’s student (Sheila Sekasi) will also assist with the study and will draw on the results for her dissertation.

SCREC has provided ethical for the study. Consent for follow up data collection will be sought in the same manner as previously, including the identification of consultees where
required. The University of Kent is sponsoring the project under the terms of the RGF. 

*Dimensions*, as noted above, has indicated their support for the project. We will also seek organisational approval from other care providers who are now responsible for some of the residential settings following reprovision. Local authority governance approval was originally obtained from nine local authorities. All of these will be contacted by letter outlining the planned follow up and asking for advice about any further information required.

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