

Why bother asking? Getting feedback from care home residents with memory or communication difficulties.

My role in our Local Involvement Network (Lewisham LINK) is to engage with a wide range of individuals from all walks of life in the London Borough of Lewisham. This includes those with disabilities or long-term health conditions and those in care homes. I was invited to lead a discussion about our work in health and social care service improvement with residents of a local care home as part of their regular residents meeting.

After meeting the residents and staff of the home and attempting to lead a group discussion it soon became apparent that this type of engagement was not effective with this client group. A number of residents have cognitive impairment (i.e. Dementia) and some also had a range of communication difficulties (expressive dysphasia). A quick review then took place with the proprietor and manager of the home and I agreed that the LINK would offer an alternative approach, but "what approach was the question".

Using my previous occupation therapy knowledge and with help from a local speech and language therapist, I returned to the care home. I offered 4 sessions of one to one work, with any residents that would engage with me during the visits. This led to residents sitting for varying amounts of time and using visual aids (Appendix A) to give their views on a range of subjects. My aim was to get feedback on their experience of different services and although this was difficult, the use of symbols and visual representations of services and clinicians made communication possible.

In addition to gaining positives and negatives feedback on specific subjects like the local hospital, GP services and dentists, additional information was also elicited. Residents commented on a range of topics (Appendix B) including familial employment and historical events though to their very positive experience of the food in the care home. Some of this information will now be provided to the staff team and in some cases has already raised awareness of individual choice in occupational choice and engagement. Some of this information had not been elicited during other perhaps more formal assessment processes.

There was a genuine sense of participation in most of the interactions with residents, despite the communication or memory difficulties. One particular resident with expressive dysphasia was able to lead me through a communication process of visual and non-verbal questions

and answers. This also used visual stimuli from within the home including land and seascape pictures on the wall and this emphasised the need for flexibility of approach and engagement. This also led to the staff team being able to document a specific interest in outdoors life, especially around walking and interacting with nature. It is hoped that this will inform future activity options for this and other residents.

This short engagement pilot was rewarding to some of the residents and to me. It allowed Lewisham LINK to gather local intelligence from a rarely engaged group and gave the staff team feedback on the home and the service provided. This could be a useful tool for any care home and the pilot home has also been provided with a copy of the visual aids used. "If you don't ask you don't get", so engagement is so important if services are to meet the needs of individuals and marginalised groups in our community.

I would like to thank, Fieldside Care Homes proprietor Mr John France, who invited me, and the rest of the team led by Gill Hennell (Manager). I would also like to thank Natalie Jones (Speech and Language Therapist) for the initial guidance on non-verbal communication and the symbols available.

It is now hoped that this engagement approach can be developed for use in other homes and work is already underway with two potential homes.

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Lewisham LINK (Local Involvement Network)
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Appendix A. Visual Aid for Lewisham Hospital



Hospital

Good



Bad



Appendix B. Example commentaries from individual sessions.
(Verbatim Reporting).

1	Food lovely, room more space, to much noise upsetting.
2	Gardening, walking and nature even documentaries, I used to be a volunteer with Lewisham Council.
3	Care home good most of the time but I need to get out more.
4	Food is very good, fresh veg good, Irish food is better though.
5	Optician (named) very good and I still use them after moving in here.
6	I enjoyed travelling. Home good and the music group I enjoy
7	Dentist (named) very good.
8	My dentist has been looking after me and other cabbies for years, he is brilliant.
9	GP for the home is very good but I liked my old one as we could talk about anything.
10	New GP is good but I am still waiting for a referral for my hip and knee.