Adult social care in need of a radical overhaul

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The case for social care reform: the wider economic and social benefits - Executive Summary (pdf; opens in new window) (/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/HSMC/publications/2010/social-care-reform-executive-summary-feb2010.pdf)

The case for social care reform: the wider economic and social benefits - Final Report (pdf; opens in new window) (/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/HSMC/publications/2010/The-case-for-social-care-reform.pdf)

A radical overhaul of the adult social care system is being called for by Birmingham University researchers following an independent analysis of the social and financial gains that could be reaped.

The case for social care reform – the wider economic and social benefits, which was produced by the University of Birmingham's Health Services Management Centre, concludes that without a radical rethink of current priorities the real cost of providing social care will double in the next twenty years.

The report's authors argue that spending on adult social care should not be seen as 'dead money'. Instead, it is a form of social and economic investment that has the potential to deliver a better service for the people who use social care services, whilst also generating significant savings in other parts of the welfare state.

An improved social care system could generate significant savings by reducing the number of hospital admissions and the pressure on emergency hospital beds. The report also argues that helping social care users into paid employment could reduce social security spending whilst also providing a significant boost to the economy.

Professor Jon Glasby, the report's lead author, comments: "In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that aspects of the adult social care system are fundamentally broken. This stems from the fact that we have a 1940s system that is now no longer fit for purpose. Social care spending is not a necessary evil. A more effective system would deliver benefits for those who use services and their families.

The next decade will see increasing pressure on social care services as our population ages. Instituting reform now has the potential to generate significant savings in other parts of the welfare state, whilst also stopping the social care budget spiralling out of control."

As part of a more detailed analysis, the report reviews five key mechanisms for reforming social care, setting out the likely cost implications of no action, some action and significant action under each heading:

- Strategic commissioning – rather than delivering all services in-house, there is increasing focus on delivering the best value for money by securing services from a much more mixed economy of care.
- Greater collaboration between health and social care – local agencies working together could potentially meet needs more effectively and may be able to reduce the costs of operating independently of each other.
- Personalisation – emerging evidence suggests that direct payments and personal budgets may be able to achieve better outcomes for either the same or potentially slightly less money for some user groups.
- Greater use of IT – to provide better support to people through a system of telecare as well as to improve the efficiency of current working practices.
- Workforce reform – at present, there are a series of costs associated with unfilled vacancies, use of agency staff and absenteeism which might be reduced by successful workforce reform.

Professor Glasby adds: " Radical reform of social care ought to focus on creating a system that is not only more efficient but that also provides better care and support.

In practice, there is wide and arguably unacceptable variation in levels of spending on adult social care across the country and the types of services that are supported. Whilst maintaining local flexibility in services is important, government should be clear about the desired outcomes of care and hold local services accountable for delivering these outcomes.

What is clear, is that doing nothing is not a viable option."

Health Secretary Andy Burnham said: "We commissioned this report to look into the potential social and economic benefits of reforming social care, and the report has concluded that there is a compelling case for change. Their findings show that by investing in social care and giving help to the most vulnerable, we can also help to build strong communities and help the economy. It can cut unnecessary hospital admissions and help social care users into work and off benefits.

"People shouldn't have to run down their life savings to pay for care or lack choice on where and how they are cared for. That's why we are looking at reforming the whole care and support system.

"With an ageing population, action is needed now. We will shortly set out a blueprint for a National Care Service that will offer a, simpler, fairer and more affordable system."

The report was commissioned by the Department of Health.

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