**This draft is for consultation.**

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# Using conversational assessment: principles and application

## An asset-based approach to working with people who access care and support

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## Introduction

Conversational assessment is all about having structured conversations with people, their family and other professionals, to assess and plan what care and support they want and need.

This guide explains the principles of conversational assessment to help social care and health workers use this approach in their organisation.

In everyday life, conversation is the way we learn about people. By using conversational assessment with people who need care and support, you can find out all sorts of things that could be lost if you just followed a form. This can help you deliver high quality, person-centred care and support.

It can help you find out:

* what are people’s strength’s and talents
* what’s important to them
* what’s working well and what they want to change in their lives
* what they would like to achieve
* the ways they’d like to be supported?

Conversational assessment is just the first step in supporting people according to their wants and needs. It’s important that any subsequent changes reflect what was discussed in the conversation, and where this isn’t possible, a full explanation is given.

These principles draw on learning from over 150 workforce innovation projects and link closely to other work and initiatives.

They align with the principles and values of [Think Local Act Personal](https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/), and support the [Making it Real framework](https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/_assets/Resources/Personalisation/TLAP/MakingItReal.pdf).

They’re also linked to the [Principles of workforce redesign](https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Leadership-management/Workforce-redesign/Workforce-redesign.aspx) and the [Principles of workforce integration](https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Leadership-management/Workforce-integration/Workforce-integration.aspx) and underpinned by earlier Skills for Care work about the ‘[Skills around the person’](https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Documents/Learning-and-development/Community-skills-development/Community-skills-skills-around-the-person.pdf) approach.

## What is conversational assessment?

Conversational assessment is not a specific model - it’s an approach to finding out more about people, what matters to them and how they’d like to be supported, through conversations.

It can be used when workers engage with people who access care and support, and with those who may not already be in the ‘system’ but want to know what support’s available.

Conversational assessment includes:

* having conversations that are led by the person and not by following a form, so that the discussion is shaped by priorities identified by them
* the person being placed at the centre of discussions, taking on the role as an ‘expert’ in their own life
* drawing out the person’s skills, expertise and experiences and exploring ways in which these may be used or enhanced. Carers and other significant people are included in the conversation
* open questioning where the person is encouraged to talk about what they see as important to their lives
* the person being seen within the context of their community, and the conversation looking creatively and flexibly at what the person says and how their community might help support them
* a careful balance between the expressed needs of the person, associated risk, and available resources
* both participants being seen as equals, with their own contribution to make to the discussion
* language that is chosen by the person, not the worker, and isn’t jargonisitc
* an underlying structure that ensures all of the relevant information is shared and understood by everyone involved. Adult social care workers can ensure that they get all of the relevant information they need by guiding and prompting the conversation, as well as ensuring that any statutory obligations are fulfilled
* assessment that’s underpinned by skilled communication, flexible thinking and detailed knowledge of the resources available in the local area.

The conversation itself may be the only “intervention “ that’s needed. For example if the conversation enables the person to clarify their needs and see how their existing support or resources can meet these needs, there’s no need for further intervention. In other cases, the care worker might connect the person to community resources they might not know about.

If formal care and support is needed, workers should have a good understanding of eligibility criteria and share these with the person early on. This might include discussions about personal budgets and direct payments.

Assessment and intervention are not always linear - sometimes actions identified as part of the conversation will happen at the same time as the conversation is taking place.

## The principles of conversational assessment

Conversational assessment should follow these key principles.

### 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 does not change that. Fulfilment means something different to everyone and so it’s important that adult social care workers are flexible and take a lead from people who need care and support to ensure that their lives are fulfilled according to their wishes.

In everyday life, conversations are the way we learn about people around us, and build rounded pictures of those we are close to. It can help us to find out all sorts of things that could be lost if we just followed a form.

Conversational assessment provides a platform for people to talk about themselves and not just the parts of their lives where they need support. It can help them to explore their aspirations, the things they’re good at, experiences they’ve had, the people they care about and what matters to them. This helps us, as adult social care workers, to get a proper picture of who they are and see them within the context of their own lives. This shows that we’re interested in them, not just their needs.

This is an essential part of delivering high quality, person-centred care and support.

### 2. People are experts in their own lives, and have resources, skills, experience and expertise

Throughout our lives we gain skills and experiences that help us to shape and control our life, and build relationships with others to enhance it. These are some of the things that define who we are and help us to lead lives that are meaningful to us.

Conversational assessment can help you to explore the skills and experiences of people who need care and support.

This will help you to find out what matters to them, what they’d like to achieve and the way they’d like to be supported. For example, people might be able to use their own skills and experience in their care and support.

They might also be able to draw on established networks from their experience, which can become part of their care and support.

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

In conversational assessment the relationship between people who access care and support and care workers is critical. It should be one of equals, in which both people recognise the other’s contribution and understand the constraints and concerns of the other.

