

Reflections on Practice – Self-Directed Support Across Scotland

Revising the Self-directed Support framework of standards

Social Work Scotland Self-directed Support project team undertook a review of the Self-directed Support Framework of Standards in 2023, adopting equalities and island communities impact approaches and engaging in extensive consultation with key stakeholders. The aim of the review was threefold:

To review, refresh and promote the Standards.

To check that the Standards speak to everyone.

To focus on making the Standards usable.



The framework with twelve foundational standards, and accompanying practice statements and core components, is designed to align with Self-directed Support statutory guidance to support system change, implementation, practice and consistency of outcomes experienced by supported people – children and adults – and unpaid carers across Scotland.

Our learning approach

When the Social Work Scotland Self-directed Support project team developed the Framework of Standards in 2020 – 2021, we involved a wide range of stakeholders from those involved in delivering Self-directed Support and social care, to those with lived experience of the system. The process was undertaken during the pandemic, using online engagement for the first

time and carving out spaces between the crises to do our work. We always knew that we would want to review the Standards quite soon after the pandemic, and we wanted to engage in a fruitful way with everyone again, this time in a more systematic way.

We decided to adapt an equality impact assessment approach and, aware of the geographical challenges, to also incorporate an island community impact

assessment approach. We took some time to design a robust methodology that included an in-depth screening exercise and a series of focused work to delve more deeply into different perspectives, especially the experiences of those who have less access to Self-directed Support.

Our project team is committed to meaningful engagement and learning-focused co-production, and we adopt this approach in everything that we do. We know that this has helped us build trust with many different stakeholders and find common ground, so we spent some time reaching out to begin building relationships and to invite stakeholders into the review, to get their input into the process design and to prepare them for the work ahead.

Our story of change

The review of the standards took place across six months and included extensive consultation with the full range of stakeholders who are involved in implementing Self-directed Support and receiving social care support. Each standard was considered from many different perspectives.

We brought together a core working group made up of national stakeholders, local authority / Health and Social Care Partnership partners, and relevant experts who oversaw the review process. This group conducted a screening exercise – over one and a half days – to consider the potential impact of the standards on diverse groups and communities. Of the characteristics (right), we asked: ‘Are the standards inclusive? If not, what we would need to do to make them inclusive? And who would we need to involve?’

Characteristics (including equality protected characteristics)

Age: children, young people, adults, older people, Looked After Children / care leavers, children at risk of neglect

Disability: physical impairment, neurological conditions, learning difficulties, profound and multiple disability, mental health, autism / neurodivergence, addictions, sensory impairment, dementia, palliative care.

Carers, families, pregnancy, parenthood, marriage or civil partnership

Race, nationality, language, religion or belief

Sex, gender, gender reassignment, sexual orientation

Socioeconomic status including educational attainment, income, poverty, occupation, social deprivation

Housing related, homelessness, travelling community

Geography including islands, rural, remote, city, community level

Out of the screening exercise, we decided on a set of lenses to examine the standards further.

Our lenses were:

Children

Physical impairment

Learning difficulties & autism

Carers

Older people

Geography

To help lens group members be ready to respond effectively, we offered a one-off half day opportunity for them to come together to go through the SDS Standards and hear more about the intention behind them. This helped lens group members become more familiar with the SDS Standards and to feel more confident to take part in the review.

Each lens group met four times for a half-day each time over the autumn of 2023. Semi-structured discussions about the fit of the standard to the lens population were led by members of the team, and were then recorded and transcribed.

We appointed an independent researcher to analyse the data from twenty-four lens group and several focused group meetings and to create:

- Twelve reports outlining the general things said about each standard and specifics about the standard descriptor, practice statements and core components.
- Four general observations reports, for different parts of the system (supported person, workforce, organisation and leadership)

This was a huge amount of rich data which we used to make revisions to the standards and have earmarked to be used in future project developments, so

that we use the data to its full potential. The newly revised standards are now evidence-based, and speak to everyone who should have access to choice and control of their social care support.

Barriers and tensions

There are significant challenges within the sector affecting the workforce and impacting on the implementation of Self-directed Support. Budget restrictions, workforce wellbeing, challenges in recruitment and retention of staff, the current cost of living crisis, an ageing population and the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic all have a profound effect on social care services and how people receive their care. These were talked about at length by people participating in the lens groups, and people wondered about how possible it would be to fully implement the Standards.

To ensure that across Scotland we remain positive and motivated, we are promoting a progressive realisation approach to implementing the Standards. This is a concept originating in human rights policy meaning that rights are realised over time, through a comprehensive and co-ordinated implementation programme and careful monitoring of progress. The concept of progressive realisation fits well with implementation science, which shifts the question from: "What can we do with what we have?" to: "What will it take to do what needs to be done?"

For the Standards, this means making decisions about which of the core components are a priority in terms of initial implementation, quantifying the resources needed to implement Self-directed Support fully across all populations, and developing a comprehensive and iterative plan to deliver on this.

Enablers

Although we were asking a lot in terms of time, lens group members kept engaged in the work through their interest and commitment to Self-directed Support implementation. We were careful in supporting lens group members, offering a gratuity to those with lived experience and a consultancy fee for member-led organisations and freelancers. We talked with them about opportunities that the lens groups gave for people to share with others in different parts of the system. Participants reported that they felt part of something by being involved.

“ We owe ourselves the time to do this kind of work. We often say ‘why has this not moved on after so many years?’, and what we need is the time to pause and think and talk about what we need to do, and to aspire to, to make it better. ”

“ The lens group was a positive experience bringing together a diverse group of people with a specific focus. ... I met people who I would easily contact again for advice. ”

“ I was originally sceptical about this approach but it has been great to hear good and bad evidence about practice and hear about a practical whole-family approach and that’s something that will help me in my own thinking. ”

What we have achieved

The revisions were overseen by a core working group of national stakeholders, local authority and HSCP partners, and relevant experts. The key revisions made to the Standards were:

- Clarifying the meaning and simplifying the language of each standard including the standard descriptors and practice statements
- Reducing the number of core components to make them more usable
- Developing a new explanatory ‘how to’ section for each core component
- Providing a glossary to aid understanding of key terms used

We also have a rich resource of research material that will help us to include more practice guidance and resources and a self-evaluation and improvement framework for leaders. In 2024, we are beginning work on what relationship-based practice entails, what training and practice development is needed by social work practitioners, and what good budget processes could look like.

If you would like more information about our approach, contact **Laura Finnan Cowan, Social Work Scotland** at laurafcowan@socialworkscotland.org