

Challenging behaviour in supported housing

Outline of a research project
funded by the NIHR School
for Social Care Research



Improving the evidence base for
adult social care practice

Can changes in social care arrangements in supported accommodation prevent challenging behaviour by residents with learning disabilities?

Some people with learning disabilities living in supported accommodation display 'challenging' behaviour that can be aggressive, destructive or self-injuring. Social care staff find this behaviour difficult to manage and may in response use restrictive practices such as physically restraining the person. It is also more costly to support an individual who shows serious challenging behaviour.

Challenging behaviour can have many different causes but is often related to the way carers provide support. It may, for instance, be one way in which people with limited communication and other skills can control what happens to them. As a result, tackling challenging behaviour often requires changes in social care arrangements but this can be difficult, partly because many carers are focused on causal factors within the individual. If arrangements that make challenging behaviour less likely were routinely put in place, there would be less need for individually-focused change. This project will test this approach.

This project

- seeks to intervene directly in the organisation and provision of social care with a view to altering the factors that contribute to challenging behaviour, thus preventing its future occurrence.

It aims to

- facilitate social care improvements for service users with learning difficulties in a number of supported accommodation settings
- intervene at the level of the supported accommodation setting, rather than the individual
- prevent challenging behaviour and enhance quality of life for residents with learning disabilities and their co-tenants
- evaluate the intervention through a cluster randomised controlled trial to demonstrate whether the intervention: prevents and reduces the severity of challenging behavior; enhances quality of life; enhances staff working life through reductions in injury, fear and stress; enhances quality of life for co-tenants; reduces the need for specialist social care and/or health provision.

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WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

Challenging behaviour remains a significant problem in supported accommodation settings among people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, with a range of negative consequences. Firstly, almost half of residential care services report the use of restrictive responses such as physical intervention. Secondly, challenging behaviour is associated with high rates of injury to care staff. Thirdly, it is associated with the breakdown of care placement arrangements and the subsequent, costly removal of individuals to more restrictive, out-of-area settings.

Generally, challenging behaviour is treated as an individual, health-related problem requiring treatment by psychologists, psychiatrists or other behaviour support professionals. Many such professionals seek to support positive behaviour, an approach which inevitably leads to a focus on the social care arrangements in which challenging behaviour is occurring. However, this type of systems change is not easy and there are regular reports of difficulties in implementing the proposed treatments.

These challenges are not unique to social care. For example, the problems of difficult behaviour presented in schools have been recognised as requiring a broader approach, more focused on prevention. The development of school-wide positive behaviour support in the US reflects this. As yet, there has been relatively little attention to the potential for a similar approach in adult social care.

This type of broad approach would be consistent with theoretical developments in the current understanding of the causes of challenging behaviour. Once seen as an almost inevitable concomitant of intellectual disability, it is now regarded as a result of the complex interaction of biological, developmental and environmental factors. Of particular relevance to this project, is evidence that certain characteristics of the social environment may underpin the motivation for challenging behaviour. Altering such 'motivating operations' is thus a theoretically viable approach to preventing or reducing the occurrence of challenging behaviour in those at

Factors affecting behaviour

Areas associated with challenging behaviour, or with its solution, include:

- provision of opportunities for choice
- creation of predictable environments
- establishment of positive social interactions
- encouragement of more independent functioning
- honouring of personalised routines and activities.

increased biological or developmental risk.

This project aims to investigate a systemic, theoretically-driven approach to the problem, in which the focus is on improving the quality of social care arrangements in areas known to be associated with causing, or alleviating, challenging behaviour (see Box).

In so doing the project will help social care providers to provide more of the inputs associated with the absence of challenging behaviour and less of those associated with its occurrence. Such an approach promises substantial quality of life improvements for individuals, better work environments for staff and a reduction in the costs associated with specialist care and out of area placements.

HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

The project will carry out a cluster randomised controlled trial of the impact of social care improvements on challenging behaviour and associated outcomes. The research will address whether improved social care:

- prevents and reduces severity of challenging behaviour
- enhances quality of life
- enhances staff working life through reductions in injury, fear and stress
- enhances quality of life for co-tenants
- produces broader benefits for the health and social care economy such as reduced need for specialist social care and/or health provision.

