

Why language matters

Social Work Week

Camden Council

Bryony Shannon

19 March 2025

Rewriting
Social Care

Bryony Shannon
rewritingsocialcare.co.uk

Plan

- Why does language matter?
- **Purpose:** a life not a service
- **People:** us not them and us
- **Practice:** from transactions to relationships
- What can we change?



This year's theme is '**Strengthening Intergenerational Solidarity for Enduring Wellbeing**', which emphasises the importance of caring and respecting across generations to build strong societies, sustain the environment, and share wisdom for a better future.

Joachim Mumba, IFSW President, stated: *"This theme highlights the critical role of intergenerational care, respect, and collaboration in creating resilient communities and sustainable environments. It underscores the social work profession's dedication to building connections that value the wisdom of our elders while empowering younger generations to tackle today's challenges and envision a better future. Together, we can build a world where compassion and solidarity lay the groundwork for lasting well-being for everyone. As an African proverb says, 'If you light a lamp for someone, it will also brighten your own path'. Our collective efforts to uplift one another ultimately illuminate the way forward for all."*



Rob Mitchell

@robmitch92.bsky.social

World Social Work Day on 18th March 2025. The theme is 'Strengthening Intergenerational Solidarity for Enduring Wellbeing'.


Hope next year's theme is about using more easily understandable and accessible language so we can sound a lot less arsey.

January 29, 2025 at 9:17 AM Everybody can reply

WORLD SOCIAL WORK DAY | 18TH MARCH 2025 | #WSWD2025

STRENGTHENING INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY FOR ENDURING WELLBEING






ACE, ADASS, ADL, AHP, AMHP, ASB, ASBO, ASC, ASCOF, ASYE, BCF, CBT, CHC, CIN, CMHT, COPD, CPN, CPR, CQC, CTR, CYP, D2A, DASS, DBS, DHR, DHSC, DLT, DNA, DNACPR, DOLS, DST, DVPN, DWP, EIA, FGC, FGM, FOI, FTE, GP, HR, HRP, ICB, ICS, IDVA, IMCA, IMHA, JSA, JSNA, KLOE, KPI, LA, LD, LGA, LPA, LPS, MAPPA, MARAC, MASH, MCA, MDT, MH, MHA, MND, MSP, NFA, NICE, NQSW, NRPF, OOH, OPG, OT, PA, PD, PDR, PI, PIP, PiPoT, POA, POT, PPE, PSW, PTSD, PWLE, PWS, QA, S42, SAB, SAM, SAR, SCIE, SCR, SEN, SEND, SI, SLT, SMART, SPA, SW, TLAP, VARMM, VCSE, WRAP, YP

“M was a LAC herself because of CSA/CSE and family breakdown, before she became a parent at 16. Her FC and LA felt the pregnancy destabilised the placement and placed her in a women’s refuge after which her case was closed to the LA. During a later, difficult pregnancy (in which she became known to the perinatal MH team), M needed extra help; the LA held a TAF L1, which (after a MASH meeting) was later escalated to an L3, after which M’s children became subject to S.17, and the CIN process. FGC not offered.”

Surviving Safeguarding, [Community Care](#)



Think about the words that
people have said or written
about you that have stuck?

How did it make you feel?




“What starts as a note stating I cried in an appointment, becomes a letter that details a “difficult appointment”, which takes flight as a descriptor of me as a “difficult person”, which ultimately leads to a doctor I only just met describing me as “difficult – as expected”...

This is the curse of the paper-self. Despite literally being a pile of paper, she holds more authority than me on my own life, because she is sculpted with the thoughts and words of “professionals”... and in the end, they are the only thoughts and words which matter.”

Mental Health Clinical Notes: The Curse of the Paper-Self -
Wren Aves







Language also acts as a mirror –
reflecting the way we think, feel and behave.



Purpose



1.1 The core purpose of adult care and support is to help people to achieve the outcomes that matter to them in their life.

