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## **Abuse of people with learning disabilities: An examination of policy, practice and educational implications in Wales**

### **SUMMARY REPORT**

**December 2004**

**Professor Ruth Northway  
Dr Rachel Davies  
Ian Mansell  
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Professor Gavin Fairbairn**



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Development for Health and Social Care**

## **Background**

People with learning disabilities are one group of adults who may be vulnerable to abuse<sup>1</sup> and evidence from the numerous inquiry reports suggests that this is a complex and multi-faceted problem (e.g. Buckinghamshire County Council, 1998; Committee of Inquiry, 1969; Committee of Inquiry, 1978). Both The National Assembly of Wales (2000) and the Department of Health (200) have produced guidance documents from which services can develop policies to protect vulnerable adults from abuse. Written policies are important as they provide a framework that clarifies the responsibilities of individuals and agencies that may be involved (Stein and Brown, 1995).

Policies by themselves cannot protect people. Staff need to be educated about the policy in order to ensure that people are protected through their practice. The need for a co-ordinated, multi-agency, collaborative approach to policy and practice in relation to adult protection has thus been identified (National Assembly for Wales, 2000). It cannot be assumed that because a policy has been developed it will be appropriately disseminated to staff (Brown *et al*, 1994). Appropriate staff education is seen, therefore, as an important element of strategies that seek to protect people with learning disabilities from abuse (Cambridge, 2000; Stein and Brown, 1995; Sobsey, 1994).

Effective adult protection requires policies to be in place, positively communicated, and coordinated between agencies. These principles both underpin recent policy development in Wales (National Assembly for Wales, 2000) and have shaped the development of this study.

## **Aims**

The study seeks to address the question ‘To what extent is best practice in relation to preventing, identifying and responding to the abuse of people with learning disabilities evident within Wales?’ .To achieve this aim specific objectives were set:

1. To review existing published evidence of physical, sexual, psychological and financial/material abuse of people with learning disabilities as well as evidence of neglect.
2. To identify best practice in relation to preventing, identifying and responding to the abuse of people with learning disabilities (to include staff training / education).
3. To gather data concerning current policy, procedures and staff training / education amongst providers of health and social care to people with learning disabilities within Wales.
4. To explore the perceptions of practitioners working with people with learning disabilities regarding their training and support needs in relation to preventing, identifying and responding to abuse.

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<sup>1</sup> This study reflects national guidance in taking a broad definition to include physical, sexual, neglect psychological, financial, or material as abuse forms.

## Method

All agencies in Wales with a role in the protection of people with learning disabilities from abuse were invited to participate in the study. This included Social Service departments, NHS trusts (and specialist learning disability directorates within these trusts), the Police, Local Education Authorities and Voluntary and Private sector organisations.

The study used a multi-method, multi-stage design with each stage building on the outcomes of the previous stage<sup>2</sup>:

*Stage 1* – a review of the literature pertaining to the abuse of people with learning disabilities.

*Stage 2* – an all Wales survey of policy and training activity directed at service managers, policy developers and trainers.

*Stage 3* – a series of focus groups held throughout Wales with direct care staff focussing on policy awareness, adult protection practice and training experiences.

## Key Findings

The following is a brief summary of some significant results from the study. More detail on specific aspects can be provided by the report authors.

### *Stage 1*

Adult protection sources were collated into a database that provides an ongoing resource of 800 fully searchable items. Literature mainly covers abuse prevention, abuse awareness and training and abuse investigations / justice issues.

### *Stage 2*

- ❑ Variations exist across Wales in terms of the nature of policies, and training provided for staff, both between agencies and between geographical areas.
- ❑ The majority of respondents within statutory services are signed up to a multi-agency policy but this was less noticeable the voluntary and private sectors.
- ❑ Approximately half of respondents supplement these policies with agency specific policies.

### *Stage 3*

The views of staff can be divided into several key categories:

- ❑ Context of abuse – many individual and organisational factors impact on adult protection practice
- ❑ Roles and responsibilities – staff have multiple responsibilities for adult protection and sometimes there is conflict between roles or a lack of recognition
- ❑ Helps and hindrances in the adult protection role – many things contribute to the ability of staff to perform their role. For example, consistency and communication can help while a lack of resources and lack of awareness can hinder.
- ❑ Training – many staff had positive experiences of adult protection training but want more regular and more advanced training.
- ❑ Awareness of policies – knowledge of the existence and content of policies was extremely variable
- ❑ Improving protection from abuse – staff had many ideas for improving protection

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<sup>2</sup> Approval for the study was obtained from the Multi-Centre Research Ethics Committee (MREC) prior to commencement

## Conclusions

This study has illustrated strengths and challenges in the adult protection context in Wales. The remit of investigating policy, practice and education has enabled these aspects of adult protection to be evaluated and the important interplay between them to be highlighted. Some areas of best practice have been noted but other areas requiring further development have also been identified. The study was limited by the number of participants (n=148) however the majority of health trusts and social service departments participated.

