Social Work with Older People

Evidence summary

Demonstrator, England

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# Introduction

This demonstrator project will take forward findings from a recently completed research study funded by the NIHR and conducted by academics from the Universities of Birmingham and Bristol; the Social Work with Older People (SWOP) study. The study ran from November 2021 to January 2024. Due to the very recent completion of this research and the use of wider evidence to frame and design this research project it is not necessary to review the wider evidence on this topic. Further, the demonstrator project has been designed as a follow-on activity to support implementation of the project findings and recommendations.

This short document provides a brief overview of the study findings as the core evidence that will shape the demonstrator. In addition, five papers that have been published within the same timeline as the SWOP project are briefly reviewed and provide additional support for the project fundings and some added depth on particular topics.

# Summarising the SWOP project

The SWOP project “*comprehensively demonstrated that it can make a huge difference to the lives of older people and their families when a social worker is the right person in the right place at the right time.”*

The project highlights the existing skills and knowledge that social workers hold that can improve the lives of older people and the particular relevance of this unique skillset at times of change or crisis. Person-centred practice and strengths-based approaches underpin the work that social workers undertake with older people often acting as advocates to support choice for older people.

However, the research found that most older people, their families and carers do not understand what social work can offer them. Where older people did have access to social work positive outcomes were seen. Working with the same social worker over time allowed relationships to build and improves people’s experiences of care. The project demonstrates a need to raise the profile of social work for older people and to provide clear routes for older people, families and carers to access social work support.

SWOP has a [project website](https://swopresearch.wordpress.com/) where more detail can be found on all aspects of the project as well as links to key documents such as the toolkits and resources for older people, links to these are also provided here. The website provides the background to the research and detail on how the research was conducted. Findings from the research are then presented for different audiences and outputs include a policy briefing that sets out what needs to change. A useful starting point is to read the [main findings from the project](https://swopresearch.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/swop-main-findings-report.pdf) – these are provided in a short report (12 pages).

The project has produced a toolkit of resources that can be used directly to improve practice and to improve older people’s engagement with social work such as a ‘Capabilities resource’ that maps project findings on to the wider capabilities statement in England and a ‘practice tool’ that can support practitioners to achieve good outcomes when working with older people. For older people and their families resources include a short animation explaining how social work can help (with versions in English and Punjabi) and a printable leaflet. For social work professionals and other stakeholders (including the IMPACT Demonstrator coaches) the key reading is the [*How to use the Social Work with Older People project’s resources in social work education and continual professional development.*](https://swopresearch.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/swop-resources-for-education-and-cpd.pdf)This provides an overview of what the project has produced and how and where to use the different outputs.

The research proposed a series of short to medium-term outcomes that the project has both identified and provided resources to work towards:

* Raise awareness of social work and social care
* Deploy social workers in advice, coordination and therapeutic support roles
* Provide a named social worker for older people/ carers, who cannot navigate a significant life change without consistent support
* Reduce the bureaucratic and administrative burden
* Ensure social workers can support each other.

# Checking for additional literature

To complement the findings from the SWOP project a search was done using Web of Science Core Collection for articles published in the past five years using the search terms ‘social work\*’ and ‘older people’ or ‘age\*’ of ‘aging’ or ‘old\*’ or ‘older person\*.’ Using the filter to find papers with highest relevance and screening the first 100 for their direct relevance to this project provided a further five studies comprising two systematic reviews and three primary research studies. These articles highlighted relevant issues that resonate with the SWOP study but provide additional detail on particular issues, summarised below.

# Ageism

The SWOP study identifies ageism as an issue in the delivery of social work with older people, however, is it not specific in reporting how ageism may be of relevance. Ageism and negative stereotypes of older people are prevalent in wider society but anti-discriminatory practice is a core value of social work practice in the UK and the assumption may be that ageism would be challenged through these practices. However, a cross-sectional study of social work students in England (Pentaris 2024) found that students tended to over-generalise about older people and held particular assumptions, such as older people experience lack of respect and frailty, which may subconsciously impact their practice. The survey further uncovered significant differences in these beliefs about ageing and older people dependent on students’ ethnicity, culture and religious backgrounds. The study suggests that there is still space to improve awareness of implicit assumptions when working with older people and to increase the appeal for new social workers to work with older. An international literature review (Micheli et al. 2024) focused on the different ways ageism is defined within social work research uncovering a lack of consensus around the definition of ageism and a particular lack of engagement with implicit and self-directed forms of ageism from both social workers and older people. They recommend that attention is paid to ageism and its particular impact at individual/micro levels.

# Working in multidisciplinary teams

Another theme discussed within the SWOP report is about the contribution of social workers as part of multidisciplinary teams and the added value they bring to the older people receiving care. Bailey and Mutale (2022) undertook a comparative evaluation of social workers supporting older people in either social work only teams or when social workers were embedded in multidisciplinary primary care teams. The mixed methods evaluation demonstrated both financial benefits, with lower costs of care provided by the integrated team, and benefits to the older people who experienced shorter waiting times for assessment and were more likely to remain living at home. Members of the integrated teams shared knowledge from their different perspectives resulting with everyone on the team benefitting from increase understanding.

# Loneliness and social isolation

There has been an increasing awareness in recent years on the potentially negative impact of social isolation and loneliness for older people. A scoping review of research about loneliness and older people was undertaken with the intention to inform social work practice (Hagan 2021). The review highlights the difference between the objective experience of social isolation and the more subjective experience of loneliness and the need to understand people’s specific experiences of loneliness. Further, it uncovers the increasing importance of friends (and not just family) in addressing loneliness for older people and the need to recognise that older people may respond better to solutions that are activity focused rather than explicitly labelled as addressing loneliness (Hagan 2021).

# Precarity and accumulated disadvantage

There is recognition in the SWOP study of the ability of social workers to engage with the complexity of supporting older people where disadvantages may accumulate across the life course. Burrow’s (2022) ethnographic study of social workers within a hospital setting demonstrates their commitment to supporting autonomy and their understanding of the impact of accumulated disadvantage across the life course enables them to support autonomy for older people even where decisions may appear risky. Burrow (2022) further reflects on the current precarity of older people at a point in time where social care provision is limited and there are pressures on family care, where working age relatives may be facing increased demands from employers, presenting particular challenges for social workers when planning care and support.

# Conclusion

This short report has provided an overview of the SWOP project and highlighted key resources that will help to shape the demonstrator project. The search of new literature provides some additional depth on specific issues identified within the SWOP project.

# References

Bailey, D. and Mutale, G.J. (2022) Social work's contribution to integrated primary health care teams in the UK for older adults with complex needs. *Journal of Integrated Care*, *30*(3), pp.263-275.

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Micheli, K., Koutra, K., Pelekidou, L. and Smyrni, I. (2024) Ageism and attitudes towards older people in the field of social work. A systematic review of operational definitions. *European Journal of Social Work*, Online first view, pp.1-14.

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