(Care and support statutory guidance)

**What matters most to you
in your own life?**



Don't we all want to live in the place we call home, with the people and things that we love, in communities where we look out for one another, doing what matters to us?



That's the **#socialcarefuture** we want to see.
Share if you agree › www.socialcarefuture.org.uk

Adult social care is 'fundamentally broken'

Social care in Britain is doomed

Social care: the time bomb no political party wants to touch

The crisis in social care is a hidden iceberg that could rip a hole in the NHS this winter

Broken

Social care is a timebomb beneath Britain

Social care is the nightmare that won't go away

Expensive

Mounting social care costs leave councils facing £6.2bn black hole

Adult care costs 'could bankrupt council'

£1bn boost to adult social care funding 'not enough to cover costs'

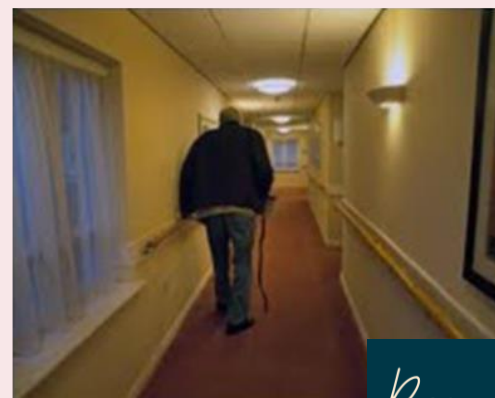
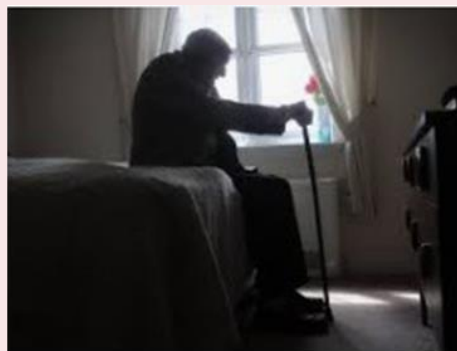
Vulnerable to lose out as care funding held back - council chiefs

Vulnerable at risk as cuts see support reduced to a minimum

Care for UK's most vulnerable faces 'collapse'

For 'the vulnerable'

Rewriting Social Care



Rewriting Social Care

“we don’t know what social care is, exactly...
but we know it’s for the vulnerable”.

FrameWorks Institute researchers
- public audience research
for #SocialCareFuture, 2018



We are committed to protecting our most vulnerable residents

As a local authority, we have a duty to support our most vulnerable

Protecting vulnerable adults

What to do if you are worried about a vulnerable adult - because of, for example, their age or disability

If you are a vulnerable adult and would like our help, or if you know of someone who needs help let us know.

Social care staff are skilled, committed employees working in challenging roles supporting some of our most vulnerable residents to live full and active lives

Vulnerable adults
and older people
£199.2m



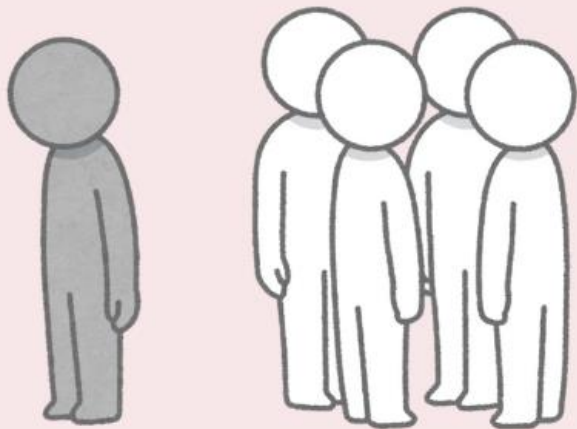
This includes social care services and homelessness prevention

Camden is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of vulnerable adults, children and young people and expects all staff and volunteers to share this commitment.



How does this framing influence people's perceptions and experience of adult social care?

