

### Communicating with service users during Care Act Assessments – what works and does not work?

#### The issue

Particularly in a context of austerity, it can be challenging to manage the expectations of service users whilst undertaking Care Act Assessments. Skilled communication is essential to ensure that service users experience their assessments as clear and acceptable and that they lead to the best possible care packages.

#### What we wanted to find out

What can research tell us about how practitioners can best communicate with service users and their families during and after Care Act Assessments?

#### What we did

We searched for relevant studies published since 2010 that reported on the views of service users. We excluded studies that only focused on carers. We used adapted CASP tools to assess study quality.

#### What we found

We found one large, mixed methods study that investigated social care assessments in four local authorities in England. The study was co-produced with disabled people and was carried out between 2014 and 2016 (shortly after implementation of the Act).<sup>1-3</sup>

#### What the evidence suggests

##### 1. Assessments as conversations

The study examined communicating *during*, rather than *after* assessments. It found that service user engagement was better when practitioners raised issues in a conversation format, rather than working through a form. Using open-ended questions and allowing the service user to direct the conversation is also better aligned with a person-centred approach. It is important that practitioners explain clearly how issues discussed in conversation contribute towards the goals of the assessment.

##### 2. Communication Skills

The study identified the following communication skills that helped both the service user and practitioner.

***Moving a conversation (assessment) onto another topic*** can be difficult but is an essential interviewing skill. Techniques that can help achieve this smoothly include.

- Using links to move on

Building on something the service user has already said can be an effective means of framing the next question, exploring an issue in more depth, or steering an assessment back to the person rather than their family carer if this is necessary. When a service user introduces serious issues in a euphemistic or jokey way, this can provide practitioners with an opportunity to talk about the issue, perhaps initially in the same vein, before reframing it in professional, medical or legal language, and following it up.

- Moving on without using links

Words such as “OK” or “right” can help to close down one topic prior to moving to another, without using a direct link to what has been said. Such transitions carry some risk that the new topic might not be seen as relevant by the service user, so care is needed to ensure this doesn’t happen. Likewise, care is needed when returning to a previous topic, as doing so without explanation might suggest the practitioner is following their own agenda and might make the service user uncomfortable.

***Using observations about the physical environment*** of the person being assessed to introduce a question can be an especially valuable technique but must be used with care.

- It is important to acknowledge and discuss with the person the role of observation within an assessment.
- Observations need to be checked, to avoid errors about a person’s capabilities, which in turn could threaten the establishment of open and trusting relationships. For example, a walking stick in a room might have been there for some time without being used.
- The environment can be used to facilitate questions that are potentially delicate. For example, commenting on a stair lift can be used to introduce questions about what is upstairs, including the bathroom, paving the way for questions about personal care.

Conveying empathy

The study confirms the importance of conveying empathy in conversations with people seeking or needing services. Acknowledging the difficulty of navigating social care systems can help to frame the assessment as a collaborative endeavour.

## Conclusions

The available research is sparse and limited to what we know about effective communication skills within an interview with a service user. The evidence reinforces what is known about effective interviewing skills in general, and routinely taught to social workers. Such skills may be less likely to be used when practitioners are constrained to complete a form. However, this does not address the particular nature of Care Act Assessments, in which the service user’s interest is geared towards access to services, which may or may not be available, for a range of reasons. Research that focuses on understanding *both* the expectations of services users *and* the constraints influencing the practitioner should be developed.

**For more information about this briefing, contact**

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## Useful information

The following two videos were created as part of the Values of Assessment Study and provide a useful means of reflection on the topic. The first is from the viewpoint of the person being assessed and the second relates to badging assessments as conversations rather than filling in a form.

1. How it feels to be assessed.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5I8Yz2ydABU>

2. Building a relationship or filling a form? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0YFMGsZL3E&t=24s>

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup> Symonds, J., Miles, C., Steel, M., Porter, S., Williams, V. (2020) "Making person-centred assessments" *Journal of Social Work*, **20**, **4**, 431-447  
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- <sup>3</sup> Williams, V., Symonds, J. (2022) "Who knows what about you? Managing topic shifts during 'conversational' social care assessments in England." *Qualitative Social Work*, **21**, **6**  
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