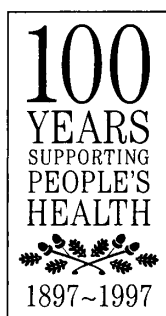


King's Fund

**A Survey of Needs
Assessment Activity in
London Health Authorities**

Naomi Fulop
Martin Hensher



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A Survey of Needs Assessment Activity in London Health Authorities

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Preface

This report is based on work undertaken on behalf of the King's Fund London Commission as part of its comprehensive review of London's health services. In 1992, the first King's Fund London Commission reported on the condition of London's acute health services, in *London Health Care 2010*. This second London Commission is reviewing the changes which have taken place over the past four years, in order to suggest a pattern of health services to serve London into the 21st century, and to indicate how such services might be achieved.

A Survey of Needs Assessment in London Health Authorities is one of the supporting papers which has helped to inform the work of the London Commission. The remit for the report was to identify and catalogue needs assessment work undertaken by London's health authorities or relating to local health needs in London between 1993-96; to examine the range of approaches to and methods of needs assessment; and to examine the influence of needs assessment on policy and decision-making, in order to improve the effectiveness of future needs assessment activity. Section Three outlines the methods used in the study. Section Four provides an analysis of the needs assessment studies identified in terms of topics addressed, methods used, definitions of health and need used, and policy recommendations made by these studies. In Section Five data from the interviews with public health and commissioning managers are presented including how topics for needs assessment came onto the agenda, what actions resulted from these studies, and what resources were used. Section Six describes the influence needs assessment studies have had on key commissioning decisions identified by the interviewees, and, using case studies, describes the four main functions of needs assessment evident from this study. In Sections Seven and Eight the conclusions and recommendations of the report are presented. The appendices contain the bibliography of needs assessment studies as well as the coding frame used to analyse the studies and the interview schedules.

The report provides a valuable analysis of needs assessment activity and how it impacts on decision-making. It suggests which factors appear to make some needs assessment studies more influential than others, and provides recommendations for the future conduct of these studies. The report will be useful both for those undertaking needs assessment studies and those making use of them within health authorities. It should also be of interest to the academic and health policy communities as an analysis of the influence of evidence on decision-making.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Stella Yarrow and Anna Grey from the Policy Studies Institute for their help with data collection. We would also like to thank Sean Boyle at the King's Fund and Nigel Edwards at the London Health Economics Consortium for support and advice. Finally, we would like to thank those we interviewed in the fourteen London Health Authorities and others who assisted in the cataloguing of the needs assessment activity for giving up their valuable time.

Section 1

Introduction

Following the introduction of the internal market in the NHS in 1991, district health authorities became responsible for purchasing health services for their resident population. One of the key tasks envisaged for health authorities in carrying out this role was the systematic assessment of the health care needs of their local populations¹. However, there has been a lack of agreement about what "needs assessment" should entail and what it can achieve. The most fundamental difficulty concerns what is meant by 'need', and there has been considerable confusion between wants, demand and the effect of supply². Bradshaw³ defined four elements of need: normative; felt; expressed; and comparative. 'Need' has also been defined as a 'need for health', including social, physical and mental well-being^{4 5}. More commonly, a narrower definition has been used: 'the ability to benefit from health care or health related interventions'^{1 6 7}.

A second difficulty concerns the methods that should be used to conduct needs assessments. The Department of Health commissioned a series of papers to give guidance to health authorities on how to carry out needs assessments on various topics⁷. Needs assessments may be broadly divided into two types: community based needs assessment and population health needs assessment⁸. The former rely on identifying the needs of the local population via findings from consultations with the public, while the latter place greater emphasis on epidemiological data. Of course, a needs assessment in any particular topic may include elements of both of these. Techniques for community based needs assessment include questionnaires (including household surveys), interviews and focus groups, work with 'key informants', and rapid appraisal methods (which may include all of the above).

There have been few studies of needs assessment which have sought to identify how topics for needs assessment are chosen and what influence they have on the decision-making process. One study of community based needs assessment in three London health authorities interviewed public health and purchasing executives, and found that needs assessments conducted as part of a multi-disciplinary service review or strategy development were more likely to influence decision-making than 'free-standing' research not linked to specific commissioning objectives⁹. A stocktake of needs assessment activities in Scotland reviewed 72 reports and the reviewers' "necessarily impressionistic" view was that nationally produced reports were often more useful than local ones¹⁰.

Section 2

Aims and Objectives

As part of its wider analysis of London's health services, the King's Fund London Commission commissioned a team from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Policy Studies Institute to undertake a review of needs assessment activities by the London health authorities. The objectives of the study were as follows:

- to identify and catalogue needs assessment work undertaken by London's health authorities or relating specifically to local health needs in London over the past three years;
- to examine the range of approaches to and methods of needs assessment;
- to examine the influence of needs assessment on policy and decision-making, in order to improve the effectiveness of future needs assessment activity.

It should be noted that this study only included health authority purchasers and did not include GP fundholders. In line with the development of a primary care-led NHS, health authorities are being encouraged to work with GP fundholders in assessing the health needs of their populations. Readers should be aware that Departments of Public Health are now beginning to work with some GP fundholders and GP commissioning groups to develop joint needs assessments. It should also be noted that this study explicitly does not set out to summarise, aggregate or otherwise estimate the *needs* of London or London health authorities; it is concerned with the *process* and *utilisation* of needs assessment.

Section 3

Methods

3.1 Participating health authorities

In March 1996, a letter was sent to Directors of Public Health and Directors of Commissioning in each of the 16 London health authorities, outlining the objectives and methods of the study and asking for the participation of their departments in the project. A return slip was enclosed with each letter, and positive replies were received from fourteen of the sixteen authorities. Two authorities (Barnet, Hillingdon) stated that they did not wish to participate, citing current pressure of work and a perception that they would benefit little from the results of the work as their reasons for not taking part. Confidentiality was assured for all data and interview responses other than the bibliography itself.

3.2 Data collection - bibliography

Directors of Public Health were asked to nominate a contact individual in their authority with whom the research team could liaise to catalogue recent needs assessment activities. Through telephone contacts and site visits, one of the research team thus identified those documents and reports which met the following criteria:

- was a "needs assessment" in the sense that it;
 - i) explicitly used the word "need" or "needs" in its title
and/or
 - ii) contained a substantial element of analysis of local health or health care needs through epidemiological, demographic or qualitative assessment (e.g. service reviews)
and/or
 - iii) reported or analysed local demographic, socio-economic or epidemiological data in the context of health, health status or requirements for health care;
- was work undertaken by or on behalf of the Health Authority (or its predecessor authorities);
- was a routine report (e.g. annual public health report) which reports the results of new needs assessment work *for the first time* (i.e. where a separate source document covering the individual area of needs assessment in more detail does not exist);
- had been completed in the period 1 April 1993 to 30 March 1996.