Rewriting Social Care



vulnerable

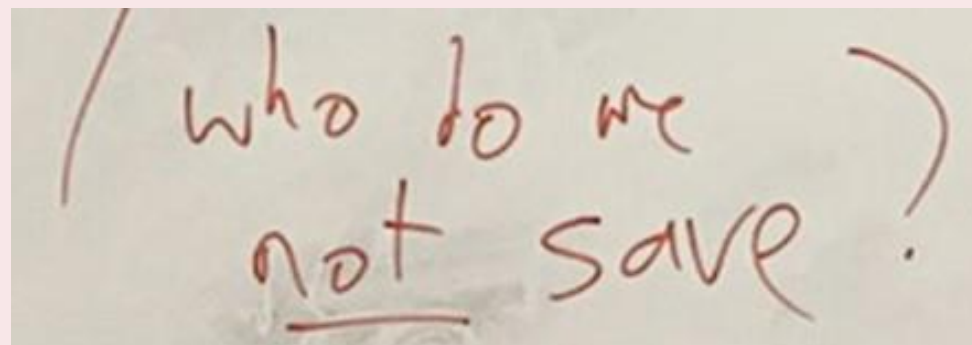
/ˈvʌln(ə)rəbl/

Synonyms: weak, frail, fragile, sickly, helpless, powerless

in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect.



Power



"If I put you in a room with a lion, you would be vulnerable"

Anna Severwright
Valuable AND vulnerable project co-production group member and convener of Social Care Future

communitycatalysts®
unlocking potential effecting change

#ValuableAndVulnerable



Words that make me go hmmm: Vulnerable

Adult social care aims to help people stay independent, safe and well so they can live the lives they want to.

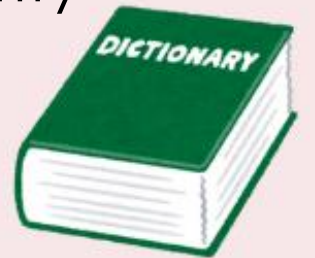
In Camden, we want everyone to be as healthy, active and independent as possible, and to be able to do the things that matter to them.



What do we mean by independent?

not controlled or ruled by anyone else,
free from outside control,
not subject to another's authority

not wanting or needing
anyone else to help you or
do things for you



“...in advancing the idea of independence, professionals and disabled people have not been talking about the same thing. Professionals tend to define independence in terms of self-care activities such as washing, dressing, toileting, cooking and eating without assistance. Disabled people however, define independence differently, seeing it as **the ability to be in control of and make decisions about one's life**, rather than doing things alone or without help.”

The politics of disablement
- Michael Oliver

“Once again, just to bang on about this one more time, this right is about **choice**, not a particular kind of accommodation or ‘independent living skills’ or living alone or without support. It’s about **disabled people having the same choices as non-disabled people about where you live and who you live with, and having access to the services you need to enable you to live there and be included in the community**. It’s a right that has at its core a desire to tackle institutionalisation and the segregation and isolation of disabled people.”

A stupid question (about supported living)

- Lucy Series

Independence:

Being in your pyjamas by 5pm and being on your own with an alert button between 7pm and 9am.

Parley Vouz Health & Social Care? (An A to Z of Carespeak)

– Mark Neary

Why is it more important that someone gets training to teach them how to use a bus than having someone to hold hands with on their bus journey?

Supporting people with learning disabilities to have positive sexual relationships

– Anna Marriott

Reimagining (or remembering!) our purpose

Don't we all want to live in the place we call home, with the people and things that we love, in communities where we look out for one another, doing what matters to us?



That's the **#socialcarefuture** we want to see.
Share if you agree › www.socialcarefuture.org.uk

A life not a service
From safety net to springboard

Rewrite 



When we change the story and how we tell it, we can change the world.

When organised well, social care helps to weave the web of relationships and support in our local communities that we can draw on to live our lives in the way that we want to, whatever our age or stage in life.



