

Communicate and Connect: Capacity building in residential services

Bronwen Jones¹

¹ Scope Australia

Short Abstract

In 2019 Scope Australia initiated "The Good Communication project", supporting communication in 222 recently acquired residential houses. The planned "pull down" model of intensive engagement with staff changed with COVID-19. Direct interaction went on hold. Instead, four communication resource packs were developed. Each supported a strategy: Visual Displays, Key Word Sign, Talking Mats and support for people with emerging communication at risk of social isolation. By mid 2021 training to match each resource pack was available but was limited by a range of factors. By 2022, all trainings were on Scope's Learning calendar (face to face and online) and house consultations were available on a "pull down" basis. Several teams include residents in house consultations and training. The service continues and is entering its' sixth year. Factors impacting positively on the service include: Scope's new "Teams" IT platform, combining of two residential service streams, launching of Tools2Talk Now App and Key Word Sign Create App. Both these apps allow for the quick creation of visual resources to support staff and residents in creating and maintaining strong visual and sign environments. Staff have reported that resources (eg: Key Word Sign posters, meal planners) serve as reminders for them to engage residents in naturally occurring communication opportunities and training provides skill development that encourages staff to promote meaningful interactions. The newly named Communicate and Connect service will continue to engage with an active community of staff and residents to work towards good communication through resources, skills and planning for optimal communication.

Long Abstract

Communicate and Connect: Capacity building in residential services

In late 2019, following a successful tender for 222 Department of Health and Human Services residential disability houses, Scope funded “The Good Communication Service” for Home@Scope houses to establish a culture of communication based on Five Good Communication Standards in residential disability services (RCSLT 2013).

To meet the needs of houses spread throughout Victoria, the service was designed as a pull-down model, where the houses were expected to identify needs and initiate contact. Unfortunately, as we entered 2020 COVID-19 arrived. Apart from the physical limitations of Covid lockdowns, the uncertain staffing, increased workloads, illness, exhaustion and sheer lack of time and energy in the houses it was clear that this model would not work at this time.

So, we pivoted to an alternate service delivery plan. Four communication resource packs were developed, with one pack sent to each house.

The four packs contained well known resources to support a variety of communication strategies: **Visual Displays** to support activities in the home environment. (designed and produced by NECAS), **Key Word Sign** resources produced by Key Word Sign Australia (KWSA.org.au), **Talking Mats** resources (Talking Mats: Improving communication, improving Lives), and **Early interaction resources**, including the Hanging Out Programme booklet and ideas for interaction for people at risk of isolation (Sheridan Forster 2008). All kits included “COVID communication resources, such as a handwashing task sequence and various social stories about living with COVID, hospitalisations, lockdowns etc. They were designed, produced, collated and sent out by June 30th, 2020. The choice of pack was discussed with the house supervisors before allocation.

Promotion of the service and interaction with the houses was the goal for the next 18 months. “Five Good Standards” and other resources were posted on the Good Communication Service dedicated intranet page. A fortnightly three-point email update was sent to all senior managers. At this stage, the pull-down model meant the service relied on emails being cascaded via the managers to houses to inform and engage them. By 2022 training to match the resource packs was established. Houses were offered:

- **House Consultations:** Offered individually with a House Supervisor or at team/house meetings. Recommendations are made in a report, and any new resources are created or ordered and distributed via the Non-Electronic Aid Service (NECAS)
- **Pull-Down Staff Training:** Designed to skill up staff in the four major areas already mentioned. Some houses choose to train as a team and customised sessions in these areas were available.
- **Visual Displays: Their role in supporting positive communication:** A 2.5 hour online or face to face workshop explores the positive changes visual communication materials can make to communication and active support.
- **Key Word Sign Basic Certificate Workshop:** This full-day workshop supports comprehension and expression – The certificate is nationally recognised.
- **Intermediate course in Key Word Sign:** Became available in 2024 for those who had completed a Basic workshop and want to work on embedding Key Word Sign in daily activities.
- **Talking Mats:** Talking Mats is recognised as an effective way to have unbiased conversations, particularly on important or abstract issues - certificate from Stirling University in Scotland

- **Supporting Emergent Communicators:** A 2.5-hour workshop exploring the needs of people operating at an early level of communication who may be at risk of social isolation. It is complemented by two short workshops on developing Personal Communication Dictionaries and Book about Me. Templates for both products are in Tools2Talk Now i-Pad app.

The Learning Calendar items continue to be offered online and at a variety of key sites. These activities were well attended in 2021/2022 and have continued in 2023/2024.

Staff have reported that resources (eg: Key Word Sign posters) serve as reminders for them to engage residents in naturally occurring communication opportunities. Training provides skill development that encourages staff to promote meaningful interactions in the houses across the day. Visual resources developed during the project are all supported by the strategies offered in training. Several houses choose to have residents included in Key Word Sign Workshops, particularly where there is a resident who uses sign. Some residents have been included in house consultations and other training.

Popular environmental resources to promote resident engagement:

- Who's Here today boards
- Timetables
- Housekeeping rosters (formerly known as "chores charts")
- Labelling around the house to encourage independence (eg: photos in cupboards to show where plates, cups, and cutlery are stored)
- Mealtime choice book to encourage active input into house menus
- Shopping book
- Daily activities
- Resources and training build capacity in the staff and support Person Centred Active Support (e.g: meeting vocabulary and board, kitchen kit, task sequences for washing dishes and other regular daily activities).

Current status

There have been changes to the original model and service delivery based on a range of factors, including formal feedback and organisational developments. Resource and technology innovations also positively impacted on the Good Communication Service. Some examples:

In 2024, Home@Scope and Scope SIL houses became One Scope (308 houses).

The Good Communication Service changed its name to Communicate and Connect (C&C) It is still guided by the Five Good Communication Standards in philosophy and future planning

Scope's new "Teams" IT platform enables better access to and improved quality of online interactions for meetings, training, document sharing etc. We can now plan shorter, flexible training options and provide more equitable support for regional areas.

The "three-point email" has been replaced by a fortnightly lunchtime "Drop in" session. This is a half hour Teams meeting and follow up email summarising the drop in and any resources discussed at the "Drop in". This is sent to all House Supervisors and senior managers.

Tools2Talk Now App allows for the quick creation of non-electronic communication aids and visual resources on an iPad by anyone.

Key Word Sign Create Web App provides Key word sign resources with descriptors, pictographs, and QR codes to support staff and residents in creating and maintaining strong sign environments.

The Communicate and Connect service will continue to engage with an active community of staff and residents to work towards good communication through resources, skills and planning for optimal communication.