

# Younger Adults' Understanding of Questions for a Service User Experience Survey

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RESEARCH  
SUMMARY

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## BACKGROUND

The mandate for conducting surveys of users' experiences and satisfaction with services was first given in Modern Local Government (DETR, 1998) with the aim that these surveys would form part of the performance framework. A set of questionnaires were developed for the purpose of collecting data on user experience and satisfaction with social services (Qureshi and Rowlands, 2004) and the national surveys have drawn on this work to identify a set of compulsory questions for each round. Thus far, the user experience surveys (UESs) have been conducted nationally on a three-yearly cycle; the first was for older people in 2003 and was followed by one for younger adults with physical and sensory impairments in 2004.

Results and feedback from the first wave of UESs were mixed. The older people's UES was judged to be successful: the results were of use to councils in thinking about how they might improve their services; and work by PSSRU at the University of Kent also found evidence to support the use of the satisfaction question as a performance indicator (Netten et al., 2004). However, feedback concerning the younger adults' UES indicated that there were several shortcomings and anecdotal evidence from CSSRs suggested that there was little subsequent reflection or change in service delivery. Recognising these shortcomings, the Information Centre (IC) for Health and Social Care decided to pilot a revised version of the 2004 questionnaire. Five authorities were involved and the PSSRU at Kent were asked to provide qualitative work to feed into the pilot.

## METHODS

The focus was on service users' understanding of questions included in the pilot survey (see Malley et al., 2006 and

Box 1). The researchers conducted thirty cognitive interviews with service users, within three of the five pilot sites. People were selected according to a number of different characteristics (e.g. age and impairment) in order to maximise the variety of points of view. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and largely in service users' homes.

## FINDINGS

Many participants told us how they enjoyed the opportunity to express their views and were keen to know more about how the data were to be used. The findings can be characterised as falling into one of five categories: problems with the interpretation of key terms due to ambiguity of meaning, problems with the structure and format of questions, irrelevance of the questions, vague terms and insight into meanings of responses.

### Ambiguous terms

Several key terms turned out to be ambiguous with consequences for the interpretation of answers to these questions. For example, one question asked service users to tick those services they

had used in the past year. The following quotation demonstrates how there is ambiguity:

Interviewer: Help in your own home?

Service user: No, they don't come in to help me, no.

Interviewer: Day care?

Service user: Yes. Is it day care, when they come in and wash you?

Interviewer: Meals?

Service user: Don't get meals-on-wheels, no.

The problem is conceptual overlap between the terms. Some people conceive 'help in your own home' as help with only domestic tasks and not help with personal care tasks. This overlaps with the concept of 'day care' that can be interpreted as something akin to home care, as well as being understood as a day centre, or a planned event taking place during the day. 'Meals' also overlaps with 'help in the home' as some service users chose to tick this box if they had meals prepared for them by a care worker or personal assistant. This ambiguity makes it quite difficult to interpret the responses and the quantitative analysis performed by the IC supported this finding (IC, 2006).

### Box 1. Some items from the pilot questionnaire

1. Overall, how satisfied are you with the help you receive from Social Services?
2. The help I get from Social Services or using direct payments has made me more independent than I was. [Responses refer to the extent of agreement with statement.]
3. It is difficult to find out from Social Services about services that might help me. [Responses refer to the extent of agreement with statement.]
4. I have as much contact with other people as I want. [Responses refer to the extent of agreement with statement.]
5. Have you got as much information about local support groups as you want?
6. Are you in work at present? [Options include full-time paid work, part-time paid work, voluntary work, training programme, and education.]
7. How useful have Social Services been in helping you to get a paid job?
8. How well does the help you get from Social Services fit in with practical help you get from family or friends?
9. Do you receive any practical help from any friends, neighbours or family members?
10. Have you received any of the following services arranged by Social Services in the past year? [Responses include help in your own home, day care, meals, planned short-term breaks, transport, equipment and adaptations, and other services.]

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Another term that proved equivocal was 'practical help'. The question was designed to provide a sense of the respondent's informal care network, but some service users interpreted the question very broadly. Practical help for some people meant occasional help such as help with odd jobs, for example, 'changing light bulbs'; it was not help with personal care tasks and not necessarily everyday help. Although it is possible that people providing occasional help might also provide everyday help, this is not a logical necessity. It seems that the question may be over-reporting the extent of informal care networks.

### Structure and format of questions

For some questions, it was the structure or format of the questions that proved difficult. Some questions were designed as negatively phrased statements and these were sometimes interpreted incorrectly, by people with all levels of cognitive functioning. Service users would go to great lengths to discuss how they thought the statement was not a problem and then tick one of the agree boxes, indicating that there is a problem. It seems that negatively phrased statements may over-report problems in certain areas of services.

This interaction between the structure of the question and the characteristics of the service users was apparent elsewhere. One question asked whether the help received from services had made the service users more independent than they had previously been. Many service users had been receiving services for such a long time that it was hard to think back to what things were like previously and similarly for service users who had a congenital impairment, as they had always received services. For these people, the question was impossible to answer and responses were consequently meaningless.

### Relevance of questions

Several questions did not apply to the majority of the service users we interviewed or were not issues of interest. Questions asking about work fell into the first category and the question about local support groups, the second.

Although the group was not a representative sample, the finding does raise questions about the usefulness of these questions as compulsory items. The quantitative analysis supported this conclusion (IC, 2006).

### Vague terms

Vague terms allow respondents to draw on any number of ideas to answer the question, making the answers meaningless. A question falling into this category asked about how well services fitted with practical help. The term 'fit' in this question was particularly vague. Service users mused over its meaning, trying to think about how to interpret it in a way that made sense with their life. Different users mentioned various aspects, such as timing, care workers not doing certain tasks so having to rely on the family to provide that care or help instead, and the behaviour of care workers towards family members. Whilst all of these interpretations made sense, the multitude of interpretations meant that we simply did not know what aspect the respondent was thinking about. The area could be more helpfully addressed by asking questions about each of the components of the concept.

The concept of 'contact with other people' was also vague. The term could encompass social interaction with long-term friends, but it also seems to extend to other areas of life, including people you see at work or doing leisure activities. More worryingly, the term could also be interpreted to include people seen whilst, for example, shopping where there is no meaningful interaction. This question was supposed to provide some sense of the extent to which service users participate socially and to this end it would seem to over-report participation. We devised and tested another question asking about this area and individual service users showed marked differences in their answers to each question. The new question seemed to mitigate the issue of over-reporting.

### Insight into meaning of responses

The final way in which the interviews were useful was in helping us to understand what people mean when they

choose response categories. Although this was true for every question, the responses to the satisfaction question proved particularly insightful. Many service users expressed ambivalence in their feelings towards the services and this was often expressed using the 'quite satisfied' or 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' options. This finding lends some support to the use of extremely and very satisfied as the cut-off for performance indicators using the satisfaction item.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates the benefits to be gained from testing questionnaires using the cognitive interviewing method. Several important issues were identified that helped to explain some of the quantitative findings. Problems with some questions were also identified, ranging from problems with key terms and formats to questions that did not appear to be relevant. In addition, the interviews were a useful way of understanding what service users are thinking about when they answer questions. Overall the study provided a number of detailed recommendations for ways to improve the questionnaire (see Malley et al., 2006).

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