

# Using conversations to assess and plan people's care and support

The principles of conversational assessment



In partnership with:



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## Introduction

In everyday life, conversation is the way we learn about people.

By having conversations with people who access care and support, you can find out all sorts of things that could be lost if you just followed a form with standard questions. This approach is called conversational assessment.

It puts conversation between equals at the heart of finding out about people, and enables you to learn:

- what's important to them
- their strengths and talents
- what's working well and what they want to change
- what they'd like to achieve
- how they'd like to be supported.

This can help you to support people in ways that reflect their wishes and needs and deliver high quality, person-centred care and support.

This guide outlines the key principles of conversational assessment to help you use it in your organisation.

You can use it with people who already access care and support *and* with people who want to know what support's available.

These principles draw on learning from over 150 workforce innovation projects, align with the principles and values of [Think Local Act Personal](#), and support the [Making it Real framework](#). 'Making it Real' is a set of 'I' statements that demonstrate what good, personalised care and support looks like from the citizens perspective, and 'We' statements which set out what organisations need to do to support personalised approaches.



## Who's this guide for?

This guide's for anyone who's involved in enabling people to understand what care and support is available, for example through assessments.

Although the assessment process might be different between organisations, it should be built around the key principles in this guide.

Even if you don't use 'blank sheet' conversational assessment in your organisation, the principles can enhance more structured assessments.

It might also be useful for:

- **people who want to know what care and support is available for them and their families and carers** - it'll help you to understand what to expect from a conversational assessment and get across what matters to you and your life
- **organisational managers and leaders who're responsible for developing assessment systems** - it'll help you to think outside of traditional assessment processes and enable your workforce to be more innovative in their approach
- **commissioners who're engaged in developing and supporting local resources** - it'll support an approach to commissioning that's based on what matters to individuals (asset-based approach).



**When you're doing a conversational assessment you should have conversations that are led by the person rather than by following a form.**

## What are the benefits of a conversational assessment?

This form of assessment enables you to find out what matters most to people. so you can target your resources where they'll have the most impact.

It means you offer people the care and support they want, and increases the likelihood of building a support system that improves their health and wellbeing and enhances their life.

The relaxed and open way of doing a conversational assessment encourages people to explore different and more imaginative ways to meet care and support needs. Sometimes this can lead to people managing for longer with less support.

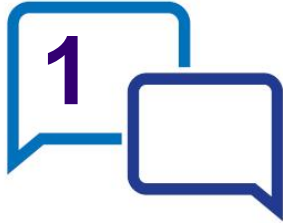
Conversational assessment also provides valuable information to commissioners about the kinds of resources that local people want and need, and should contribute to and inform commissioning strategies.



**Conversational assessment is important because it enables people to describe their lives in ways that mean something to them. But conversational assessment is just the first step in supporting people according to their views.**

## The principles of conversational assessment

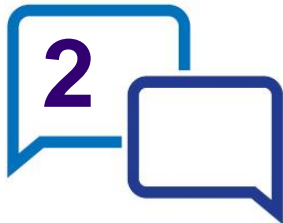
A conversational assessment should be built on these key principles.



### **It's about people's lives, not just their needs**

It provides a platform for people to talk about their whole lives and not just the parts where they need support.

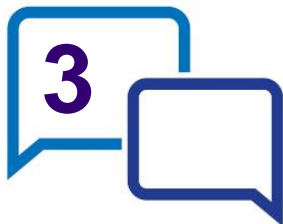
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### **It recognises that people are experts in their own lives**

It encourages people to use their expertise, skills and experience in their own care and support.

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### **It's founded on trust, honesty and openness**

It requires a relationship of two equals, recognising each person's contribution and understanding the concerns they might have.

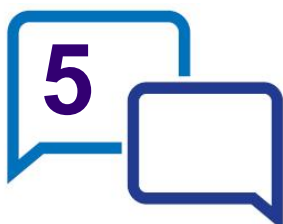
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### **It starts with a blank sheet**

The conversation should be led by what's important to the person, but care workers can prompt and shape the discussion.

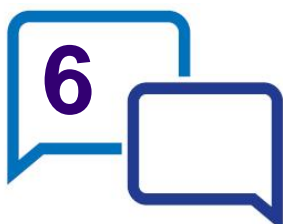
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### **It needs sufficient time and resources**

The person may need time to feel confident and comfortable to participate. But getting it right means that people are offered the care and support they want.

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### **It takes place within the context of the person's whole life and their community**

It will cross organisational boundaries, and some things might be best supported by other services.

