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Executive Summary

Background

Occupational therapy services for older people are a part of adult social care services in England, social work service in Scotland and social services in Wales. Older people are the main users of health and social services (Department of Health (DH) 2001) and the numbers of people over the age of 65 in the UK are expected to rise with the highest increase in those over 85 (Office for National Statistics 2012). This will place additional pressures on social care services at a time when resources are becoming increasingly scarce.

Across Great Britain, National Service Frameworks and strategies for older people emphasise the need for services that help people to manage and maintain independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible, (DH 2001; Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) 2006, 2008; Scottish Executive 2005, 2007). Government policies in England, Scotland and Wales (DH 2008, Scottish Executive 2006, WAG 2007) state that this is achievable through a preventative and enabling approach to social service provision that reduces the need for complex and costly packages of care.

Occupational therapists in social services have traditionally been engaged in the provision of equipment and adaptations aimed at enabling people with disabilities to remain active within their own homes and communities (Mountain 2000). Although occupational therapists in social services for adults make up a small proportion of the social care workforce (approximately 2% in England, 1.3% in Scotland and 1.5% in Wales) they have a key role to play in promoting individuals' self-reliance and resourcefulness (COT 2008). Despite their small numbers, occupational therapists are reported as handling over 35% of the referrals for adult social care services and their skills have been identified as key to the delivery of Government policies in England, Scotland and Wales (Riley 2007, Riley et al 2008, Riley 2010). The majority of service users with whom occupational therapists engage are older adults and female. Since Mountain's (2000) review of the literature, systematic reviews of evidence relating to occupational therapy for older people in the community have been conducted in Europe (Steultjens et al 2004, Johansson et al 2010) but no reviews have concentrated specifically on Great Britain, or on the impact of occupational therapists' interventions for older adults in social care settings.



The purpose of this report

Occupational therapy in social services for older people in England, Scotland and Wales (Great Britain) remain a local authority responsibility, whereas in Northern Ireland, health and social care is integrated into one structure. In view of these organisational differences, this critical review of the literature relating to occupational therapy for older people in local authority social services focuses on Great Britain.

Since 2000, changes have occurred in social care provision across Great Britain. Devolved powers in Scotland and Wales have led to the development of different social care policies: *Changing Lives* in Scotland (Scottish Executive 2006), *Fulfilled Lives, Supportive Communities* in Wales (WAG 2007) and *Putting People First* in England (DH 2008). Taking into account policy directives and organisational drivers since then, this study aimed to critically review and synthesise the post-2000 evidence on the effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions for older people in social care services in Great Britain in preventing the need for complex packages of care, by using a wide range of published and unpublished literature to investigate:

1. The nature of social services occupational therapy interventions for older people in Great Britain.
2. The policy contexts and organisational factors that influence the delivery of such occupational therapy interventions.
3. The effectiveness of these interventions in maintaining older people's independence and preventing dependency, and how this is evaluated.
4. The benefits of occupational therapy interventions for older people themselves.
5. The cost-effectiveness of such interventions.

Summary of the key findings

The key findings from this review are summarised thematically.

The nature of occupational therapy services for older people

Local authority responsibilities for social care services and geographical differences across Great Britain inevitably impact on how occupational therapy services are organised and delivered. Social care services are generally described as being organisationally-driven and resource-led. No substantial differences were identified in the types of occupational therapy provided for older people in England, Scotland or Wales. The provision of equipment and adaptations remains a predominant feature of occupational therapy services for adults, the majority of whom are over 60 years of age. However, occupational therapists are becoming more involved in reablement and rehabilitation services.

Influences on occupational therapy service provision

Workforce issues such as recruitment and retention, career development, pay and grading impact on service provision. However, organisational constraints such as eligibility criteria and the use of shared assessments can compromise occupational therapists' specialist professional action. When this occurs, occupational therapists tend to use their professional judgement to navigate the system and ensure a client-centred outcome.



Occupational therapy professional issues

The social model predominates in social care services and this links well with the person-centred philosophy of occupational therapy. However, occupational therapists have found difficulty in making full use of their professional skills and their core values can be compromised by concentrating on service user's functional limitations. The creation of reablement services with an emphasis on maintaining independence also fits well with the occupationally focussed and enabling philosophy of occupational therapy.

Access to services

Access to occupational therapy services in all three countries are controlled by eligibility criteria and this can cause problems for older service users and their carers in finding their way into the system. Referral rates for occupational therapy services are consistently reported as being high and various methods are in place across the three countries for managing referrals. In addition, reablement services also have rigorous screening processes in place.

