

Using ASCOT to improve care practice

Outline of a research project
funded by the NIHR School
for Social Care Research



Improving the evidence base for
adult social care practice

Can we improve the quality of life for care home residents by giving care staff feedback about their outcomes?

Social care services, such as care homes, are under increasing pressure from central government to demonstrate how the care and support they provide affects people's quality of life. The Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU), at the University of Kent, has developed the Adult Social Care Outcomes Toolkit (ASCOT) to measure this social care related quality of life (SCRQoL) and to explore the impact of services.

Recently, organisations already using the ASCOT have found the toolkit helpful for improving care practice in some care homes. Some providers have used the toolkit to observe residents and staff in order to understand what life was like for care home residents. In some cases, the staff in the home were surprised by what they heard: care staff were very good at keeping residents safe, clean and nourished but had not taken the time to support residents to be engaged in activities or socially occupied. This project will explore the feasibility of using ASCOT to give homes feedback on residents' care-related quality of life: can it be used to improve services?

This project

- is a feasibility study to investigate how care homes respond to feedback about residents' care-related quality of life and to explore whether this information can be used to inform care practice.

It aims to

- develop an approach to delivering the outcomes-focused feedback with a view to maximising acceptability and effectiveness.
- pilot the approach in a small sample of care homes to establish whether it is feasible to deliver feedback like this and to explore whether an effect can be detected.
- examine the future feasibility of conducting a cluster randomised controlled trial of the feedback intervention, and gather the necessary information for calculating sample sizes for this type of trial.

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WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

The PSSRU undertook research relating to adult social care as part of the Measuring Outcomes for Public Service Users (MOSPU) project, led by the Office of National Statistics and funded by HM Treasury. The aim was to develop efficient methodologies for measuring the 'value added' of public services. Following PSSRU's work, the ASCOT website was launched in June 2010 with eight outcome domains (see Box).

The toolkit was specifically designed to measure outcomes that could reasonably be attributed to social care services and shown to be valid across different user groups. It provides a variety of approaches to measuring outcomes, including a multi-method approach to evaluating the outcomes for residents of care homes.

To date, training in the multi-method approach in care homes has been aimed at researchers, local authorities and providers wishing to use the tool for auditing or quality monitoring purposes; it has not so far been offered to care staff or seen as having a role in improving practice. However, existing ASCOT users told PSSRU how feedback from ASCOT had been used to focus staff on residents' quality of life (or lack thereof), which in turn had acted as a springboard to improved practice in some homes.

It is the nature and impact of this 'feedback' that this project will explore further. The key question is whether it is possible to improve residents' social care related quality of life by focusing staff on outcomes and reflecting back the findings from observations and interviews – or whether staff require more support and training.

The process of improving practice is not straightforward and can be perceived by staff as threatening. The success of an intervention of this kind is likely to vary by factors such as: the category of the home (eg with/without nursing), the qualifications, culture and attitudes of the staff, the ethos of the provider, and the skills and commitment of the management team.

The ASCOT outcome domains

The eight domains of outcome making up the the ASCOT Toolkit are:

- control over daily life
- personal cleanliness and comfort
- food and drink
- accommodation cleanliness and comfort
- personal safety
- social participation and involvement
- occupation
- dignity

There may also be a perceived conflict in some care homes about meeting residents' dual needs in health and social care. With this in mind we will also be testing the methodology and feedback in homes registered for nursing. Home managers will be asked for their views on the applicability of the feedback in their homes and whether they feel the toolkit would benefit from the inclusion of observable health indicators in future.

HOW WILL THE PROJECT WORK?

STAGE 1: Literature review

A rapid review will be undertaken of, first, published intervention trials aimed at changing care practice in care homes for older people and, second, observational measures of health already publicly available and used in research with older people. The aim is to determine: what additional support staff might need for the feedback intervention to be effective; how many residents should take part in the study; what follow-up time is appropriate; and whether the project can use existing measures of observable health indicators.

STAGE 2: Consultations with stakeholders

The project will consult stakeholders including care home providers, managers and staff; relatives and/or volunteers; academics; and the NHS Trust with experience of using ASCOT to

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inform practice in care homes for adults. The consultation will explore the level of interest in an outcomes-focused intervention, potential barriers to its success, and how the feedback should be delivered to include all relevant staff and other key stakeholders (e.g. family members and volunteers). The responses will feed into the project design.