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. Workers should be open and honest, for example in talking about resource priorities, and the person should feel listened to and know that what they have to say, matters.

Listening properly, giving them the time they need and acting on what they say are all ways to show that they are valued.

### 4. Conversational assessment is a blank sheet

Conversational assessment begins with a blank sheet and follows a direction that’s led by what’s important to the person.

This means that workers don’t prejudge what will be the main concerns and priorities of the person, or the ways in which they’d like their needs to be met.

This doesn’t mean there is no structure or accountability - conversational assessment is still structured assessment. That structure comes from the person’s priorities, the statutory responsibilities of the organisation the worker represents, and any practical constraints placed upon the worker, such as the organisation’s eligibility criteria.

Skilled workers should understand the things that need to be included in the discussion and use prompts and checklists to contribute to the shape of the discussion.

Conversational assessment can be very informal, but the worker maintains a formal responsibility to act on the outcomes of the assessment.

### 5. Sufficient time allocated to undertaking conversational assessment ensures the most appropriate support is offered, helping people get the best from their lives, and making best use of resources

There are lots of benefits to taking this approach, even though conversational assessment can take longer than form-led assessment. This may be because the person needs some time to feel confident and comfortable participating, or it may just be that the conversation itself takes longer than a form-led assessment.

Here are some of the benefits of this approach.

* Getting the assessment right means that people who access care and support are offered the right care and support (that they want), which improves their health and wellbeing and means they’re often able to manage with less support for longer.
* Taking the time to ensure that the person is properly able to identify the things that matter most to them, increases the likelihood of building a support system that enhances their life.
* Sometimes the conversation itself is sufficient enough to enable the person to feel more in control of their lives. They might also recognise that they already have access to resources which they can use to support themselves.
* A relaxed and open discussion creates an environment in which participants can explore different and more imaginative ways to meet people’s care and support needs.
* Conversational assessment provides valuable information to commissioners about the kinds of local resources that local people want, and should contribute to commissioning strategies.
* Conversational assessment gives care workers significant autonomy in managing the assessment process. This can help them to develop their skills and confidence which can be discussed in supervision and other reflective discussions.

### 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.

A conversational assessment will frequently cross organisational boundaries so that not only will social care and health boundaries disappear, but people will place themselves in the communities they live in. Often, some of the things that matter to them will be best supported by these communities. This is important because it enables people to describe their lives in a way that has meaning to them.

For workers to be able to do 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
* have flexible, innovative and imaginative approaches when looking at community resources.

Their employers need to create systems and have the right workplace culture that enables them to work in this way.

## Good practice

An organisation that’s focused on using conversational assessment is one where:

* the expertise of the person is recognised and valued, both in relation to how their needs are met, and how the organisation supports, shapes and develops community resources
* there are systems in place to connect what people say they want to commissioning processes, so that commissioners are able to stimulate their local communities to offer resources that are needed
* commissioning systems are open and flexible, allowing resources to be shaped around what people say they want, and build on the assets that people already have.
* accountability is managed through trust in the workforce, rigorous and supportive supervision, and clear frameworks within which workers operate
* paperwork and recording systems across the whole organisation are efficient and good use of technologies is made to minimize the amount of time workers spend doing this. Flexible approaches to recording information are adopted, for example using audio and video
* there are 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
* workers are properly trained and supported so that they can carry out conversational assessments
* confidence is shown in workers, and there is a good balance between accountability and autonomy. Authority to take decisions is vested appropriately in individual workers
* there are opportunities for reflection and learning, where workers can come together to talk about their experiences of conversational assessment and contribute to the ways in which it’s used in their organisation
* the process of conversational assessment itself is valued and understood, and is given sufficient time for relationships to be established and confidence built, so that the right support is given
* systems and organisations demonstrate trust in the conclusions of the assessment, including managed risk taking.

## Further reading

Partners 4 Change, The three conversations model (Available online at: [partners4change.co.uk](http://partners4change.co.uk/)) Social Care Institute for Social Care (2015), Strengths-based approaches. (Available online at:

[www.scie.org.uk/care-act-2014/assessment-and-eligibility/strengths-based-approach/](http://www.scie.org.uk/care-act-2014/assessment-and-eligibility/strengths-based-approach/))

Skills for Care (2015), Skills around the person (Available online at [www.skillsforcare.org.uk/](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/communityskills)

[communityskills](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/communityskills))

Think Local Act Personal, Personalised care and support planning tool - conversation (Available online at [www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/personalised-care-and-support-planning-tool/ conversation/](http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/personalised-care-and-support-planning-tool/conversation/))

Think Local Act Personal, Developing a wellbeing and strengths-based approach to social work practice: changing culture (Available online at: www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/\_assets/ [Resources/TLAP/BCC/TLAPChangingSWCulture.pdf](http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/_assets/Resources/TLAP/BCC/TLAPChangingSWCulture.pdf))

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