Occupational therapy intervention

Intervention in the context of social care includes assessment, actions following assessment and follow up. The complexities of shared assessments for older people was a major theme in the literature and was found to detract from occupational therapists' specialist actions. Such actions commonly involved the provision of equipment and adaptations as solutions to problems with personal care and to enable and maintain older people at home. Regular follow up was considered important to ensure that service users were not re-referred, but was reported as inconsistent in all three countries.

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of occupational therapy for older service users in social care services is complicated by the diverse contexts in which intervention takes place and the inherent problems in disaggregating occupational therapy from other aspects of the service. However, occupational therapy is generally claimed to be effective in improving quality of life and independence for service users. Where occupational therapists are part of reablement and rehabilitation teams, they contribute to cost-effectiveness through savings on home care and residential care. Service users also reported high levels of satisfaction with occupational therapy services once received. The literature revealed that a range of outcome measures are used by social services occupational therapists, although not consistently, and no single outcome measure emerged as being specifically appropriate for use in social care settings. Outcome measures that are generally used in healthcare are not necessarily appropriate in social care where the focus is on maintenance rather than improvement. Setting realistic timescales to measure outcomes, especially for housing adaptations, was considered crucial.

Collaborative working

Working with others across professional and organisational boundaries is key to occupational therapy practice in social care services. Managing boundaries and defining roles can be an issue, especially where occupational therapists are involved in shared assessment processes and multi-disciplinary teams. Older service users



and carers also require clarification of roles to avoid unnecessary confusion and duplication.

Issues for service users and carers

Occupational therapists in social care services are generally regarded as helpful and understanding and as problem-solvers by service users and their carers. They are also seen as advocates for service users and navigators through complex processes such as disabled facilities grants. Occupational therapy services, and especially equipment and adaptations, improve service users' confidence, quality of life, feelings of safety and dignity. Good adaptations and equipment provision have positive outcomes for service users and carers, who also appreciate being a part of the process and informed at all stages.

Time- related issues

Waiting times, both for access to occupational therapy services and for service provision following assessment, remain an issue and service users need to be kept informed of waiting time at all stages. The timeliness of occupational therapy interventions is an important factor in enabling older people to engage in their everyday occupations and crucial to effectiveness. Timely provision of equipment and adaptations can prevent deterioration and ameliorate changes in older people's health and ability.

Communication issues

Communication between occupational therapists and older service users is generally regarded as appropriate once the service user has entered the system. However, there is a lack of publically available and easily accessible information about occupational therapy services. Older people are often unaware of how long they might have to wait for services and require information throughout the process. Within social services the role of occupational therapy, despite its effectiveness, can be overlooked and occupational therapists need to be more proactive in publicising what they do if they are to be recognised as an essential element in transforming social care in Great Britain.

Reshaping services

Occupational therapists have begun to develop new roles in social care reablement and rehabilitation in response to Government directions in all three countries. They are also developing new roles in other local authority departments such as housing. However, the importance of their traditional role in providing effective adaptations and equipment for older people remains important; and needs to be protected and built on. In the future occupational therapists need to be more proactive in shaping wider social care agendas by addressing occupational issues, prevention and early intervention.



Conclusion

The integrated nature of social services and collaborative working, together with differences in working practices across local authorities, makes occupational therapy difficult to disaggregate from other aspects of social services. This review, nonetheless, has identified that occupational therapists in local authority social services, despite being a small proportion of the workforce, are effective in providing services that maintain older people's independence and improve their quality of life in a cost-effective way. To ensure effectiveness, interventions must be delivered in a timely manner and this can be compromised by organisational constraints and the high demand for occupational therapy services.

Summary of the recommendations

Further research is needed into:

- The effectiveness of occupational therapy in social services and whether it is possible to disaggregate it from other services.
- The impact of organisational constraints on the effectiveness of occupational therapy social care services.
- The effectiveness of rehabilitation and reablement social care teams where occupational therapists are involved.

Occupational therapists need to:

- Acknowledge the importance of their role in providing equipment and adaptations that effectively contribute to older service users' occupational engagement, independence, health and well-being.
- Be more proactive in publicising the effectiveness of their interventions more widely.
- Be more proactive in engaging in wider policy and organisational issues.
- Investigate the appropriate use of outcome measures.
- Carry out regular audits and evaluations to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their services.
- Publish the evidence supporting the effectiveness of their interventions.

Local authorities need to:

- Identify mechanisms for assisting older service users through complex processes, such as disabled facilities grants and major adaptations.
- Implement procedures to reduce the disproportionate amount of time that occupational therapists (a scarce resource) spend on administration such as completing shared assessments.
- Support occupational therapists in widening their role into rehabilitation and reablement.
- Identify appropriate follow up procedures for older service users once occupational therapy interventions are completed.
- Ensure that estimated waiting times at all stages in the process are published and accessible to service users.



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