



Improving Communication around Outcomes: A resource to support reflection and practice development

Introduction

Within health and social care settings, there is a growing commitment to focussing on the outcomes important to individuals using services and their carers. The Talking Points: Personal Outcomes Approach has been developed to support partnerships and providers to focus on these outcomes. At the heart of the Talking Points approach is the engagement between the practitioner and individual service user or carer. Good communication between these individuals is central to taking forward an outcomes approach.

Good communication is reliant both on the skills and expertise of the individual practitioner and on the organisational support for these quality interactions. Practitioners working to implement an outcomes approach have reported a range of barriers and challenges to consistently achieving the quality of communication required. This resource has been developed to support individuals and groups of practitioners to reflect on their own practice and to identify opportunities for improvement as individuals, teams and across organisations.

Design of this resource

This resource is presented in three sections. The first section provides a short background to the communication issues underpinning the adoption of an outcomes approach and outlines key considerations for any practitioner undertaking this work.

The second section provides a framework to support individuals and teams to reflect on their confidence and skills in relation to three key aspects of engagement. This section of this resource is designed to take you through three steps:

Step 1 involves you and colleagues in reflecting on your experience as practitioners, identifying what currently works well in your practice and identifying areas of need in terms of skills development.

Step 2 introduces you to some materials to aid further reflection.

Step 3 involves you and your colleagues in reflecting on what you have learnt through these discussions, what changes you want to make and how you will support one another to make those changes.

The final section includes some additional material to support reflection and training in this area. This includes some preparatory exercises that can be used by groups to encourage reflection on communication and links to multimedia resources, including the full list of audio resources linked to in this document.

Links to materials to support reflection and to provide additional information, including audio recordings, digital stories and relevant documents are highlighted in **blue text** throughout this resource.

How to use this resource?

This resource is designed for use within multi-disciplinary teams to help problem solving, the identification & sharing of existing skills, the identification of support needs and any improvements required . It builds on practitioners' existing knowledge and skills, developing capacity and confidence to take forward an outcomes approach with all service users and carers, including with people with communication support needs. The resource can also be used by individuals, for example during supervision sessions.

Section 1. Improving communication around outcomes: some issues

Focussing on outcomes: getting back to basics

Working with service users and carers to focus on the outcomes important to them builds on skills fundamental to professional practice across social work and health professions. Taking an outcomes approach requires that the practitioner engage with the individual and significant others to find out what is important to them in life. Further, the practitioner will routinely negotiate with the individual service user or carer to prioritise outcomes and to agree how best their needs can be met and outcomes achieved. In this way, practitioners can work with the individual to create a care and support plan that brings together the outcomes important to the individual (e.g. being able to travel to see family) with those professional goals and outcomes needed to achieve this (e.g. reduce anxiety, increase mobility).

This process may require managing the expectations of the individual and being honest about the limitations of services and supports available. Practitioners need to work with the individual to consider solutions and supports within their local communities and social networks as well as from services. An outcomes approach enables practitioners to use their core skills of listening, problem solving and analysis. As such, adopting an outcomes approach builds on best practice in assessment, care and support planning and review.

The 'Good Assessor' exercise has been developed by East Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership to be used by practitioners to reflect on their own practice in assessment with a particular focus on communication. (<http://www.jitscotland.org.uk/action-areas/talking-points-user-and-carer-involvement/staff-development-materials/>)

Many practitioners working in this way have reported that taking an outcomes approach feels like getting 'back to basics' and has allowed them to reconnect with the fundamentals of their professional practice. They have also described some of the 'unlearning' required to make this shift from the more 'service led' practices that have become common place in many community care organisations.

In this digital story, June Findlater from East Renfrewshire CHCP describes what taking an outcomes approach has meant for staff and

management in her organisation. (<http://www.digitalstorylibrary.scot.nhs.uk/FitForTheFuture.html>)

Discussion points: To what extent do June's experiences resonate with your own?
Is a focus on outcomes 'getting back to basics' or something new?

There is overwhelming evidence from practice that making the shift to focus on outcomes for individual service users and carers takes time and requires the support of the whole system. Practitioners cannot work in an outcomes focussed way in isolation, but need the support of an organisational culture, systems and practices to do so.

