

Support for Older Carers of Older People: The Impact of the 2014 Care Act

Phase 1: Review of information on support for carers
on local authority websites in England



1. Introduction

The NIHR School for Social Care Research has funded research at the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol to examine Support for Older Carers of Older People: the Impact of the 2014 Care Act. The overall aim of the project is to examine the impact of the 2014 Care Act on local authority support for older carers who provide unpaid, co-resident care to a partner. This report covers the findings of Phase 1, which was a review of online information on local authority websites in England concerning their support for carers, with attention to the implications for older carers. We hope that these findings will contribute to the ‘communications and learning and development activity’ arising from the implementation of the 2014 Care Act, the importance of which was highlighted by the Carers Workstream of ADASS and LGA (21.7.2014). This project was approved by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) Ref RG16-012.

The importance of high quality publicly available information is a key element in the prevention strategy of the 2014 Care Act and is part of Local Authorities’ duty to carers. The 2015 Guide to Efficient and Effective Interventions for Implementing the Care Act as it applies to Carers emphasises the importance of information and advice-giving as a key element of the policy on prevention. It suggests a range of formats and approaches, including web-based, in order to ensure both breadth and accessibility of information, in order to meet the diverse needs of a wide range of people, including carers. It also points out that there is an economic case for encouraging carers to come forward for support.

We are minded that at the time these websites were accessed, implementation of the 2014 Care Act was in its early stages and many local authority websites had yet to catch up with changes in the statutory offer to carers. Many carer-targeted pages of local authority websites are still in development and likely to improve over the coming months. We have therefore chosen not to comment on the quality of individual websites but to provide an overview of those factors that contribute to, or inhibit, the ease of accessing and understanding the local authority ‘offer’ to carers.

Based on our experience of reviewing information for carers on 150 websites of local authorities in England, we offer the following key lessons on developing web-based information for carers:

Key Lessons

1. Provide a clear, accurate and inclusive definition of a carer.
2. Make clear that all carers are entitled to support in their own right and that the local authority values them.
3. Provide webpages dedicated to carers.
4. Ensure information for carers on the LA website is compliant with the 2014 Care Act and that all out of date information is updated or deleted.
5. Assist carers, through clearly explained steps, to understand how they negotiate the pathway to an assessment of needs in your area.
6. Ensure that carers are informed on the dedicated pages about the kind of support or services they might access, including with safeguarding, direct payments and advocacy.
7. Explain local policies on charging.
8. Clarify the nature of partnerships between the local authority, local carers' organisations and health care providers so that carers know who does what and that the local authority has a responsibility for their wellbeing.
9. Ensure your website is functioning smoothly and that links are not broken or lead to defunct alternatives. Provide links to the carers' webpages from other relevant sites.
10. 'Test-drive' your website, perhaps with a local carers' group. This could be of significant benefit, especially in ensuring user-friendliness and accessibility.

2. Method

The websites of 150/152 local authorities in England were accessed between April and November 2016. Each website was viewed by one of four researchers who reviewed those pages intended to provide information for carers under the following broad headings, drawn from the 2015 Guide:

- substantive information and advice given to carers;
- information about partnership and commissioning arrangements within the local authority;
- services available to carers; and
- accessibility and user-friendliness of the website.

Information from 150 completed website reviews was analysed in November 2016.

3. Findings

3.1 The quality and availability of advice and information for carers, and adherence to the 2014 Care Act.

Drawing on the key issues highlighted in the 2015 Guide, information was gathered on the process of assessment, eligibility for state-funded support, charging, advocacy, direct payments and personal budgets, and safeguarding.

3.1.1 *The process of assessment.*

Around two thirds (101) of local authority websites are using eligibility criteria that comply with the 2014 Care Act, including that any carer is eligible for an assessment, regardless of the amount of care provided. Of the remaining 49, there may be one or more reason why it appears that they are not using up-to-date eligibility criteria. Thirty-one still say that carers should be providing 'regular', 'substantial' and/or 'significant' support to be eligible for a carer assessment. Twelve websites state that the cared-for person must be resident in the local authority. In 11 cases the criteria are either not defined or the website gives conflicting information, depending on which page is being viewed.

