



Managing care

Caring for quality

Martin

Unfortunately I have a feeling that quality has become a bit of a buzz word, and when it becomes that, you lose what the meaning of it is. But to me it's actually about the service, the service user or carer experiences at the end of the day.

Bronwyn

It isn't about looking at bits of paper and thinking, that's the goal of this project, we have to achieve it come hell or high water, if it's not what our service users actually want.

Beverley

I think it's quite management focused as opposed to service user focused, and quality seems to have taken on a meaning of outcomes and outputs, and how many people move through the service, and I would say that it was measuring quantity as opposed to quality.

Rissa de la Paz

Quality is very much on the agenda of managers in social care. What does it actually mean for users of the service as well as for staff developing that service? We hear from managers and workers in a variety of health and social care settings. We begin with Tricia, a manager of the Surestart Programme in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire. This government initiative aims to support parents and carers in children's development. She argues that quality should manifest itself to people from their first point of contact with the service.

Tricia

I think for families it's important that it's a welcoming environment and I think the first contact is really important and that really sets the scene for everything else. So it's important that they feel welcomed, that they don't feel judged, but it's also about the ethos and the attitudes and the kind of equipment we have. I think it's important that it reflects all types of people so that people do feel that they're included in that, and so we've been very careful that obviously our toys and equipment reflect disabled children, children from different cultures.

Rissa de la Paz

A quality service is as much about attitude as about the nuts and bolts of the provision.

Tricia

I think people in sort of disadvantaged areas do tend to have a basic mistrust of statutory services particularly, but probably all services that they think we're going to criticise. So I think it's all really important that we do it differently and that we accept people as they are and value what they bring, and build on their strengths and the positives that they bring. And I think if you've got that kind of attitude that's what really matters to families. I feel that it's about the services meeting the needs of the families, not the other way round, that you put them into boxes and say this is what you're going to get.

Rissa de la Paz

These sentiments are echoed by Carol, who works in Milton Keynes Social Services Department.

Carol

Quality for children and families means to know that somebody is going to respond to them in a sensitive way. They're going to be able to understand their needs, not come in and take over but will sit and listen to find out what they need to do at the pace that they can do it.

Families don't want to be imposed upon, they know what they need, they understand what they need to make the right decisions in order to be able to parent their children.

Tricia

I also think a fast response is important because I think so often you go somewhere, you get passed on to someone else, and I think even if we can't deal with something we help them to access the service they need. And that they get some help quickly when they want it, not to say well we'll assess you for three months and then you might get some help, we'll decide what you need.

Rissa de la Paz

Underpinning this is an approach which values the dignity of the individual. It's particularly crucial in care settings where it may be difficult for service users to articulate their needs. Martin, a manager who has worked both in mental health care and child protection.

Martin

We're trying to achieve respect for people, it sounds simple but a lot of users and carers in the past have said to me that the professionals hadn't always treat them with respect and I think that's what we're trying to achieve.

Rissa de la Paz

What impact can this lack of respect have? Mandy is project coordinator at End House, a young people's centre in Durham. The centre acts as a one-stop shop that provides counselling, support and information on a variety of issues from contraception to careers advice. She outlines how an insensitivity to young people's concerns can impoverish any dialogue with them.

Mandy

We have a lot of requests from external organisations wanting young people to sit on their committees, to join in research, to take part in designing a new leaflet around health promotion, whatever it is, and quite often they just take young people's ideas and they don't feed back to young people and for me that's actually abusive to those young people's rights. So young people get sick and tired of just giving all the time, and they don't get the respect and the responsibilities and the acknowledgement back.

Rissa de la Paz

By contrast, respect is about actively involving service users in the decision-making process. Joanne, youth forum coordinator at End House.

Joanne

The good thing about End House is they've given young people the chance to have an involvement in the development and the running of the centre, from the day to day running right down to the policy and procedures of all the services

Rissa de la Paz

Mandy argues that quality manifests itself as an openness to tap into the potential of each individual.