For more information about the organisational changes need to support an outcomes approach and to access a wide range of resources and materials go to the Joint Improvement Team website. (<http://www.jitscotland.org.uk/action-areas/talking-points-user-and-carer-involvement/>).

Including people with communication support needs

Many people using services or caring for people using services have specific communication support needs that makes engaging in conversations around outcomes more difficult. Where individuals have difficulties with language, comprehension, capacity or literacy such as those caused by dementia or learning disability, the practitioner and organisation has a responsibility to work with the individual to find a way around these difficulties to ensure their views and perspectives are included in decision making around their care and support.

For any person with communication support needs, they will have learnt or discovered ways to communicate their needs, desires, intentions etc. Many of these will be unique to them. If a person's ability to communicate is very restricted then it can be difficult, if not impossible, to be always certain of what particular vocalisations, gestures or other movements 'mean'.

In this audio clip, Isobel, a carer of a women with profound learning disabilities, describes some of the ways her daughter Susie

communicates, the difficulties she has interpreting this communication and some practical strategies to overcome these difficulties.

[Registration needed]

Observation skills are essential when working with people with communication support needs. Not only is observation necessary to pick up on the many non-verbal ways in which individuals communicate, but observations provide important information about the context in which someone is living. This information can be used along side the person's own reports and the views of carers and significant others to piece together a picture of that individual, what is important to them in life, and the impact that services and supports are having on their lives. Practitioners report that this is a set of skills that they use routinely when there are concerns an individual is at risk but have tended to use less to understand an individual's priorities in life.

Discussion Point: What use of observation do you make in your own practice?
 How do you record your observations?

Finding out from the individual themselves what is most important to them in life is central to taking an outcomes approach. Therefore, regardless of how difficult communication is, it is vital to engage directly with the individual concerned rather than relying solely on carers or significant others. Instead the views of carers, significant others should be used to help interpret the meaning the individual themselves is communicating.

It's not what you do, but the way that you do it

There is overwhelming agreement amongst people using services, practitioners and carers that the attitudes and motivations of all the individuals involved are vital ingredients of any successful encounter. Good communication comes from a will to engage, a willingness to attribute meaning in the face of uncertainty, flexibility, resourcefulness and a preparedness to step out of one's comfort zone for service

users, carers and practitioners alike. Specific tools and approaches are useful in supporting communication, but are dependent on the motivation and skills of both interaction partners. Furthermore, research [recently conducted in Wales \[Registration needed\]](#) has shown that there is not one tool or approach that can be used with everyone. Instead it is about finding the right approach for each individual.

The good communication required to take forward an outcomes approach is a fundamental part of professional practice across health and social care settings. This resource recognises that the vast majority of practitioners have very well developed skills in these areas, particularly where they have regular contact with people with communication support needs. [However, as the following audio clip describes, making the space to engage with people, particularly where they have limited communication, can be in conflict with other professional demands. \[Registration needed\]](#)

Organisational factors

Practitioners seeking to take an outcomes approach regularly comment on how challenging this can be, particularly where they work within restrictive environments and systems that lead to compromises in the delivery of that practice. Most practitioners will, for example, express the intention to be person-centred, treating each client as unique and placing a focus on the client/practitioner relationship. However, caseload size, a focus on tasks and an emphasis on formal assessments and tick boxes can be in direct conflict with a person-centred approach. These pressures are felt most acutely when working with individuals with communication support needs whose views cannot be ascertained in a structured and time limited way.

This resource acknowledges the challenges that practitioners face in marrying the humane approach they strive for with the structures they have to work with. Just as practitioner motivation is essential to including people with communication support needs in an outcomes approach, so are organisational attitudes and values. Good communication with individuals with support needs will not happen routinely unless there is good organisational support for individual practitioners.

Discussion point: What are the key organisational challenges you face in taking an outcomes approach, including with people with communication support needs?

Make a record of these challenges so that you can revisit them in the 'Action Planning' sections of this resource.