That's the **#socialcarefuture** we want to see.
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Rewriting Social Care 

Words that distance and divide

1913: Mental Deficiency Act

- included a '**definition of defectives**', with classifications of 'idiots', 'imbeciles', 'feeble-minded persons' and 'moral imbeciles'

The Mental Deficiency Act stated that "a person who is a defective may be dealt with under this Act by being sent to or placed in an institution for defectives or placed under guardianship..."

"On the towpath we met & had to pass a long line of imbeciles. The first was a very tall man, just queer enough to look at twice, but no more; the second shuffled, & looked aside; and then one realised that everyone in that long line was a miserable ineffective shuffling idiotic creature with no forehead, or no chin, & an imbecile grin, or a wild suspicious stare. It was perfectly horrible. They should certainly be killed."

- Virginia Woolf (1915)

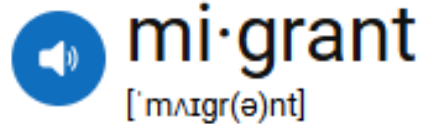


"This hereditarily ill person will cost our national community 60,000 Reichsmarks over the course of his lifetime. Citizen, this is your money."

'Useless eaters'

'Lives unworthy of life'

Words that *still* distance and divide



noun

1. a person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions.



Models of disability – Medical and Charity Models

The **Medical Model of Disability** describes disability as something a person has, like an illness, and something that needs to be prevented, cured, treated, or overcome.

The Medical Model sees medical professionals as the experts in disability.



Medical Model language focuses on what people can't do and on 'fixes' like medical treatment.

Freya can't work because she has a disability.

Cyril can't go to the theatre because he's confined to a wheelchair

Ben can't read the newspaper because he's blind.

What's wrong with you?

The **Charity Model of Disability** views disability as tragic and disabled people as objects of pity, who require sympathy, help and looking after.

The Charity Model sees non-disabled people as heroes and saviours, rescuing disabled people and caring for them - often in 'special', segregated services.



Charity Model language includes describing disabled people as 'victims', 'suffering from', 'brave', 'inspirational' and 'courageous'.

Both models place responsibility for the 'problem' on the disabled person – not on society and how it is run and organised.

Models of disability – Social Model

The **Social Model of Disability** reframes disability as a civil rights and equality issue rather than a medical or charitable issue.

Impairment = a person's physical, sensory or cognitive difference (for example being blind, experiencing bipolar, having M.S.)

Disability = the social exclusion and oppression people with impairments experience due to the way society is organised.

Social Model language focuses on the barriers faced by disabled people, and what can be done to remove them.

Person first language

People with disabilities

Identity first language

Disabled people

Freya can't work because she has a disability.

Freya faces difficulties in finding a job because of employers' attitudes towards disabled people.

Cyril can't go to the theatre because he's confined to a wheelchair.

Cyril can't go to the theatre because he uses a wheelchair and there is no step-free access.

Ben can't read the newspaper because he's blind.

Ben can't read the newspaper because of the absence of alternative formats.

We all... (or not)

Those with disabilities Complex cases

Vulnerable adults **Service users** Patients

Those with complex needs The frail/elderly

Carers **Our most vulnerable** Patients

Those with behavioural or developmental issues Those who use a service Our residents

Clients Individuals with complex needs

Our service users Those with dementia **Customers**

Those with lived experience

Those who are most vulnerable

Adult social care users

Those

“‘Those’ suggests different. Separate. Other. Not like ‘us’. Maybe not so important. Possibly not so human. Definitely not so visible. And once you’re not so visible, your life becomes that bit less valued. And once you’re seen as less valuable, you’re a whole lot more vulnerable. Once you’re written out of the story, you’re effectively written off.”



Words that make me go hmmm: Those – Rewriting social care

Clients, service users and customers



"local authorities should ensure that individuals are not seen as passive recipients of support services, but are able to design care and support based around achievement of their goals."

- Care and support statutory guidance

Client: "one that is under the protection of another",
"a customer or someone who receives services"



Service user: "someone who has used or is eligible to use social care or health services."