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STAGE 1: Participant recruitment

Participants will be adults with learning disabilities living in supported accommodation settings, together with the staff supporting them. Settings may be organised in different ways (e.g. as residential care or supported living). All settings will include at least one person with a recent history of displaying frequent and/or serious challenging behaviour. Most settings will have more than one such person. The proposed sample size will be 25 people currently presenting challenging behaviour, 25 people not currently presenting challenging behavior, and 100 support staff. It is expected that 12–13 accommodation settings will be involved per group of 25 participants.

Dimensions, the social care provider, will identify services supporting suitable participants. Where participants lack the capacity to give informed consent, consultation will be undertaken in line with the Mental Capacity Act to establish whether or not each potential participant should take part in the project.

STAGE 2: Social care improvements

Accommodation settings will be randomly allocated to experimental and control groups. Following baseline data collection, work to improve the quality of social care will begin in the experimental group settings. This work will be carried out over a 10-month period by the project team, working in collaboration with Dimensions' own personnel. The process (derived from the literature on performance management) will be tailored to each setting and will involve:

- agreement of changes required
- development of performance standards
- development of monitoring arrangements
- use of monitoring to provide feedback and identify areas for additional work
- provision of additional support or training.

STAGE 3: Data collection

The research worker involved in gathering baseline and follow-up data will be blind to group membership. Measures will be employed to gather information on four sets of variables across the experimental and control groups:

- characteristics of the people with learning disabilities and support staff
- quality of social care at the beginning and end of the trial
- frequency and severity of challenging behaviour, quality of life of tenants/residents and co-tenants/co-residents, support staff working experiences, and broader outcomes for health and social care economy, at the beginning and the end of the trial
- qualitative data on the process and perceived impact of the intervention.

Throughout the intervention the research workers will record and reflect upon the process. Data will arise from diaries they keep, records of supervision with the project leader, and other processes such as records generated within the experimental settings.

STAGE 4: Analysis and outputs

Changes in the experimental settings will be contrasted with the control group. Research workers will also review with staff (and service users where possible), through interviews and focus groups, their experience and perceptions of the intervention. They will produce two related outputs: a detailed description of the process of intervening in accommodation settings in this way as a guide for further work; and a discussion of the factors that enhance or obstruct this kind of intervention.

Project publications

Publications will include an accessible 'Findings' document, to be placed on the websites of the Tizard Centre, Dimensions, the Challenging Behaviour – National Strategy Group and other organisations, and a key messages briefing document. There will also be a short administrative report, one or more peer-reviewed papers, a note reflecting on the methods used and any issues/lessons that arose, and at least three presentations given to relevant audiences. Dissemination will be promoted through the incorporation of the findings in the teaching and training provided by the Tizard Centre, summary articles in practitioner journals and the use of relevant networks.

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HOW DOES THE PROJECT FIT THE AIMS OF THE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH?

This research will potentially offer widespread benefits for adult social care practice in England by identifying effective strategies for preventing challenging behaviour in supported accommodation among adults with learning difficulties. These strategies will aim to have an immediate impact on the users and paid carers in the project's experimental group. The project also aims to influence commissioners, regulators and policy makers to encourage step changes in adult social care practice with people at risk of displaying challenging behaviour. Since the project is being carried out in partnership with a major social care provider it is anticipated that successful findings will lead to changing practices for many of the provider's 2,500 service users.

Broader impact will be sought through dissemination of findings across a range of professional outlets and networks. The project has the active involvement of the Challenging Behaviour – National Strategy Group which is supported by the Department of Health to address, nationally, the needs of people with learning disabilities.

The Research Team

Peter McGill, Reader in Clinical Psychology of Learning Disability and Co-Director at the Tizard Centre, University of Kent, will be responsible for the overall direction of the project, the development and application of the methodology, the analysis and interpretation of the results and writing reports and articles.

Vivien Cooper, Chair of Trustees of the Challenging Behaviour Foundation, will provide a family carer perspective, liaise with families of participants where necessary and support the dissemination of findings through the Challenging Behaviour Foundation and the Challenging Behaviour – National Strategy Group.

Lisa Hopkins, Director of Specialist Development at Dimensions, will be responsible for facilitating access to appropriate services within Dimensions, disseminating findings within Dimensions and ensuring that effective practices are maintained following completion of the project.

Professor Glynis Murphy, Professor of Clinical Psychology of Learning Disability and Co-Director at Tizard Centre, will be responsible in particular for advising on randomised controlled trial methodology.

Project title:
Preventing challenging behaviour of adults with complex needs in supported accommodation

Timescale:
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Budget:
£279,024

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