Mandy

One of End House's roles is to actually build young people's qualities up, so that what they feel that they don't have as good qualities, we actually help them to gain those qualities. What we would try and do is actually raise their knowledge base and understanding so it helps build their confidence up.

Rissa de la Paz

This valuing of the individual is also central to the approach of Camphill Newton Dee, a village community near Aberdeen. It aims to integrate adults with learning difficulties into the life, work and management of the community. Tom, a member of the management committee at Newton Dee.

Tom

Our ultimate aim for our residents, our service users, is to provide an environment where they can develop to as full their potential as possible. It takes away a little bit of the thing that we are here to provide a service for certain people. It's more, we are here to live together in a particular way, which allows all of us to develop to our full potential, we hope.

Rissa de la Paz

Residents live in a number of house communities that vary in size and make-up. There are opportunities to feed their views into decision-making, through the neighbourhood and working groups that discuss different aspects of community life. David, another member of the management committee.

David

The Newton Dee meeting happens at least four times a year, and it happens in our village hall, and everyone who lives and works in Newton Dee is welcome to that meeting. That's service users, that's employed people, that's community members, people who've been here for twenty years, people who've been here for twenty minutes. The decision making process can be a slow one from time to time. However having said that, once the decision is made, you have a lot more backup, a lot more trust and a lot more unison in your approach.

Rissa de la Paz

Responding to the needs of users in a flexible and sensitive way is demanding on systems and staff. Sarah, an art therapist at a voluntary sector project for children and young people who have experienced abuse.

Sarah

Quality of service is particularly around meeting the needs of the service user and following professional guidelines and procedures of good practice and always keeping in touch with what the changing needs and developing needs of that client group are. And I think it has to be flexible, but I think there need to be good systems in place.

Mandy

Quality generally I think it's about being competent. If you're going to do something you do it well, and if you can't do something you're honest and open about it. And when you fail at something, you acknowledge failure and you learn from it, and you don't feel frightened about saying, well actually I did do a really bad job there. And also if you're good at something, not to be smug about it but to be confident about it.

Rissa de la Paz

Mandy, project coordinator at End House Young People's Centre in Durham. For her, quality is about valuing staff as much as the service user.

Mandy

In terms of quality for people, especially for workers here, for me the quality in work is that they actually believe in what they're doing. So they're honest, open, respectful, value each other, that they feel valued. If people feel valued as people, then they feel valued as professionals anyway. So they will give and deliver and feel supported in an environment. And they feel also able to tell you as a person when they've blown a gasket or when they're doing things right and when they're doing things wrong, and also they can challenge you. Because I think some managers don't like to be challenged, and I like to be challenged.

Rissa de la Paz

There are two distinct ways in which managers can provide support for their staff suggests Martin, who has worked in mental health and child protection.

Martin

Supervision is quite often about helping people with skills, helping improve their abilities, picking up on issues, whereas I think welfare is a different thing. I think if you just look at people in terms of their work I think you're missing out, I think you've got to take an interest in

other issues, whether it might be a problem at home, health problems, whatever they might be. So I think there's a distinction between the two really.

Rissa de la Paz

Martin argues that this type of approach should be a standard part of any quality framework.

Martin

I feel that quality should be the corner stone, it should be imperative, it should be what we're about, and it needs to become sort of an overall way of thinking within the work, rather like anti-discriminatory practice or whatever, that it's part of what a care manager is about.

Rissa de la Paz

Carol manages a Family Support team at Milton Keynes Social Services department. She and her colleagues work with families and other agencies to implement quality initiatives set up by the Department of Health.

Carol

We use a family support model, whereby we sit down with families, with other agencies, in order to plan what needs the children and the parents have, and everybody joins up to that plan in a very coherent way, as early on as possible. So it's a very much a joined up approach to working. It's really important in terms of the assessment framework to embrace the holistic idea and to make sure that we don't just look at one aspect but we look at all aspects of children's needs, that's very important.