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## 1. Conversational assessment is about people's lives, not just their needs

**We all want to have lives that fulfil us; having an illness, disability or impairment doesn't change these aspirations.**

Conversational assessment provides a platform for people to talk about and reflect on themselves and not just the parts of their lives where they need support, so that they can live a fulfilled life according to their wishes.

It can help people to explore their own aspirations, the things they're good at, the experiences they've had, the people they care about and what matters to them, as well as their support needs.

This helps you to find out all sorts of things that could be lost if you just followed a standard form, so you can deliver person-centred care and support.

The Institute of Health Care Improvement suggest a very simple way to achieve this is to make sure that we don't just ask "what's the matter?" but also "what matters to you?"

For people who access care and support this means:

***"I can live the life I want and do the things that are important to me, as independently as possible."***

For organisations this means:

***"We have conversations with people to discover what they want from life and the care, support and housing that will enable this, without restricting solutions to formal services and conventional treatments."***

## **2. Conversational assessment recognises that people are experts in their own lives, and have resources, skills, experience and expertise to contribute themselves**

**Throughout our lives we gain skills and experiences that help us to shape and control our lives, and build relationships with others to enhance them.**

These are some of the things that define who we are and help us to lead lives that are meaningful to us.

Conversational assessment places the person at the centre of discussions to enable them to take on the role of 'expert' in their own life.

It can help you to understand the person's skills, expertise and experiences, and explore how they can be used or enhanced in their care and support.

People might be able to use their own skills and experience to help achieve their goals, or they may identify particular interests and passions that they want to maintain or re-visit.

They might also be able to draw on established networks of friends and associates to contribute to their care and support.

For people who access care and support this means:

***"I am valued for the contribution that I make to my community."***

For organisations this means:

***"We look for ways to involve people in their communities where they feel included and valued for their contribution."***

### **3. Conversational assessment is founded on trust, honesty and openness**

**In conversational assessment the relationship between people who access care and support and workers is critical.**

It should be one of equals, where both people recognise and are respectful of each other's contribution, and understand the constraints and concerns of the other.

Listening properly, giving people the time they need and acting on what's said are all ways to show that people are valued and respected.

For people to speak honestly and with confidence, they must feel secure and trust each other. This may take time to build but is made easier when there's a mutual respect. You should be open and honest with people and maintain a careful balance between the wishes and needs of the person, any associated risks and what resources are available.

Because conversational assessment can feel very informal and relaxed it's important to be absolutely clear about confidentiality, so that everyone knows what will be shared and with whom.

For people who access care and support this means:

***“I am supported by people who see me as a unique person with strengths, abilities and aspirations.”***

For organisations this means:

***“We work with people as equal partners and combine our respective knowledge and experience to support joint decision making.”***

## 4. Conversational assessment begins with an open discussion

### Conversational assessment begins with a blank sheet.

It involves having conversations that are led by the person rather than by following a form, so they're shaped by their own priorities rather than the initial reason for referral.

This means that workers don't prejudge what *they* think are the person's main concerns and how they'd like their needs to be met, but instead lets the person shape the conversation.

But this doesn't mean there's no structure or accountability - conversational assessment is still a structured assessment.

That structure comes from the person's priorities, the statutory responsibilities of your employer, and any practical constraints such as the organisation's eligibility criteria.

There'll always be some standard information that needs to be recorded. Skilled workers should know what this is and how to use prompts, open questioning and checklists to ensure these are incorporated into the conversation.

Although the discussion can be very informal, the worker maintains a formal responsibility to record and act on the outcomes of the assessment.

For people who access care and support this means:

***“I am supported to make decisions by people who see things from my point of view, with concern for what matters to me, my wellbeing and health.”***

For organisations this means:

***“We don't make assumptions about what people can or can't do, and don't limit or restrict people's choices.”***

## 5. Conversational assessment needs sufficient time

**Conversational assessments can take longer than form-led assessments, but it ensures people are offered the most appropriate support.**

It can take longer because the person needs some time to feel confident and comfortable participating in the conversation.

Or the conversation itself can take longer because it gives people time to talk things through.

Investing sufficient time in conversational assessment ensures that people's needs are better met, and can save time and other resources in the longer term.

For people who access care and support this means:

***“I am supported by people who listen carefully so they know what matters to me and how to support me to live the life I want.”***

For organisations this means:

***“We know the place where people live, the people they live with, and the support they get, are important to their wellbeing and often interlinked. We have conversations with people to make sure we get all aspects right for them as individuals.”***

## **6. Conversational assessment takes place within the context of the person's whole life and community**

**People don't compartmentalise their lives according to the boundaries of the organisations they interact with – they'll often talk about their wider health, wellbeing and social circumstances.**

A conversational assessment will frequently cross organisational boundaries, including social care and health boundaries, to describe people's lives in a way that has meaning to them. People also place themselves in the communities they live in and often, some of the things that matter the most to them will be best supported by these communities. For workers to support this, they need to:

- be knowledgeable about their communities and have a good understanding of the resources that exist there
- be confident working across organisational and community boundaries
- have well established networks with colleagues from other settings and organisations
- have flexible, innovative and imaginative approaches when looking at community resources.