STAGE 3: Development and pilot study

Approximately 4-5 homes for older people will be recruited for this research. We think it is important that researchers are able to get to the homes quickly and easily to allow frequent visits during the early stages of recruitment. Consequently, we are working with a small number of local homes. Homes will vary in size and provider and at least 2 will be registered as nursing. We are aiming to recruit 20 residents per care home (more if possible), with at least half completing the study. Owing to the advanced age and poor health of many care home residents, large sample sizes are very difficult to achieve.

The pilot study will have four main aims:

- to test the design and methodology of the intervention
- to explore the feasibility of detecting post-intervention changes in social care related quality of life (SCRQoL)
- to explore whether the approach works equally well in care homes with and without nursing
- to use pre- and post-intervention ASCOT scores to estimate effect sizes and intra-cluster correlations for use in the design of a cluster randomised controlled trial (CRCT).

SCRQoL, as measured by the ASCOT, will be recorded pre-intervention, together with other relevant personal, health and care home/staff data. Feedback sessions will then be held with the staff and management of the homes. The SCRQoL scores will be explained, with information to identify the domains that require attention. However, the project will not provide training in ways to improve these scores as the study is interested in how feedback alone can impact on care practice.

SCRQoL and other data will be measured again approximately 3 months later. Researchers will also ask staff and resident representatives (e.g. family members) for their feedback on the intervention process, if appropriate and possible.

STAGE 4: Evaluation

A mixed methods approach will evaluate the intervention process. First, the project team will draw on its own experiences setting up and delivering the intervention and the responses received from care home staff and managers during the feedback interventions. Secondly, we will look at the pre- and post-intervention scores and see whether there have been any statistical differences in any of the homes. We will be able to interpret these differences in light of the feedback from staff (how did they respond to the feedback and was it helpful?) and the observations and fieldwork notes of researchers. Finally, feedback from staff will be used to evaluate the acceptability of the data collection and intervention itself (was it easy to arrange and how much burden did it place on homes?).

STAGE 5: Exploration of trial feasibility

This stage will draw on the evaluation and the pilot data to examine the sample sizes that would be required for a future cluster randomised controlled trial (CRCT) and whether a trial would be worthwhile. As part of assessing the feasibility, the costs of the intervention will be examined, including research time for data collection and feedback, and costs to the care home.

Project publications

In addition to academic articles and an administrative and methodological report, there will be: an ongoing web presence for the project making use of the SSCR, PSSRU and ASCOT websites; web-based and traditional printed outputs – including executive summaries for practitioners, policy makers and residents/family members involved in the research; conference presentations; and general media coverage, if appropriate.

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HOW DOES THE PROJECT FIT THE AIMS OF THE SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL CARE RESEARCH?

This project is concerned with practice improvement, ultimately with a view to improving the social care related quality of life (SCRQoL) of care home residents.

The development of the care homes multi-method Adult Social Care Outcomes Toolkit (ASCOT) into a mechanism that could be adopted by providers as part of their own quality monitoring and staff development would encourage the use of outcomes measures to improve care practice. It would also add value to an already successful tool.

The research will be able to move on the thinking in this area, with a view to building on this knowledge base in the future.

The Research Team

The team brings together a number of experienced academics at the University of Kent's Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU).

Ann-Marie Towers, Research Fellow at PSSRU, University of Kent, will oversee and manage the project. Ms Towers was one of the main researchers on the HM Treasury-funded PSSRU research project, Measuring Outcomes of Public Service Users (MOPSU), which led to the development of the multi-method approach for measuring outcomes in care homes and has an in-depth knowledge of the ASCOT.

Her PSSRU colleague, Research Officer *Nick Smith*, will assist with the project design, conduct the fieldwork and be involved in writing up the report and feedback to stakeholders. Since joining PSSRU, Mr Smith's work has focused the measurement of outcomes in social care.

Professor Ann Netten, is Professor of Social Welfare at the University of Kent and Director of the Kent branch of the PSSRU, the Director of the Quality and Outcomes of Person Centred Care Research Unit, and an Associate Director of the SSCR. She will provide guidance and advice to the project.

The project will be supported by *Elizabeth Welch*, Research Officer and *Sinead Rider*, Research Assistant.

All project team members will contribute to analysis, production of outputs and dissemination of results.

Project title:
ASCOT Feedback Intervention Study (AFIS): exploring the feasibility of an outcomes-focused intervention on care home practice

Timescale:
1 June 2012 to
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Budget:
£322,849

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