1 Introducing Community Care

The NHS and Community Care Act 1990 introduced far-reaching changes into community care policy and practice in England and Wales. It gave the lead agency role to social services authorities for all the main ‘core’ groups of service users. This lead agency role was to take the form of stimulating a mixed economy of care through encouraging independent providers. At a strategic level, this was to be achieved through the publication of community care plans on the basis of wide consultation with key agencies and groups, including service users and carers. At an operational level, care management was to be used to ensure service users were offered flexible packages of care which drew upon the independent sector. Caring for People, the White Paper on community care, justified these changes by reference to the need to develop choice and user-driven services (Department of Health, 1989a) while subsequent guidance went much further in arguing that ‘the rationale for this reorganisation is the empowerment of users and carers’ (Department of Health/Social Service Inspectorate, 1991, p. 7).

However, these community care changes find themselves under extensive attack in the late 1990s from academics, practitioners and service users. In Care in Chaos, Hadley and Clough (1996) lament ‘the widespread malaise which seems currently to exist in the community care services’ (p. 194) and express concern that ‘the new system may be ill conceived in theory and defective in practice’ (p. 206). Dominelli and Hoogvelt (1996, p. 52) claim the 1990 Act brought the market and the contract culture into social work and they comment how ‘social workers are increasingly drawn into becoming managers and accountants, with their time spent pushing paper and pen, or should we say exercising their fingers on the keyboards of their computers, rather than in direct work with users’. The community care reforms are seen by many as having undermined a rights-based and free system of care which placed a high emphasis upon counselling. This has been replaced by a community care approach driven by the need to ration and to charge, and controlled by managers whose central concern is to stay within budget rather than to meet need.
The central concern of Community Care: Policy and Practice is to explore this bleak scenario 'head on'. How truthful is this rosy picture of past provision? What concerns of central government really lay behind the 1990 Act? Has the impact of the reforms been universally bad for service users and carers? What are the prospects for the future and the implications of the election of a Labour government in May 1997? However, before these questions can begin to be tackled we need to say a little more about what we understand by the term 'community care', and how this relates to the present organisational and legislative framework.

What is community care?

Over the past thirty-five years community care has come to be almost universally espoused as a desirable objective for service users and a central pillar of policy for governments and politicians of all persuasions. An obvious starting point is for the authors to offer a clear statement about what they understand by the term 'community care'. Which groups will be covered? Will the book cover unpaid care as well as paid care? Does it include institutional care as well as domiciliary services? Which health care services are included? What does 'community' mean in the context of the term 'community care'? These are simple questions but do not necessarily have simple answers. 'Community care' has long been a contested term used by different people in different ways at different points in time.

The starting point in this definitional quest has to be the loaded power of the word 'community' within the term 'community care'. Titmuss described community care as 'the everlasting cottage-garden trailer' and went on to remark:

Does it not conjure up a sense of warmth and human kindness, essentially personal and comforting, as loving as the wild flowers so enchantingly described by Lawrence in Lady Chatterley's Lover? (1968, p. 104)

Some twenty-five years later, in more prosaic language, Baron and Haldane (1992) complained that 'today we are in a period of striking certainties about the value of community care, still strangely combined with silences and absences about the details of what care in the community means, and how it is to operate for the benefit of those with special needs' (p. 3).