Rissa de la Paz

Carol's colleague, Baljinder, argues that working across professional boundaries is important if they're to respond appropriately to the needs of children and families.

Baljinder

A child doesn't have just one need that could be met by one person, or one agency or one professional. If we actually work in isolation we're not meeting all of the needs of that child and that family. So we have to be working together and we have to be encouraging other agencies to actually fulfil those needs for that child as well.

Rissa de la Paz

As part of their aim to deliver a quality service, Baljinder's and Carol's teams are charged with meeting specific targets. These are imposed by the Department of Health.

Baljinder

In the Referral and Assessment Team we do have targets that we need to meet. The targets would be to undertake initial assessments or make a decision within seven days. Are we actually responding to every single referral or as many referrals as we possibly can within those seven days? The other targets that we do have are looking at sending leaflets to family members, making sure that they have the appropriate information and how many families we've actually sent the leaflets to. And how many families have actually responded in saying "well these are good for us, or these aren't good for us"

Rissa de la Paz

Once an initial assessment is complete, the cases are transferred to the Support Services team, where Carol works. They're expected to complete core assessments within 35 days. Although this exerts pressure on the department, there are advantages.

Baljinder

I actually feel the targets are very useful, that people are very clear that for example, the initial assessment. It has to be quick enough to actually provide an appropriate response to families. Families cannot wait after a referral has been made especially if they've requested support, they can't wait for the next three months for someone to actually get back to them.

Carol

Targets are important because they do give you a focus. Without a focus, without a time-scale things can very much drift. It is good to have these time-scales so that I can work through in supervision with my social workers what is needed, when it's needed by and actually help them to achieve that. It can be quite a difficult task, but there is an art and a science in terms of not over assessing, to be able to get enough information to pull the assessment together as quickly as possible.

Rissa de la Paz

As a manager, one of Baljinder's tasks is to ensure that initial assessments are done as effectively as possible. This means constantly marrying the cases with the most appropriate members of staff on her team.

Baljinder

What I've actually done is devised some formats that I've been using to look at, which social worker has actually got which initial assessment. Also we have case supervision, which comes a lot quicker than the normal four to six weekly professional supervision. And it's during that case supervision that I would be chasing up and looking at if initial assessments aren't completed, then what else needs to be done. And its things like looking at, do we need more social workers? Do we need social workers to be available on the phone or do we need more social workers to be out there doing the initial assessments? Do we need more support workers? Do we need to have two Team Managers rather than one?

Rissa de la Paz

Carol points out that planning support in conjunction with families is crucial to an effective service.

Carol

By holding a Family Support Plan as soon as the case has been received into a Family Support Team, you get an awful lot of assessment within that first meeting. You're making a plan and there are only one or two other things that one needs to know to really feel that you've got a good picture. If you have a Family Support Meeting involving parents, they are the best people that know what they need and you need to hear and listen to what they've got to say.

Rissa de la Paz

For Carol, one of the rewards of the job is observing how families gradually take on a more active role in defining how the service should be tailored to their specific needs.

Carol

When you first get involved with a family it's often that professionals will be the person responsible for fulfilling certain tasks. But as you work through that plan it's very important to see that the parents take on the responsibility of making sure certain tasks are achieved. But we never do that unless the families are happy and willing that there isn't any role left for us. And that's a celebration time, that we've gone through quite a lot of hard work and that is the time where we sort of wave goodbye. And it feels very positive.

Rissa de la Paz

A critical part of implementing quality is measuring outcomes. This inevitably involves providing the evidence of meeting targets laid by government initiatives. Bronwyn, manager of a voluntary sector project that works with families where abuse has taken place.

Bronwyn

The agency at the moment, because it's government led, they're looking all the time at output, output, output. What are your outcomes, how are you measuring, how are you doing this and how are you doing that it. It gets into number crunching as well. You will see X number of families during this year, that's an outcome for this project and you have a service level agreement with another agency, and they will say, well with this money we're giving you, we expect you to achieve this amount of work. So it's a different sort of an outcome.