Section 2: Managing the Encounter

Practitioners seeking to engage with any individual using an outcomes focussed approach need to consider the following:

- How will you 'prepare the ground' for a successful encounter?
- How will you engage with the individual?
- How will you gather and record the information required? This includes information from the individual themselves and where necessary from other sources

These issues are considered in turn in the following sections.

How do you – Prepare the Ground?

When you think about your own experiences:

- What do you do to 'prepare the ground' for any engagement with a service user or carer? What do you do well that you can build on?
- What do you find challenging and how do you deal with it?
- What would alert you that there may be a difficulty with communication?

Listen to the audio resource.

[Resource 1. James describes how a range of environmental and social factors can impact on the ability of someone with dementia to communicate \(see also: clip for Improving Communications document\). \[Registration needed\]](#)

When you meet an individual in a professional role, the onus is on the organisation and professional to ensure that the encounter is set up in a way that is supportive of good communication. This includes ensuring the individual service user or carer is relaxed, has their basic needs met, is comfortable and informed of the purpose and scope of the encounter. Service users and carers differ in their willingness and ability to influence such encounters and where people have specific communication support needs particular care should be taken to ensure that their needs have been met. As James describes, if an individual is hungry, thirsty or needing the toilet or if this is a morning appointment and they are at their worst in the morning, then their capacity to engage will be compromised. Every individual may draw on a range of verbal and non verbal skills to communicate. As Isobel highlights, discovering the 'pathway to access' for each individual is vital to a successful interaction and is particularly important and challenging when seeking to engage people with communication difficulties. This includes ensuring that the individual is using any specific aids they may need or find useful, such as hearing aids, glasses or communication supports .

Points to consider.

- What information can you find out about this individual in advance (care notes, essential life plan, speaking to other professionals, carers or significant others).
- What does the research tell you about the particular client groups that you work with in relation to communication?
- Consider environmental factors (the time in the day when they're most alert) – the person will be very responsive to their environment, think about how the environment may impact on them negatively or positively.
- Physical and emotional comfort (is the person hungry or thirsty, do they need the toilet, are any sensory aids in place?)
- Positioning (seating yourself so that you are level with them, how do you do this while looking after your own comfort e.g. there may not be a convenient seat) is there sufficient light, can they see you ok?

Action Planning.

- What changes could you introduce to enhance your communication skills (as an individual, as a team)?

- What changes to systems or processes would support you to make those changes?
- How could you support one another to make those changes?

How do you - “Do Engagement?”

When you think about your own experiences:

- How do you feel about engaging with individual service users and carers around outcomes?
- How do you feel about working with people with communication support needs? Are there some individuals that you look forward to seeing more than others, if so, why is this?
- What does a good encounter feel like? What do you do well to help this happen?
- What do you find challenging and how do you deal with it?

Listen to the audio resources:

[Resource 1. Isobel outlines some key considerations when engaging with people with communication difficulties \(insert link to clip 2\) and describes an approach she has developed to support communication, being 'Sense Active'. \[Registration needed\]](#)

As already highlighted, well developed professional skills are essential when engaging with individuals using an outcomes approach. These skills can be particularly stretched when working with someone with communication support needs. Engaging with someone with a communication difficulty or cognitive impairment who does not follow the conventional rules of conversation can be very challenging. We are socialised to expect that when we engage with someone they will respond to us in particular ways. When people do not respond as we expect it can make us feel frustrated and inadequate. This applies equally to practitioners and people with communication support needs. Encounters with people with communication support needs can be full of uncertainty and it can be hard for both individuals to sustain an interaction when they are not sure they are understanding or being understood. Therefore the attitudes and motivation that both individuals bring to an encounter can have a significant impact on its success.

The quality of engagement with an individual around outcomes will also be influenced by their expectations, experiences and fears surrounding the conversation. Where people have had previous difficult interactions with professionals or organisations, or are fearful of the outcome of for example an assessment, it may lead them to withhold information, or avoid engagement altogether. Acknowledging individual fears, expectations and experiences is an important part in building the trust required for meaningful engagement.

