

Assessing Social Work practice against the PCF

Principles for gathering and using feedback from people who use services and those who care for them

A primary purpose of social work is for professionals to work alongside individuals, families and those who care for them in order to establish the best outcomes possible for them. Feedback from everyone who uses our services is vital, be they a foster carer or young person coming into 'the system' for the first time, or an adult service user or a carer who cares for a family member. Their feedback can help us to not only learn what works, but also what we could do better.

There is no single way in which students or social workers should seek feedback from the people they work with. The agency or setting in which they are working, and its culture around feedback, will impact on how such feedback is incorporated into practice. Below are some ideas about how to approach the issue of both gathering and using feedback.

Principles for gaining and using service user or carer feedback

- 1. Feedback happens all the time:** in an informal way, we are constantly receiving feedback from the people we work with about our interventions, and how people feel about us. Such feedback may be either verbal or non-verbal in character, and we all need to be sensitive to the messages people are conveying to us. Sometimes those messages can come across as angry or upsetting to us – but its always important to consider what people are conveying and why. Through reflective supervision, students and social workers should be supported to consider these different views, separate out what the adult, young person or child may be trying to convey from how that makes the student/social worker feel, and considering whether the intervention could have been different/more useful had the approach used been different.

Case example:

When Omar saw Greg as part of supervision, he was concerned about how negatively Greg viewed the Crystal family. He described them as 'aggressive' and 'not interested in changing anything.' It was only through supervision that Omar was able to help him separate out how he felt about things (angry and concerned he hadn't really helped) from how the family might have felt about things (worried, disappointed, as well as angry) and plan how to reengage with them to move things forward.

2. **Service users and Carers as ‘partners’ in the observation process:** Working respectfully with people is central to good social work practice. Where a formal observation is being undertaken, service users and carers should be asked for their permission prior to the event, and be given information on what to expect during the session. For example, knowing in advance that an observer will be joining an NQSW. Some ideas about approaches/questions have been included at the end of this document.
3. **Being brave – asking for feedback in difficult circumstances:** the people we work with may welcome the opportunity of being asked whether the service/support/intervention they received was helpful and how it might have been improved. This can be helpful both in circumstances where people are happy with the help they have received, and when they are not. Including some way to provide feedback at key transitions points (such as when reviewing, transferring or closing cases) can be very helpful. It can be tempting only to ask for feedback from the people we have the best relationship with, sometimes the best learning can be from those who we experience as most difficult. Talking through difficult feedback in supervision is key, and can provide a really good learning opportunity. Additionally, it is important to guard against influencing people to respond in a particular way – there is often a power imbalance between social workers and those they work with, and it is important to be aware of that and consider whether enabling people to respond confidentially will provide a better understanding of the experiences of the child, family or adult you are dealing with.
4. **Give choices and take comments ‘on the chin’:** the starting point should be asking people directly for their feedback – and allowing them space to respond personally and directly if they wish to do so. However, different people will have different preferences about how they would prefer to respond, and providing the option of being able to provide feedback in a range of ways can be very helpful. For example, young people used to email and texting might prefer to do it in that way, whereas someone older might prefer to give written feedback. Explaining why feedback is being asked for, and what will happen next is really important. For some people being able to provide confidential feedback might be really helpful and reassuring.

Case example:

As part of AMHP training, Trina was asked to revisit someone she had been involved in detaining the day after the Mental Health Act Assessment, a week after and then finally after a month. Trina expected the service user to be angry, and although they were the following day, a month later when she visited she was amazed that Rachel not only was happy to sit down and talk about her experiences of assessment, but also how important it was to Rachel that someone cared enough to ask.

5. **Timing! Timing! Timing!:** be conscious of the fact that what might feel like the right time for you might not be the right time for the person you are seeking feedback from. If you have just finished a challenging conversation with a couple who want to be able to foster or adopt, the initial response you get might be very different from what they might say at a later date.
6. **Focusing on the process, rather than the decision:** social workers need to intervene in people's lives at points of crisis, and rarely meet the expectations or desires of everyone. Because of this, it can be more helpful to focus on the process and the service user and carers experience of it rather than the decision, which they may not be able to change. Having said that, collecting information about needs that can't be met and feeding that back to your manager is also an important social work role.
7. **Getting the style right- communicating with different people:** The communication skills and styles needed when talking to a 3 year old are very different from those a 13year old would appreciate, and different again from a 30 year old. Remember to avoid jargon, and if you are not sure about something, ask! Additionally, issues such as language, culture and disability may affect the ways in which people both understand and react to requests for feedback.
8. **Reflecting together – saying goodbye:** Endings are always important; they provide an opportunity to reflect together on the work that has been done, think about what has changed and consider where people are going to go from there. Remember this can be a two way process! Talking about the first meeting, how the person came across to you, as well as how you came across to them can be a real eye opener!

