



COMMISSIONING FOR THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL CARE



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Front cover: Rory Bray-Harper, member of Citizen Checkers, opens the conference.
Back cover: Attendees at the conference.

About this paper

This paper is a summary of the discussions of 120 people at a conference organised by Citizen Network and the Self-Directed Support Network in Winchester on 25th March 2026. A more detailed discussion paper will also be published.

This paper says social care should help people have:

- a good life
- real choice
- friends and relationships
- a home
- support that fits them
- chances to join in and contribute

This paper says social care should not just be about:

- services
- rules
- control
- fitting people into what already exists

Why does this matter?

A lot of people know that adult social care is under pressure.

Councils are under pressure.

Providers are under pressure.

Families are under pressure.

People who need support are under pressure too.

Many people still have to fight too hard to get support that works for them.

But it is not only about money. It is also about the kind of system we have built.

Too often, the system responds by adding:

- more rules
- more checks
- more control
- less flexibility

This can make support harder, not better.

The main message

People do not just need services.
People need good lives.

Good social care should help people:

- make choices
- have control
- feel part of their community
- do things they enjoy
- have relationships
- contribute
- live ordinary lives

If social care only focuses on services, hours and contracts, it can miss what really matters.

What is citizenship?

Citizenship means being seen as a full person.

It means:

- having rights
- having choices
- being included
- being part of community life
- being valued
- being able to contribute

It means people should not just be seen as a list of needs.

People have:

- strengths
- interests
- talents
- ideas
- relationships
- things to offer

Citizenship should be at the centre of adult social care.

World Café discussions

People talked about lots of different things.

But many of the same messages came up again and again.

People said:

- support is often too rigid
- systems can be hard to understand
- there is too much bureaucracy
- people do not always get real choice and control
- community matters
- relationships matter
- small local support matters
- too many people are still pushed towards institutional care

People wanted social care to be more human and more flexible.

Personalisation must be real

People often hear words like:

- personalisation
- choice
- control
- co-production
- strengths

But many people still do not experience these things in real life.

- Support plans can be too fixed.
- Budgets can be too tightly controlled.
- Services can be too inflexible.

This means personalisation can sound good in theory, but feel weak in practice.

People agreed this must change.

Trust matters



People agreed that trust is very important.

Without trust, systems often create:

- too many rules
- too many checks
- too much paperwork
- too little freedom

When there is more trust:

- support can change when life changes
- people can use judgement
- providers can be more creative
- families can help shape solutions
- support can feel more human

Trust does not mean no accountability.

It means having accountability that still leaves room for common sense.

Community matters



A good life is not built by services alone.

People also need:

- friends
- neighbours
- clubs
- groups
- community activities
- chances to join in
- chances to belong

Community should not be treated like an extra. It is part of what makes a good life possible.

If people only have paid support and no real connection, life can become lonely and narrow.

Contribution matters too

People should not only be seen as people who need help.

People also have things to offer.

They may offer:

- kindness
- friendship
- creativity
- humour
- skills
- ideas
- help to others

Good support should help people contribute, not just receive support.

This helps people feel valued and included.

We need more local support



People said there should be more small, local and flexible support.

This includes:

- small organisations
- local groups
- micro providers
- peer support
- community based help

These kinds of support can often be more personal and more flexible. But they need real investment and support to grow.

If this does not happen, people are left with fewer real choices.

We need to move away from institutional care

Institutional care is not just about big buildings. It is also about ways of thinking.

It can happen when:

- people are expected to fit into services
- support is over controlled
- people have little choice
- life becomes organised around staff and systems
- people are cut off from ordinary life

People said we need real alternatives.

That means:

- better housing options
- more flexible support
- more local support
- more trust
- more self direction
- more support in ordinary communities

What needs to change for commissioners

Commissioners are the people who help decide what support gets funded and organised.

People thought that commissioners need to think differently – they need to focus less on services and more on people's lives.

Commissioners should ask:

- Does this support help the person have a good life?
- Does it help them belong?
- Does it help them have more choice?
- Does it help them contribute?
- Does it help them avoid crisis?
- Does it help them live in an ordinary place?

Commissioners should help build a system that is more flexible and more human.

What needs to change for providers, communities and national bodies

People said change is needed from everyone.

Providers

Providers should ask:

- Is support really built around the person?
- Is there enough flexibility?
- Does support help people connect and belong?
- Are we helping people live ordinary lives?

Communities

Communities matter too. People need places where they are welcomed and included.

National bodies

National government and national organisations also need to help.

They need to make it easier to build:

- flexible support
- housing choices
- local support
- community based support
- self directed support

10 big changes

1	<p>From services to lives.</p> <p>Start with the person's life, not the service.</p>
2	<p>From care packages to citizenship.</p> <p>Focus on people being full citizens, not just receiving care.</p>
3	<p>From control to trust.</p> <p>Use trust and common sense, not just rules.</p>
4	<p>From rigid plans to flexible support.</p> <p>Support should change when life changes.</p>
5	<p>From system convenience to what matters to people.</p> <p>The system should fit the person, not the other way round.</p>

10 big changes

6	<p>From large scale dependency to stronger local support.</p> <p>Build more small, local and community based options.</p>
7	<p>From managing risk to building resilience.</p> <p>Help people have stronger lives, not just more restrictions.</p>
8	<p>From passive receipt to contribution and connection.</p> <p>Help people join in, connect and contribute.</p>
9	<p>From institutional habits to ordinary life.</p> <p>Support people to live ordinary lives in ordinary places.</p>
10	<p>From warm words to real change.</p> <p>Do not just talk about change. Make change happen.</p>

Conclusion

People voiced a simple message.

Adult social care should not just keep people going. It should help people live.

That means social care should be built around:

- citizenship
- trust
- flexibility
- belonging
- relationships
- contribution
- community

We need to stop asking: How do we keep the current system going?

We need to ask

How do we build something better?

Thank you

To everyone who joined us, it was brilliant to meet you all. And to all who couldn't make it — please join us next time!

Special thanks to Citizen Checkers for their awesome help.

Finally, thank you to our wonderful sponsors for all their support:





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