Points to consider within your own practice:

- The assumptions you bring to any encounter will influence it's success. How can you test these assumptions out?
- Any feelings of fear, frustration and anxiety on the part of the professional and the individual with communication support needs can hinder encounters. How do you spot when these arise in yourself or someone you are engaging with? What can you do to alleviate them?
- How do you manage to stay flexible in your encounters with people with communication support needs?
- How do you use and respond to non-verbal communication? How do you test out whether you have interpreted a behaviour correctly?
- The pace of the conversation as well as the way questions are phrased will influence how someone with a communication support need responds. How do you balance asking open questions and letting the individual set the pace with time pressures? Can you think of any examples where rushing an encounter created more work later down the line?

Action Planning:

- What changes could you introduce to your own practice (as an individual, team)?
- What changes to systems or processes would support you to make those changes?
- How could you support one another to make those changes?

How do you – gather information?

When thinking about your own practice:

- How do you gather and verify information? What works well and what can you build on?
- What are the challenges in gathering and verifying information?
- How well do you record information at the moment? What more could you do?

Listen to the audio resources:

[Resource 1. James suggests some strategies for getting good information from people with dementia. \[Registration needed\]](#)

[Resource 2. In this clip Maureen, the wife of James, talks about the importance of checking out information given by people with dementia. \[Registration needed\]](#)

[Resource 3. Isobel highlights the importance of relationships when seeking information from and about the lives of people with communication difficulties. \[Registration needed\]](#)

Engagement with the individual concerned should always be central to taking an outcomes approach, regardless of any communication difficulties. However, it may not be possible to gather all the information required directly from the individual themselves. In these instances it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved and look for additional information to support the individual's account. This information can come from family carers, other colleagues or paid carers and from your own professional observations and understanding of the individual and their situation. It is important that the source of any information is always recorded. Where there are concerns about the reliability of a particular piece of information this should be recorded.

Gathering information from people with communication support needs has been likened to 'playing detective' with the practitioner piecing

together the story using information from a range of sources. However this approach does not always sit easily with the demands of administratively driven assessment processes where the emphasis is on ticking all the boxes. It is important that systems and processes are adapted to support this way of working.

Points to consider within your practice:

- The information gathering process should start with engagement with the individual but does not end here. Where else do you routinely get information?
- How do you verify important information? Observation, view of carer, colleague?
- How can you help the person to show you their capacity? (e.g. asking them to show you round their home will give you a good indication of what their mobility is like).
- How do you record where information has come from and how reliable it is? Is there a standard protocol for recording this information within your organisation?

Action Planning:

- What changes could you introduce to your own practice (as an individual, team)?
- What changes to systems or processes would support you to make those changes?
- How could you support one another to make those changes?

Next Steps

Having gone through this resource identify any areas for further development and review. You may find it useful to draw up a plan prioritising actions that can be taken as individuals, teams and at an organisational level to improve communication. Agree a timescale against which progress towards actions can be reviewed.

Consider what supports are needed to achieve these changes and how information and evidence about organisational factors can best be

used to influence decision making processes. Sharing learning with other teams and services could usefully strengthen the case for change.

Section 3. Additional Resources

In this section a number of additional resources are presented to support staff training and development around communication and outcomes.

Resource 1. Audio recordings

The audio clips presented as part of this resource are taken from longer interviews with three experts in the area of communication. Isobel Allan is a carer for her daughter Susie, who has profound learning difficulties, and also a trainer. James McKillop has dementia and is former chair of the Scottish Dementia Working Group. Maureen McKillop is his wife and carer. Both Isobel and James have spoken nationally and internationally on issues to do with communication.

Links to all of the interview material (broken into shorter clips) can be accessed from below.