"a person who receives services from a provider as they carry on a regulated activity"

Customer: "A person who buys goods or a service"

hmmm...

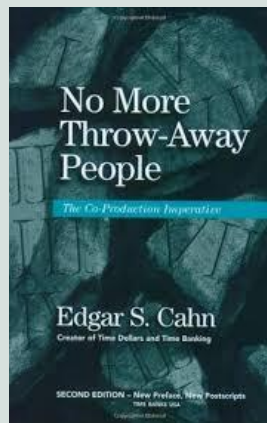
CLIENT

SERVICE USER

CUSTOMER

“the central assumption is that service is a unilateral process. I, the professional, produce. You, the client, consume.”

– John McKnight



“Demand”

“You need me”

“We need each other”

“Assets”



Citizenship & Professional Gift Models

hmmm...

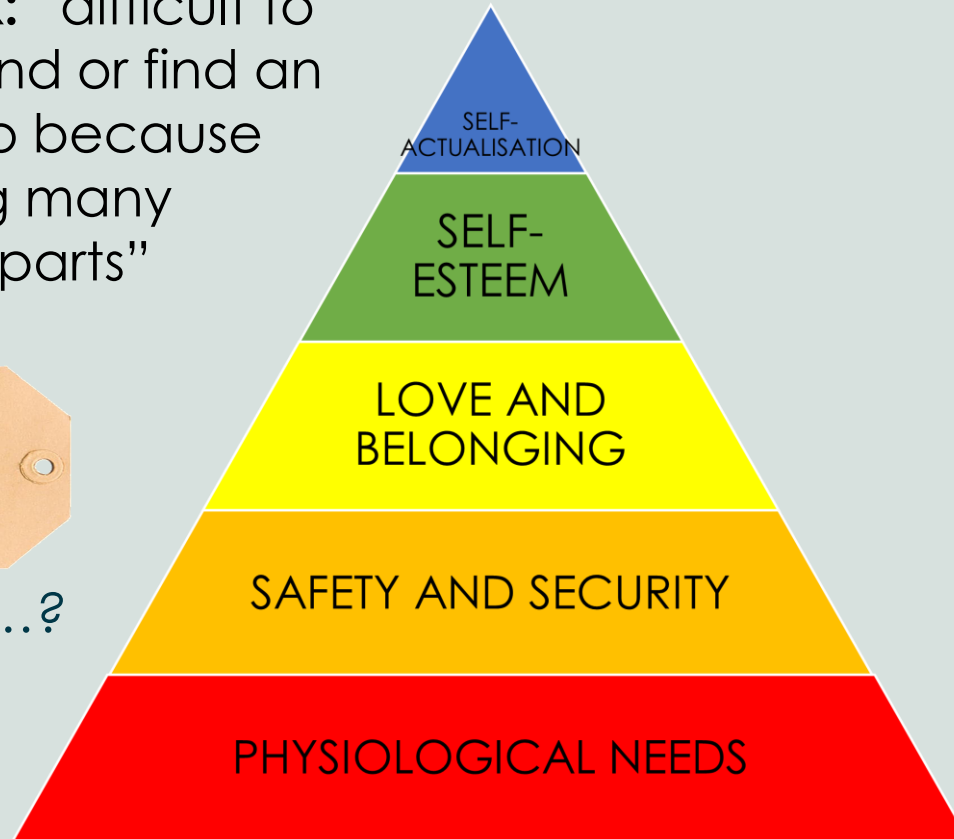
COMPLEX



Complex: “difficult to understand or find an answer to because of having many different parts”

Complex
needs

or human needs...?



The other phrase that we must never ever be drawn into is “**complex needs**”. It’s a shifter of responsibility, a justification for anything, a checkmate conversation killer, all rolled into one. Died a preventable death? Ah yes, but she had complex needs. Entering his 16th year in an ATU? Ah yes, but he has complex needs. LA won’t fund a home care package? Ah yes, we cannot find a provider that can manage his complex needs. It’s the get out clause of all get out clauses. It’s the king of multi disciplinary one-upmanship.”