Rissa de la Paz

How does this tally with the very specific outcomes that may be needed by individual children and their families?

Bronwyn

You're doing therapy with a child, and basically that child will say to us, I just want to feel better. So we have to try and break that down with the child and say, okay you want to feel better, so how would that feel to you if you felt better, well I'll be able to sleep, I won't have nightmares any more, I wouldn't be worried about going down the street. And at the end of the day if we've got a parent and a child sitting in front of us who are feeling very stuck, and I'm thinking, well how are we measuring their outcomes, that for me just goes out of the window.

I just have to make sure that my workers are there, alongside, doing what they can, to help that family move on, but it may take an awful lot longer than people first envisaged.

Rissa de la Paz

The challenge of meeting different targets for different parties can lead to tensions. Beverley, who works in the same agency, argues that there need to be new ways of measuring outcomes.

Beverley

I think that quality has come from business speak and I think it's been transferred into social care. And I think it focuses again on outcomes and outputs and how many people you've got through a service. I think we need some systems that really look much more in depth at the complexity of what service users bring. They often bring years of difficulties and complex issues that really need a lot of individual time to work through.

Rissa de la Paz

An awareness of the pressures on staff is equally important. A salutary comment from Sarah, an art therapist on the project.

Sarah

I think it's really important for my manager to give me the time and space and recognition of my professional style, so that I actually have the head space I suppose to really rethink things and develop things. And that is about understanding me and my style as much as the actual work load that I carry. Our senior managers don't always remember that in order to think about practice, consider new ways ahead, it has a time implication basically, and I wonder sometimes whether there's an awareness of the position of the practitioner having to meet all these needs from on high as well as the current demands of the job.

Rissa de la Paz

What's the impact on staff of working in a highly demanding care setting?

Sarah

We're working with children and young people who are actually experiencing post traumatic stress. What can happen to practitioners such as myself, or their immediate manager, is that they can feel overwhelmed by the demands of the job, and the stresses, and the emotional and psychological baggage that is actually given to them as part of their daily work. Good clinical and manager's supervision actually helps to clarify what the issues are and therefore identify them, and by that same token enable them to be contained within a framework.

Rissa de la Paz

Beverley, a colleague in the same agency, endorses this.

Beverley

We need case management supervision, but also I think we need something else. We need a therapeutic supervision that helps, a place where you can talk about the impact personally, and I think a manager to hear that, value it, respect it, and find a way of resourcing it, will keep your work force healthy! And it stops workers going off on long term sick and all of those other costs to organisations that happen when people feel that their needs aren't being met in that way, and they get burned out and they leave and move onto something else.

Rissa de la Paz

Developing a team commitment to quality is clearly an integral part of good management. Front-line managers can lay the groundwork for this at an early stage.

Martin

I think the most simple thing you could do as a first line manager is recruit good people. I think good people do quality work, poor people can do a lot of damage. I think the other way is to have it as part of the training for people, the work isn't just about the work, it's about the quality, the outcome.

Rissa de la Paz

Evaluating Quality.

David

I think the best way to show or demonstrate that what I am doing is good and right, is to ask those around me, to look at those around me, and to look at how I fit in that environment. So as such it is the service users, my peers, and those who from time to time can come in from outside and observe me. Their reflections, their reactions and their comments, are the best judgement on my actions.

Rissa de la Paz

How do you know whether you're delivering a good quality service? In this band we look at the different measures people use to assess whether they're meeting expectations. At Camphill Newton Dee, a village community for people with learning difficulties, the key is to reflect a democratic notion of quality. There are certainly powerful informal methods for finding out how residents feel about the service. Pauline, a manager at the village metal workshop, comes into contact with many service users.

Pauline

You can usually tell when people are happy or not happy, especially with people with learning difficulties. They don't hold back in the same way, or they might exhibit some kind of behaviour that's not what they would normally exhibit, so you would know that there was something wrong. The longer you're here the more you get to know people in the workshop, so you would know how they were and if their production was going as it should be, then you know you would be doing a good job as well.