For people who access care and support this means:

***“I know about the activities, social groups, leisure and learning opportunities in my community, as well as health and care services.”***

For organisations this means:

***“We keep up to date with local activities, events, group and learning opportunities and share this knowledge so that people have the chance to be part of the local community.”***

For this to be achieved, employers need to:

- create systems, cultures and environments that support this way of working
- ensure that leaders at every level demonstrate their commitment to conversational assessment, including allowing time for it to happen
- create opportunities for workers to develop an understanding of community resources as well as to build effective relationships with colleagues from other settings.

***“We have a ‘can do’ approach which focuses on what matters to people, and we think and act creatively to make things happen for them.”***

## After a conversational assessment

Discuss and agree what needs to happen next with everyone's who's involved in the assessment.

The conversation itself may be the only 'intervention' that's needed. For example the conversation may enable the person to clarify their needs and see how their existing support or resources can meet them without the need for further intervention. Or during the conversation, you might connect the person to community resources they didn't already know about.

If the person needs more formal care and support, you should talk to them about their options, for example personal budgets taken as direct payments. You should also share any eligibility criteria for services with them at this stage.

For people who access care and support this means:

***“I can get skilled advice and support to understand how my care and support budgets work, and enable me to make the best use of the money available.”***

For organisations this means:

***“We tell people about person-centred approaches to planning and managing their support and make sure they have the information, advice and support to think through what will work best for them.”***



## Good practice

If you want to take this approach in your organisation you need to:

- recognise and value the expertise of the person in relation to their strengths and how their needs are met, and how the organisation supports, shapes and develops community resources
- understand the process of conversational assessment itself and allow sufficient time for people and workers to develop relationships and build confidence using the approach
- ensure that commissioning systems are open and flexible, and allow resources to be shaped around what people say they want and build on the assets that people already have
- manage accountability through trust in the workforce, rigorous and supportive supervision and clear frameworks that workers operate within
- have efficient paperwork and recording systems across the whole organisation; you should make good use of technologies to minimise the amount of time workers spend doing this, for example using audio and video
- have ongoing discussions with external agencies, such as the Care Quality Commission (CQC), to ensure that a single set of paperwork and other accountability systems can meet everyone's needs
- train and support workers so that they can carry out high quality conversational assessments
- involve people who've participated in the conversational approach to contribute to learning and development
- ensure you have a good balance between accountability and autonomy. You should give individual workers the confidence and authority to make decisions
- give workers the opportunity to reflect and learn, for example bring workers together to talk about their experiences of conversational assessment and contribute to the ways your organisation uses it
- ensure leaders at all levels show support for conversational assessment through their priorities, behaviours and decisions
- ensure your organisation and its systems demonstrate trust in the conclusions of the assessment, including managed risk taking.





## Further reading

Here are some other resources about conversational assessment which you might find useful.

### [Institute for Healthcare Improvement - A vision for 'What Matters To You?'](#)

This web based resource shares their approach to understanding the needs and goals of patients by asking 'what matters to you?'

### [Think Local Act Personal - Making it Real: how to do personalised care and support](#)

This framework supports good personalised care and support for providers, commissioners and people who access services. It shows what 'good' practice looks like and explains how to do it.

### [My Home Life - Best Practice themes](#)

This web based resource is for residential care services and shares the findings from a literature review about 'what older people want' and 'what works' in care homes.

### [Partners 4 Change - The 3 Conversation Model](#)

The Partners 4 Change approach explains a way that local authorities and organisations can deliver personalised care. They have tools to implement the approach and offer coaching and support.

### [Social Care Institute for Excellence - Strengths-based approaches](#)

This guide summarises the process and the key elements to consider in relation to using a strengths-based approach.

### [Think Local Act Personal - Personalised care and support planning tool](#)

The 'conversation' checklist in this tool gives workers examples of questions they could ask in conversations they have with people who access care and support, their family and carers.

### [Think Local Act Personal - Developing a wellbeing and strengths-based approach to social work practice: changing culture](#)

This report is for social workers and discusses why they need to change their workforce culture to a 'strengths-based' one to promote wellbeing, intervention and prevention.



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