A new conversation - Mark Neary

Special needs?



Doing the things that matter to us... or not



'Accessing the Community' - Service Speak – You Tube
- OXFSN Oxfordshire Family Support Network (OxFSN)

Doing the things that matter to us... or not



[Measurable daily outcomes - YouTube](#)

In communities where we look out for one another... or not



“Disabled people and older people **living in the community**”

“Ability to support the individual to **access the community**”

hmmm... COMMUNITY

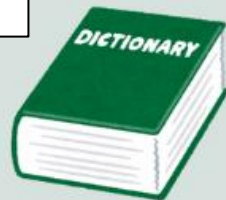
ACCESSING THE COMMUNITY

community

the people living in a particular area

a group of people with the same interests, nationality, job, etc

Community is friendship between different people or groups, and a sense of having something in common



Reciprocity

“I wish they would drop this “accessing the community” stuff. Steven is the community. “Accessing” it means that he is on the outside of it, waiting to be given admittance. That reveals a strong attitude – “this is ours and you are not part of it unless we allow you to be””. - Mark Neary

“my daughter doesn't want to “access the community”. She likes going out, when she can choose where and when... She loves company, and chatting to people, but wants little to do with day centres or over-organised activities. The other night, she hid her shoes, because to her accessing the community sometimes means doing things that other people want her to do.”



Community – Rewriting social care

Rewrite^{leaf}

Us not them and us

HUMAN.
A LABEL WE ALL SHARE.
#FLIPTHENARRATIVE

Source: Elly Chappell [@elly_chapple](#)

Rewriting Social Care^{leaf}

TEST TWO

2

Would I use that
LANGUAGE in my
kitchen with my
FAMILY, or at the
cafe or pub with
my **MATES**?

Source: Tricia Nicoll [Gloriously Ordinary Lives](#)

I am human. You are human.



Poem – I live in a house

Source: Learning Disability England

I live in a house or a flat.

You live in a scheme or a setting.

I go to the shop or for a walk in the park.

You go out in the community.

I get irritated and a bit shouty.

You display challenging behaviour.

I change my mind and decide not to go out.

You are non-compliant.

I choose to eat too much chocolate and pizza.

You make unwise decisions.

I am a person.

You are a service user.

I go to the gym.

You participate in meaningful activities.

The language we use matters and examples like these reinforce the 'othering' of people with learning disabilities. The knock on effect is that we see people who have learning disabilities as different or somehow less than.

I am human.

You are human.

Source: Helen Greenhalgh [@Helen_Charters](#)

Social work is about life...

“Social work is about life, treasuring humanity, building connections, sharing and promoting fairness. It is about creativity, care and love – being there to help people overcome obstacles and oppressions that hold them back. For people using our services, a social worker should be someone to trust and believe in – someone who helps you believe in yourself. Sometimes we must hold boundaries, protect rights, advocate and challenge. We are always in the midst of the messy stuff, finding ways forward.”

