

The role of the lay assessor in joint reviews

Who are lay assessors?

Lay assessors are people who have been recruited, independently of SSIW and WAO to assist in reviewing local authority social services in Wales. They are part of the review team but they are not professional inspectors, social workers or social care managers. Their status is that of the concerned citizen, representing the general public. Their ability to form a considered view about social services will have been gained from a range of different life and work experiences.

Lay assessors are recruited by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), which administers the scheme, provides support to lay assessors and assigns them to particular reviews. They are normally appointed for a period of three years, following interviews and checks with the criminal records bureau. Some groups of people (e.g. councillors) cannot become lay assessors. They are not employed by the National Assembly for Wales or the Welsh Assembly Government but receive a fixed daily allowance for the work they undertake during reviews. There is a systematic process for recruitment, on the basis of a clear specification that outlines the personal qualities, knowledge and skills required. Lay assessors receive induction training and ongoing advice from the WCVA. There is an agreed protocol between SSIW and WCVA about how lay assessors contribute to review reports and how disagreements should be resolved.

Lay assessors have not worked in the authorities that are being inspected nor do they have any experience of services provided by these authorities (either personally or through family/friends). They have no involvement or financial interest in the provision of social services in the area.

What is their role?

Lay assessors add a different perspective to the work of review teams by representing the views of people who use services and the wider public. They bring additional independence to the reviewing activities of SSIW and WAO, acting as one of the safeguards that help to ensure fair play in the course of these activities and public accountability. They complement the work done by professional inspectors, in part by focusing on the experiences and interests of service users and carers in their relations with social services and partner organisations. They work with and alongside the rest of the team throughout much of the review process and provide their own written assessment at the end of each fieldwork phase. They contribute to the review report.

What do they do during reviews?

During reviews, lay assessors undertake a range of activities so that they can:

- gather sufficient evidence for reporting the views and experiences of service users and carers
- observe enough of the way in which the review team operates to reach an independent and fair conclusion about the conduct of the review
- contribute properly to the planning of the review and the process of making judgements about the performance of social services.

They will:

- read relevant parts of the information provided by the local authority
- pay particular attention to evidence from consultation exercises with service users and carers and the surveys used as part of the review
- talk with people who use services
- visit places where services are provided (including contact centres, day facilities and residential settings)
- talk to local authority staff and other service providers
- contribute to interviews with relevant stakeholders

- meet service users and carers in their own homes (but only when accompanied by another member of the team)
- promptly alert colleagues about any matters of concern
- make notes of their work and share these with the lead reviewer
- take part in all the formal meetings of the review team
- provide a written assessment at the end of the fieldwork phase, expressing their independent views
- monitor and report on the fairness and impartiality of the review team
- contribute to the review report and check that it can be understood by other lay people with an interest in social services.

Lay assessors will play an especially active part in meetings with groups of service users and carers but they are not expected to manage these meetings without assistance from other members of the review team. They participate in the fieldwork on a selective basis. It is likely that they will be involved in at least one-half of the programme but no more than two-thirds; this is negotiated with the lead reviewer. Some of their work may be done independently of the review team, primarily visits to service settings and advocacy groups.

How should they conduct themselves?

During reviews, lay assessors are expected to:

- be well organised
- respect the confidential nature of the information they receive
- respect the private spaces of those they meet
- behave in a way that is sensitive to the diverse needs and circumstances of individual service users and carers
- treat people with courtesy and respect and listen to what they have to say
- ask questions in an appropriate way and listen attentively
- act at all times in a manner which maintains confidence in their integrity, independence and open-mindedness

- refrain from providing advice to service users or staff, except with the agreement of the lead reviewer
- avoid using the review as a platform for furthering particular causes
- make reasonable and fair judgements based on what they have seen and heard
- contribute on an equal basis to the work of the review team
- take direction from the lead reviewer on both the conduct and focus of the review
- deal responsibly with any legitimate differences of opinion that may be expressed within the review team.

What qualities are required of lay assessors?

Lay assessors need to be perceptive people who are sensitive to the needs of those for whom services are provided. They should have observation and communication skills, the ability to distinguish fact from opinion, the capacity to make judgements about the quality of services and the willingness and the ability to work in a team. Lay assessors will also need to be aware of equal opportunities issues. It is not expected that they will have detailed knowledge of the legislation, regulation or official guidance which underpins the provision of services. They do need to understand the context for social services and the provision of social care. There is an induction programme for them and they receive full briefings in advance of the review.