Rissa de la Paz

Each resident also takes part in an annual review to assess not just their care provision, but their experience of community life as a whole. Penny, a registered nurse and social worker, is responsible for one of Newton Dee's house communities.

Penny

We sit down and write about each villager with each villager, about their life and it's split into home life and work life. Have we actually achieved what we said we were going to achieve on the care plan, if not why not. Looking at people's social lives. So actually sitting down and writing those is like an aide memoir, because you know if you haven't achieved what you were supposed to achieve, you sit and think oh well, why not, and how am I going to achieve that, so they're very useful pointers as well.

Tom

The reviews and the care plans are fed by three monthly summaries where important issues will come up. If someone has a relative who's died or if they've been on holiday, or where they've learned a new skill, or they've moved house or they've moved from work. Those sorts of things are picked up in the three months summary, so we do have a written record to some extent of how things are going.

Rissa de la Paz

Regular reviews with service users are also part of practice at the voluntary sector project where Bronwyn works. The aim is to provide therapy and support for families where abuse has taken place.

Bronwyn

We try at the beginning of every piece of work, set a goal for the work, what do you want out of this work, and we then try to measure, have we met that goal, are we some way along the line, or have we not met it at all. If we haven't, what do we need to change.

Rissa de la Paz

Every few sessions, families attend a review meeting with staff. They're invited to fill an evaluation form at the end of a piece of work. The team is also exploring methods of longer-term evaluation.

Bronwyn

We finish a piece of work, six months down the line we'll contact the family again and say, at the end of the piece of work this is how it was, how is it now? Just to ensure that what we think we're measuring is actually accurate.

Rissa de la Paz

A critical look at one's practice is an integral part of developing a quality service. Mandy, project coordinator at End House, a young people's centre.

Mandy

I like having evaluations because quite often you can't see what you're doing right and wrong, because you're in it, and I think we always have to learn from our bad practice and acknowledge the good practice. And I think a lot of people feel threatened by external evaluations, because it picks up things that you might want to hide or things that you're not doing particularly well. But it actually fuels us, because I think you're only as good as the practice that you're delivering, and if you've got a blind spot, or something that you're not particularly happy about and somebody else picks it up, then you really do need to do something about it.

Rissa de la Paz

Learning from feedback is also part of the Camphill Newton Dee ethos. As registered providers of residential care, the community is subject to regular inspections from the Social Work department

Tom

We went through a quite a phase of being very defensive towards the inspection unit and seeing them as just controlling and hassling and pummeling us, and we've now come really the other way round. That we just really use them in a way I think is much more helpful, and as advisors, as people who stand there and say no, we stand for you, we know you'll do this properly and if you have any problems, come to us.

Rissa de la Paz

But is the evaluation process itself open to improvement? Beverley, from the therapeutic centre that supports families where abuse has taken place.

Beverley

I think evaluations don't tend to really look in depth at people's needs. I think they look fairly superfluously at how many groups you offer, how many sessions you offer, and I think it would really help if evaluations and inspections really looked beneath the surface, and the impact on the workers of providing what they provide. And I think that's skimmed to some extent, what's the cost of the service that the workers offer, and what does the project need to support it?

Rissa de la Paz

A more bottom-up approach to evaluation is a possible way forward.

Beverley

Workers and service users could have an input into what needs to be looked at in an evaluation, rather than it being a mapped out process that a manager has already worked out, and they've got X number of issues and questions to address. I think that would be a much more holistic, equal approach to evaluation.

Rissa de la Paz

Finally, Beverley argues for a continual reflection and appraisal that's integrated into practice, rather than a one-off event.

Beverley

I think it should be a process, that workers find valuable as well to think why do we do that, why do we do it that way. So I'd like to see some kind of connection as well with, right, you've had that evaluation and review, now what's the next stage, and how do the recommendations of that get put into action. So that it's a much more continuous process that's a part of practice rather than a, let's wait for the next one and get anxious about it.