Clip	Content	Duration
1	Isobel: Some key considerations	1 min 55 sec
2	Isobel: What works	3 mins 5 sec
3	Isobel: Being sense active	4 mins 55 sec
4	Isobel: Taking a risk vs getting the job done	1 min 15 sec
5	Isobel: Organisational support and resources required	1 min 10 sec
6	Isobel: Filling in the picture, the importance of relationships	1 min 20 sec
7	Isobel: Respect for ownership of outcome	1 min 25 sec
8	Isobel: Hindering forces	4 mins 10 sec
9	Isobel: Do's and don'ts for successful engagement	4 mins 40 sec
10	Isobel: Essential Life Plan	1 min 40 sec
11	James: Importance of 'preparing the ground' for good communication	5 mins 20 sec
12	James: Suggestions for getting good information from people with dementia	1 min 50 sec

Resource 2. Diagram showing the different factors that become more important when you're engaged with someone with communication support needs:

Working with people with communication support needs requires that practitioners take a wide view of the person and their communication. The focus of engagement needs to be expanded beyond speech and cognition to look at the person in their broader environment. This diagram illustrates that shift.

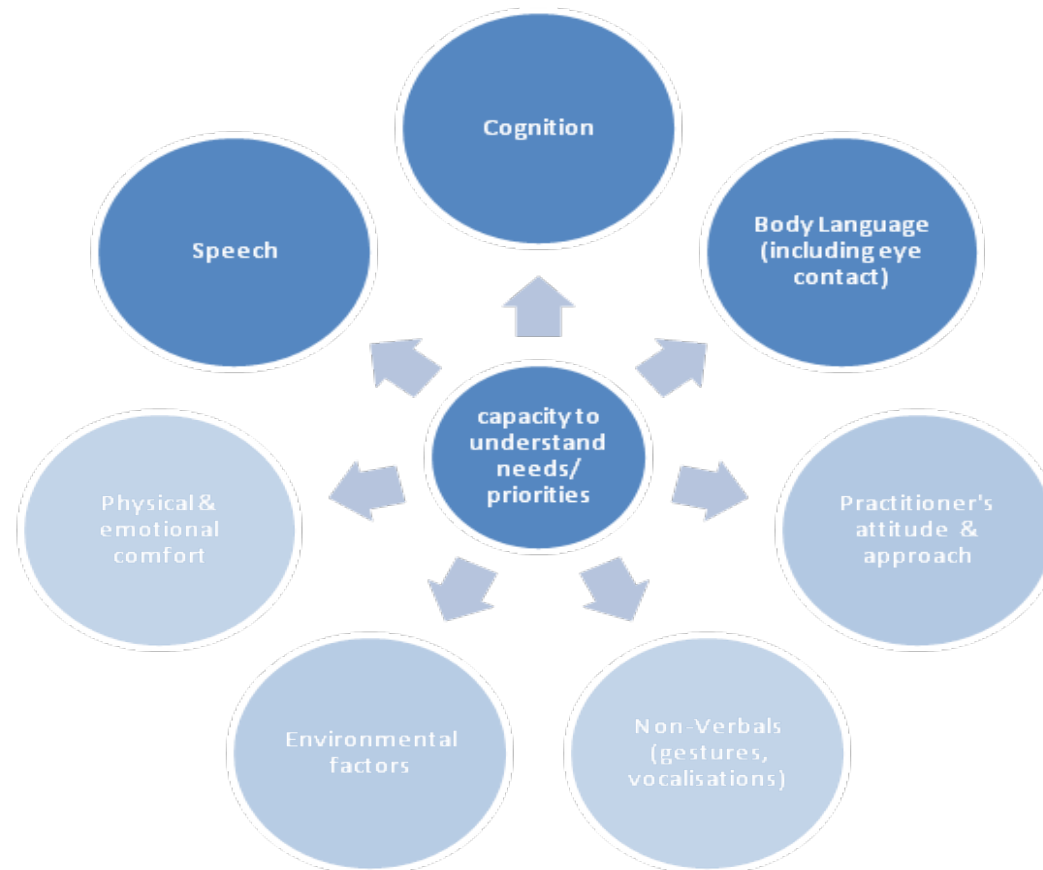


Diagram 1: *This diagram shows where engagement is focused during routine interactions.*

