

Quality assessment

Star rating system promises best value

A new appraisal system which gives residential care and nursing homes a "star rating" appears likely to be adopted by the Brighton and Blackpool health authorities in the near future.

Lancashire Care Association chairman Frank Hessey said health authorities which adopt the system will be better able to achieve "best value" when purchasing residential care in the private sector.

Mr Hessey said interest grew in the star rating system soon after Blackpool and Blackburn became unitary authorities in April.

"The Lancashire authorities were aware of a huge over-provision of beds and a star rating scheme promised to be an effective means of identifying where the best value could be obtained," Mr Hessey said.

Setting up the pilot scheme involved the Blackpool authority paying £10,000 for six nominated homes to be assessed, redeemable against subsequent accreditation upon the adoption of the system by the authority.

"A steering group was set up and two authority-owned residential homes were nominated for assessment, along with

two privately-owned residential homes and two nursing homes," Mr Hessey said.

The steering group for the pilot scheme was made up of social services director Steve Pullan, two assistant directors, Mr Hessey and a Lancashire Care Association colleague, an Age Concern representative and North West Lancashire health authority director of quality Ray Welton.

Mr Hessey said the owners and managers of the six nominated homes were interviewed before the results of the assessments and said the feedback had been very positive.

Two of the homes assessed were given one star, a rating automatically assigned to all registered homes within the region covered by the participating authority. Ratings for the other four homes ranged from two-and-a-half to four stars.

Mr Hessey said the steering group was likely, in the near future, to make a recommendation to the Blackpool social services committee to formally adopt the star rating scheme. "Star rating could well sweep the country," Mr Hessey said. "It is much-needed and should do away with many of the inconsistencies in care-purchasing."

Project co-ordinator Sue Brand pioneered the star rating scheme and her company, Residential & Domiciliary Benchmarking Ltd (RDB), launched the first pilot assessments in Brighton earlier in the year and carried out the Blackpool pilot scheme assessments.

"The star rating system is care-oriented," Mrs Brand said. "It works through an assessment of service standards through to a home's physical properties. Homes that have excellent facilities would not necessarily achieve a high star rating because the star rating is determined primarily according to the quality of care provided.

"The great benefit to those responsible for purchasing residential care is that it enables them to look for best value for money rather than what is the lowest cost."

Mrs Brand said the star rating system, if widely adopted, would improve public confidence in the residential care industry and provide homes with an effective marketing tool and, because star rating already was well-recognised in the hotel industry, it would also help residents and relatives make an informed choice when choosing a residential care home.



Sue Brand: informed choices

"Brighton and Hove social services have written to all the homes in the region telling owners and managers that the star rating system had been informally adopted under the 'best value initiative'", Mrs Brand said.

Head of adult services for Brighton and Hove social services department Ian Long said recommendations coming from the star rating pilot scheme were expected to be finalised by the end of the year.

"We aim to have an action plan based on those recommendations ready by April," Mr Long said.

"Brighton and Hove is a pilot for the best value initiative and we expect to be using the star rating system when we make spot purchases of care placements from the private residential care sector."

RDB was due to present the scheme to the Derby authority in October and will also conduct a presentation in Norfolk in November.