**The looming row over adult social care assessments**

There is a fresh row brewing in adult social care with government and the regulator about addressing waiting lists and the conduct of assessments of people on them.

At the heart of this are old questions about what you need qualified social workers or occupational therapists to do and whether you address the presenting problem or undertake a more comprehensive review of people’s circumstances. Concern about hidden safeguarding issues has grown too as awareness of its prevalence increases in partner agencies.

The perceived need for speed around hospital discharges and crises has also accentuated this dilemma, leading to a plethora of triaging, prioritising, and pending mechanisms.

Staff shortages in these professions and wider budget pressures has added to the case for quick, pragmatic approaches.

While this has bubbled away for years, it is coming to the boil again as the Care Quality Commission has kicked off its assurance process testing how councils are fulfilling their responsibilities under the Care Act 2014, the key legislation on these matters.

Their inspectors are looking at how people with care and support needs can have the best possible outcomes because their care and support needs are assessed in a timely and consistent way. They are seeking evidence that plans are co-produced, up-to-date, and regularly reviewed in a transparent way. Similarly, people should be supported to make choices that balance risks with positive choice and control in their lives.

All this requires skills, judgment, and a degree of proportionality in approach. No-one should be drawn into a more complex process than their circumstances warrant and the council is legally entitled to put in places processes that have regard to the best use of increasingly limited resources.

COVID accelerated different approaches to where, when, and how should people talk to an assessor. Can the job be done properly by telephone or on-line, can it be delegated to another organisation, and how do you judge whether that person has the capacity to participate, is not being coerced or otherwise at risk?

Perhaps anticipating CQC’s concerns, the Chief Social Worker in the Department of Health and Social Care has issued guidance on carrying out proportionate assessments, who can do them and when qualified staff must be involved. The latter are required for supporting people with more complex needs and circumstances.

The guidance is co-developed with adult principal social workers from councils. They strike an important note saying proportionality must not be used only as a vehicle to deliver financial imperatives.

That is the source of the looming row as the regulator’s judgment on the current application of the law and professional best practice and standards meets the government’s wish for urgency and pragmatism within a tightening financial context.

*Andrew Cozens is an independent social care and health specialist.*