**Ruth Allen –
CEO British Association of Social Workers**

Connection
Creativity
Care
Love
Trust
Rights
Advocacy
Challenge

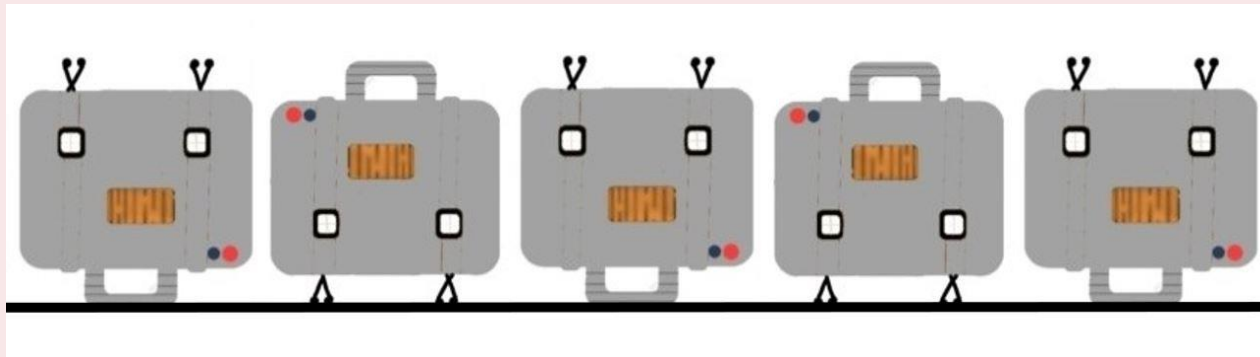


Rewriting Social Care

Social work is about life... or not!

You will be responsible for...

- “reviewing waiting lists for prioritisation and screening”
 - “screening and risk assessing cases”
 - “assessing service users”
 - “carrying a caseload of service users”
 - “managing complex cases”
 - “designing intensive care packages”
 - “reviewing placements”
- “It is a fast-paced team, and you don’t hold cases for long”
- “You will ensure that all cases are progressed efficiently through the system within this fast-paced environment”.



The social care sorting office



SIGN POSTING

hmmm...

PATHWAY

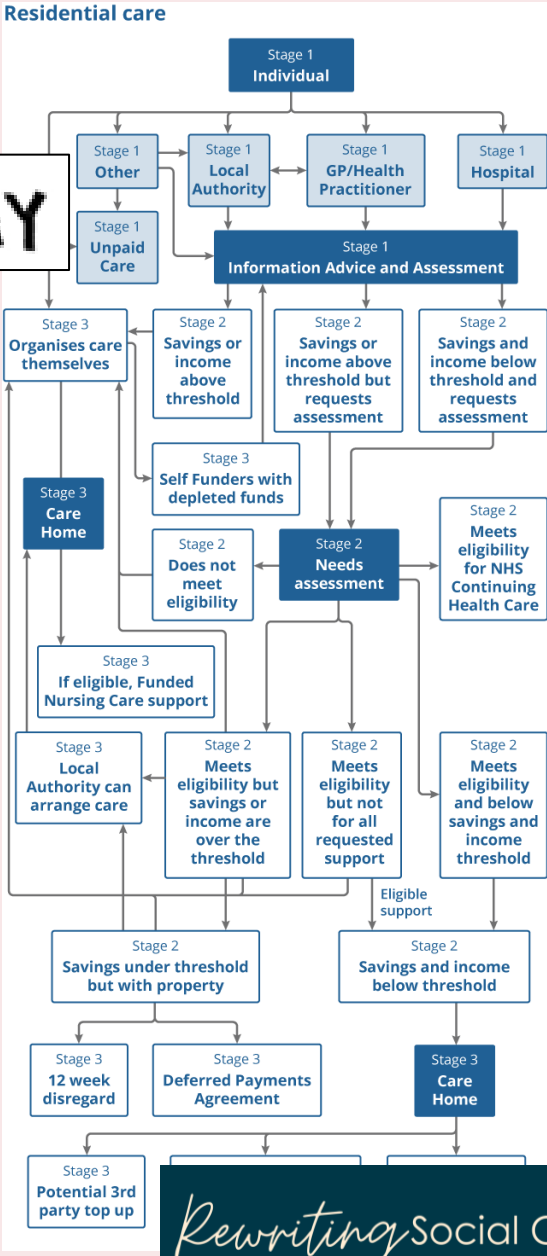
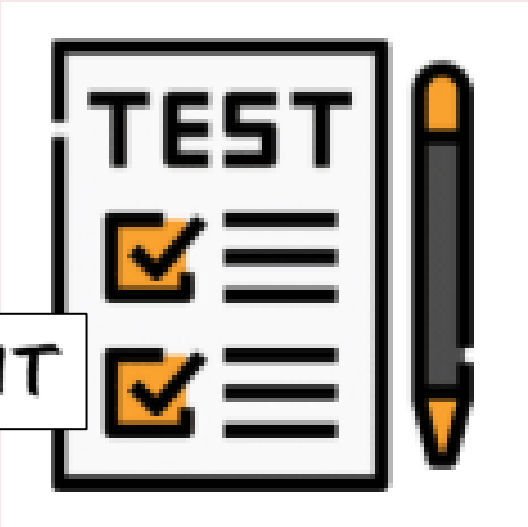
hmmm...