Useful Approaches:

Different sources of /approaches to feedback

- *Questionnaire, online survey or feedback forms:* these can be based on questions generated by service user/carer groups (e.g. welcome, respect, helpfulness, ability to communicate and/or give information, show sensitivity, listen, give constructive and realistic? advice, share future plans and arrange when and where to meet again) and/or draw on the nine PCF capability domains. A questionnaire may be most appropriate where work has been undertaken over a period of time in a relatively formal setting (e.g. groupwork). Including open-ended questions ('have you any other comments you want to make?') so people can add issues that they think are important is always useful. If a questionnaire or feedback form is used, the student/social worker should think carefully about how and when to use it, ensuring that the design is appropriate to the situation (including the communication needs) of the service user or carer. When thinking about timing, it can be useful to ask the service user or carer themselves about when they would prefer to be asked to comment. For example, would they prefer to think about what has happened and respond the following week rather than right away?

- *Direct observations:* When an observation of practice is planned, wherever possible the service user(s)/carer involved should be asked if they are willing to be part of the process. If they agree it is the responsibility of the observer and the student/ social worker to ensure that the service user/carers is given the opportunity to comment on the candidates capabilities, and/or for the service user/carers to be given feedback about the student/social worker and observer's own assessment. Not all service users will be able or want to be involved in the whole process; others will be willing to contribute and to be part of the assessment process. Giving choices – including the option of not being involved at all – is a key part of the process. The observer and the student/social worker will need to plan how this is managed, using their knowledge of and relationship with the service user to ensure that this is comfortable for all the parties involved.
- *Gathering feedback over time:* It can be very informative to ask for feedback immediately after a significant intervention in someone's life, and then returning a month or six weeks later to ask more formally about their experiences. This provides information about the initial experience, but also allows people to reflect on what has happened and provide a more considered response. However, do remember that what may seem like the 'right' time for you may not be right for the person or family you have been talking to. Give people the option of providing feedback at the time or later, and be sensitive to the non-verbal and well as verbal messages you receive about whether 'now' is the right time to talk. Remember you are in a position of power and it may feel difficult to say 'no' to you. Where the child, family or adult is happy to talk to you straight after the intervention has happened, it can be very informative. Examples could be directly after a Mental Health Act Assessment, or a decision to accommodate a child or young person.
- *Supervision records* should note whether or not the student/social worker records feedback from service users and carers about their work, and should encourage them to regularly incorporate this into their practice, noting how their skills in undertaking this develop over time.
- *Feedback from other people involved:* getting feedback from other people involved in a situation or case can be very informative. People are always learning, and many professionals are used to being asked about their perceptions on a situation.
- *Work products and records:* Note should be taken as to whether or not there is evidence from any work products that the student/social worker elicits feedback from service users and carers about their work, and if not encourage them to regularly incorporate this into their practice.
- *Critical reflection:* all exercises that student/ social workers are asked to undertake should incorporate a specific requirement to reflect on the way/s in which feedback was elicited from service users and carers and the learning derived from this.

Useful Questions:

For direct observations:

- Did the service user understand what to expect during the session?
- What went well during the observation?
- What could have gone better?
- Did you get what you wanted/expected out of the session? What difference do you think being involved in providing feedback made to the service user/carer?

For more general feedback from service users and carers at key points of transition:

- What have you found useful about your work with X?
- What do you think they might do differently?
- What positive things do you hope your next social worker might do?
- Was the social worker always on time / sometimes on time/ never on time?
- If a problem cropped up that made them late, did someone let you know?
- Did you feel they listened to you?
- Did you feel they understood your point of view?
- Did they help you understand the options available to you/ what might be expected of you / how you could take more control of the situation?
- Do you feel your situation has improved since being involved with 'X'?
- Do you feel safer / more in control of your life having worked with 'X'?

Questions for the student/social worker

- What surprised you about the feedback?
- What has been most positive for you about the feedback?
- How did you feel about the service users/ carers views?
- What might you do about these feelings? How might they impact on your work with these people?
- What might you do differently as a result of the feedback?

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' it is important to remember that a service that ensures feedback is received regularly will be a service that will continue to make a positive impact on people's experience of the service'

Quote from feedback received Sept 2012