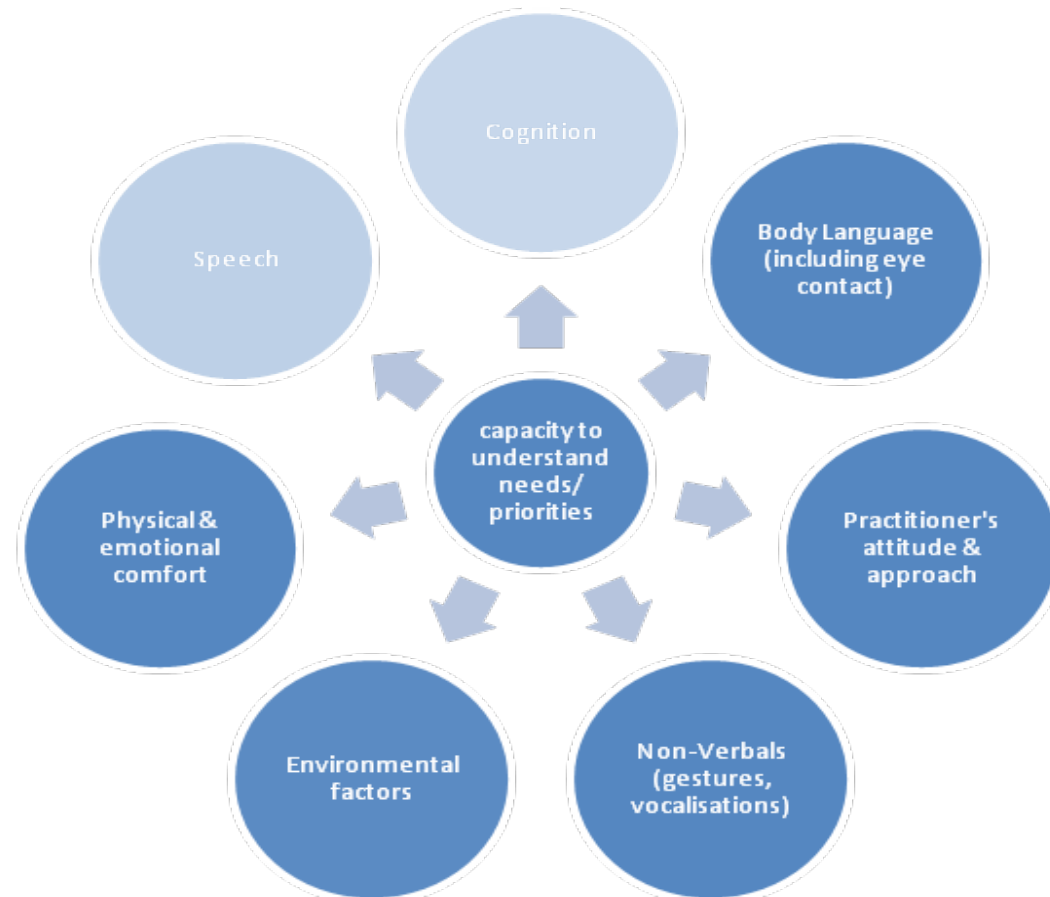


Diagram 2: *This diagram shows how the focus expands during interactions with clients with communication support needs.*

This series of exercises will help you to reflect on some of the communication issues discussed above.

1. “Blind Lead” ([click here for instructions](#)) [Registration needed]

In this experiential exercise you are denied the two modes of communication that you are likely to be most reliant on – talking and looking. It is a paired trust exercise in which one person is ‘blind’ and is reliant on their partner to lead them safely round the room. Swapping partners intensifies the feelings of vulnerability that the ‘blind’ person is likely to experience. They are denied speech and therefore have to find alternative ways to communicate to their partner their fears or need for reassurance. The challenge for the sighted partner is to convey ‘I can be trusted’ without being able to use a visual or verbal cue.

Move slowly to give yourselves greater opportunity to notice how you feel, what you pay attention to and how you communicate with your partner as you go through the various stages of the exercise. If you feel resistant or annoyed, if you want to break the ‘rule’ and murmur to your partner, if you feel helpless and lost, if you find yourself more trusting of one partner than another, then notice these experiences and what you do about them (if anything).

Once this exercise is finished, spend a good bit of time debriefing. Really develop your sense of what happens to you when you engage with someone without these two modes of communication.