## Recommendations

Recommendations are made based on the detailed findings of the study. These recommendations encompass actions aimed at primary, secondary and tertiary prevention and address the responsibilities of individuals, services and government.

1. **Clarity is required in the exact nature of the adult protection responsibilities for individuals and agencies in order to reduce role ambiguity and to promote awareness.** Proposed actions:

- ❑ Serious consideration should be given to the development of dedicated vulnerable adult officers and units within the police.
- ❑ Local authorities should consider giving increasing prominence to the role of the Adult Protection Coordinator and consider making this a dedicated role.
- ❑ The adult protection role of inspectors and regulators needs to be clarified and publicised
- ❑ Social Services need to give consideration to the interface between adult protection and care management and to ensure that sufficient support is given if dual roles are required
- ❑ The role of the Adult Protection Coordinators in raising awareness amongst all agencies and the general public is recognised in some areas and needs to be mirrored throughout Wales.
- ❑ Engaging LEAs with the issue of adult protection should be addressed as a priority.
- ❑ Engaging the voluntary and private sectors with the issue of adult protection should be addressed as a priority and viewed as an area for further research.
- ❑ Improving awareness raising and training for vulnerable adults and their families should be given greater priority by services and training coordinators.

2. **Consistency in prevention and response to adult protection should be addressed as a matter of priority.** Proposed actions:

- ❑ Adult Protection Fora and Adult Protection Committees across Wales should clarify their role and function and ensure this information is shared with all relevant agencies.
- ❑ Adult Protection Fora in Wales need to develop mechanisms to share good practice and learn lessons on an all Wales basis
- ❑ Adult Protection Fora (or Adult Protection Committees) need to consider marketing their multi-agency policies to agencies in their area who are not currently signed up, particularly to voluntary and private sector organisations
- ❑ Consideration should be given to an all Wales adult protection policy
- ❑ Future research should be undertaken into the function of internal agency policies and how this relates to agencies signing-up to multi-agency policies
- ❑ Diverse perceptions on thresholds of abuse need to be explored in order to provide staff guidance regarding a hierarchy of abuse versus zero tolerance of abuse

- Consideration is needed on how abuse of vulnerable adults by other vulnerable adults is addressed through adult protection policies and practice
  - The existence of the Practitioner Alliance for Vulnerable Adults (PAVA) should be promoted across Wales and more groups developed if required.
  - More informal local networks to learn lessons should be developed
  - Future research should be undertaken to evaluate the quantity and quality of adult protection training to ensure it best meets the training and support needs of staff
3. **Future policy development needs to give considerable attention to facilitating implementation and to monitor impact on practice.** Proposed actions:
- Whistle blowing needs to be promoted as part of adult protection responsibility.
  - Staff should be made aware of whistle blowing policies and support mechanisms.
  - Services should strive to create a safe and receptive environment for people to disclose abuse or raise concerns.
  - Collaborative research is needed with services regarding bridging the policy-practice gap and evaluating policy impact.
4. **Justice in cases of vulnerable adult abuse must become a real possibility.** Proposed actions:
- The impact of ‘Achieving Best Evidence’ and the use of Special Measures upon prosecutions in adult abuse cases should be evaluated
  - Police authorities should ensure services understand what actions could contaminate future investigations and advise on appropriate initial responses.
  - The viability of a legislative framework for adult protection should be given serious attention
  - Joint investigator training between police and social services should be expanded to ensure that sufficiently trained personnel are available
  - Strong relationships between the police and other agencies in some areas of Wales should be emulated
  - Every police officer should be aware of the need for appropriate interviewing of vulnerable adults and should know who is trained to conduct this interviewing within their area
  - Consideration should be given to educating the judiciary in the needs of vulnerable adult witnesses and victims
  - Research should be undertaken with vulnerable adults regarding their perceptions of justice and redress.

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