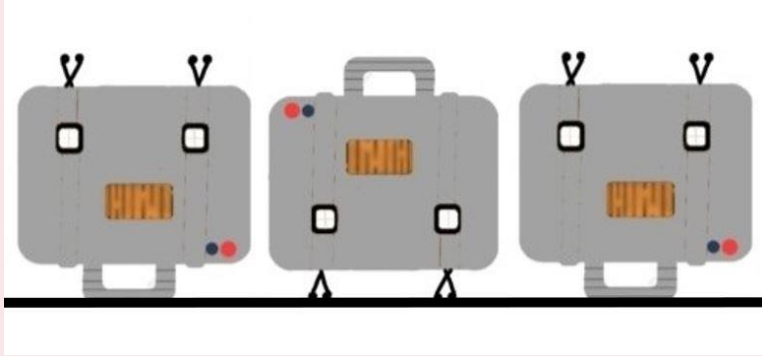
PLACEMENT



hmmm...

ASSESSMENT





Transactions



Relationships

Rewrite 

What's the
matter with
you?



What matters
to you?

We have to change our language to change our practice,
and we also have to change our practice to change our language.

Rewriting Social Care 

Our 'what matters' approach to supporting you Camden

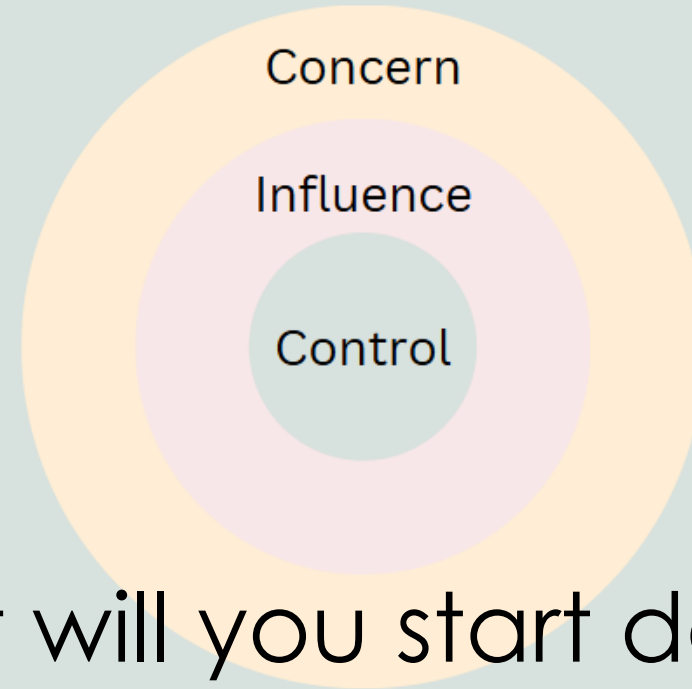
To support our residents, we no longer use a traditional approach that focuses on what's wrong with a person ('what's the matter?'), which provides formal services without considering alternatives.

Instead we will:

- focus on what is most important to a person (a '**what matters**' approach)
- recognise and build on their strengths as individuals and within their networks
- help a person to stay connected to their community

*What matters
to you?*

What can we change?



- What will you start doing?
- What will you stop doing?
- What will you continue doing?

“Language is the cheapest thing to change.”

– Wendy Mitchell

Thank you



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