2. “Follow your ears”

This experiential exercise challenges you to focus your listening skills.

In pairs, choose between you a sound that will identify you to one another (e.g. the sound of a cow mooing, the sound ‘a’, the sound ‘oo’).

Each pair in turn show their sound to the group. If two pairs have chosen the same sound, then one needs to select another.

Everyone spread out across the room. Everyone close your eyes. Turn round once. Turn round again. Now your task is to find your partner by virtue of your unique sound. Keep your eyes closed. Move slowly. Listen carefully.

When you’ve found your partner, stand together, open your eyes and watch everyone else.

Take time to debrief. What was this experience like? What were you aware of as you sought out your partner? What kinds of feelings did you have? What made it harder or easier to locate your partner?

3. “Notice a twitch”

This experiential exercise challenges you to focus your observation skills.

In pairs, sit on seats opposite one another so that you both see each other's bodies. One person will keep perfectly still except for a small movement in some part of their body: try to find a movement that is as small and local as possible while still being visible (to a very discerning eye). Their partner will pay close attention to identify what that movement is. When they have identified it correctly they swap roles.

You could start off by offering fairly easy movements and then make them progressively more challenging.

Take time to debrief. What was this experience like? When you were communicating your movement how did you feel when your partner successfully identified it or continued to miss it? When you were trying to capture your partner's movement, how did you feel when you couldn't detect it or when you successfully identified it?

Resource 4. Digital stories

A range of digital stories have been developed to support training and reflection in the area of outcomes and communication. A selection of these are available from the Digital Story Library (insert hyperlink to <http://www.carestories.co.uk>).

Resource 5. Talking Mats

Talking Mats is a low tech communication support system that has been developed at the University of Stirling. The approach supports individuals to reflect on and prioritise their needs and aspirations using sets of simple symbol cards. Work is currently underway to pilot a

set of symbol cards specifically for use within an outcomes approach. For more information about Talking Mats visiting the [Talking Mats team website](http://www.talkingmats.com). (www.talkingmats.com).

Resource 6. Talking Points: Personal Outcomes Approach

Access to a wide range of resources and materials to support the implementation of the Talking Points: Personal Outcomes Approach is available from the [Joint Improvement Team website](http://www.jitscotland.org.uk/action-areas/talking-points-user-and-carer-involvement/). (<http://www.jitscotland.org.uk/action-areas/talking-points-user-and-carer-involvement/>) The work is also supported by the online Community Care Outcomes Community of Practice. This community of practice is hosted on the local government CoP portal, is free to join and provides an opportunity to engage directly with individuals from a wide range of partnerships and provider organisations across the UK working to take forward on outcomes approach. To join the community of practice [click here](http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/community-search.do?queryText=community+care+outcomes&x=17&y=9). (<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/comm/community-search.do?queryText=community+care+outcomes&x=17&y=9>).

Resource 7. Supporting Communication with Older People

This resource was developed to support the Older People Engagement Project, under the auspices of the Lanarkshire Managed Care Network for Older People and includes links and descriptions of a wide range of resources to support communication with older people, including those with dementia. The resource can be accessed from the [Joint Improvement Team website](http://www.jitscotland.org.uk/action-areas/talking-points-user-and-carer-involvement/staff-development-materials/). (<http://www.jitscotland.org.uk/action-areas/talking-points-user-and-carer-involvement/staff-development-materials/>).

Appendix 1. The development of this resource

This resource was developed jointly by Connect in Care, a practice development project based at the University of Edinburgh and the Joint Improvement Team, part of the Scottish Government, as part of their work to support the Talking Points Personal Outcomes Approach.

The resource has been developed building on learning from three workshops with health and social care practitioners, people using services and their carers held between November 2008 and November 2009. Sincere thanks is given to the many individuals who gave up their time to contribute to this resource, but in particular: Isobel Allan, James McKillop, Maureen McKillop, Joan Murphy (Talking Mats Team, University of Stirling), and Gordon Dunbar (Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership). We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Alex McCauley and Alison Forbes (Connect in Care); Winona Samet (Joint Improvement Team) and Louise Trow and Fiona Stewart (Media Education).

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