

Case study: supported decision-making

A care manager demonstrates good practice in taking practical steps to help someone make a capacitated decision

A nurse, working as a care manager in a local authority, was supporting Michael, a young man with learning disabilities, and was worried that he was being exploited financially by his brother, Ian, and Ian's partner, Lisa. Michael seemed to be spending a lot of money buying stuff for Ian and Lisa – DVDs, cigarettes, bits of shopping. All small enough in themselves, but the care manager was worried it was all adding up, and leaving Michael with not enough for himself.

She needed to know whether Michael really understood the implications for himself of what he was doing. Too often, the mental capacity assessments the team did were rushed, and often done by duty workers, with people they'd never met, and had not had time to prepare to see. The care manager was determined to do it better with Michael, so on one visit to him started to ask about his understanding of money, to get a ballpark idea of how best she could assess his capacity around money.

The care manager thought his understanding seemed quite shaky, but rather than just assume, she spent a good bit of preparation time before visiting to do the capacity assessment. She got pictures of different notes and coins, and drew up two lists of what things cost: one for what Michael was buying for Ian and Lisa, and one for the things he had to buy each week for himself – food, bills and so on.

After a long assessment discussion, the care manager concluded Michael did lack the capacity to understand the decisions he was making about spending so much money on Ian and Lisa. She was self-aware enough to accept that because she didn't want him to be giving away his money, to some extent this was the decision she wanted, because it enabled her to help Michael manage his money in a way that made sure his food and bills were always paid for. But she was confident of the conclusion, because of the preparation time and the work she did to assess Michael's capacity properly. The challenge is finding that time for everyone.