As expected, there is variation between local authorities in their allocation of responsibility for undertaking carers' assessments. In 83 cases we were able to identify who would be carrying out this task. In 56, all carer assessments are carried out directly by the local authority. In many of these carers are required or encouraged to complete an online self-assessment form first, and, if this suggests a full assessment is necessary, one will be undertaken by staff from adult social care. In 20 cases assessments are carried out either by the local authority or a carers' organisation is commissioned to do so. In these areas, the decision on which organisation carries out the assessment may depend on complexity of need (local authorities undertaking

assessments for complex cases) or on whether it is a single or joint assessment (with local authorities undertaking joint assessments). In 7 cases it appears that all carer assessments have been commissioned out to carers' organisations. In the remaining 67 sites it was unclear to the reviewer who undertakes carers' assessments. Very often, the emphasis is on self-assessment, either online or with telephone support.

The pathway to assessment also varies considerably between local authorities. In 60 areas a telephone number for the assessment team is provided and in a further 30 areas an online initial contact or self-assessment form is provided. In other areas there is either no information, or carers are asked simply to contact the local authority.

Around half mention that assessments can be joint or carer-only while in the other half this is not clarified on the website. Around one third of websites describe the topic areas the assessment will cover and the type of questions asked. There are 17 local authority websites that provide a detailed account, many using information provided by the Carers Trust and NHS Choices. This includes how to prepare for a carer assessment, who will undertake it, topic areas the assessment will include, how long it will take, a range of possible outcomes for the carer, and timescales. In some local authorities, access to assessment is via an application for emergency support, which would not be relevant to all carers and is not compliant with current policy on carers.

3.1.2 Eligibility for state-funded support

In 68 cases, the local authority website clearly states the criteria used to determine eligibility and these criteria are compliant with the 2014 Care Act. In 10 areas the online information about eligibility criteria is not compliant with the 2014 Care Act, most often because the requirement to be providing 'regular and substantial support' is still applied or that the person cared for must also have had their needs assessed. In around half of the local authority websites (72 areas), there is not enough information online to determine whether or not the criteria used to determine eligibility for state-funded support are compliant with the 2014 Care Act.

3.1.3 Charging

There is generally little information about charges for carer services and 49 websites provide no information at all. Of the remaining 101 areas, 32 areas make clear that all carers' services are free (though this may be under review), 39 state that some carer services are free, some are charged for (often dependent on a financial assessment). Five direct the carer towards separate information about financial assessments. The remainder state that replacement care including short breaks and respite will be charged-for, but do not clarify who pays - the carer or the person cared for.

3.1.4 Advocacy

Sixty-four local authorities make it clear that carers can have an independent advocate to support them during assessments. In the others advocacy is either not mentioned, or generic information is provided which is not carer-specific.

3.1.5 Direct payments and personal budgets

It is made very clear in 84 local authority websites that carers may be eligible for direct payments or personal budgets. In a further 26 these are referred to, either on the

website or in downloadable material, but the information is less easy to find. In 40 cases there is either no mention at all, or only generic information that is mostly aimed at the service-user rather than the carer.

3.1.6 Safeguarding

Thirty-six local authorities provide safeguarding information and contact details on the carer pages of the website. Other local authorities may refer to safeguarding in strategy documents or similar but there is no information specifically aimed at carers accessing the website.

3.2 'User-friendliness'

Here we report on the 'user-friendliness' and accessibility of information available on local authority carer webpages and offer our view on what constitutes good practice. Websites are increasingly important as a first port of call for carers and publicly available information should encourage carers to come forward so that they can be provided with information and advice to prevent unnecessary problems from developing. We aimed to conduct this aspect of the review from the perspective of an older carer seeking information about obtaining support. Contributing factors to user friendliness include the ease with which information can be found; whether accessibility has been considered for people with sensory impairment or requiring easy read options; the 'tone' of the website and whether it shows that carers are valued.

3.2.1 Finding information

Some local authorities had developed a dedicated area of their website for carers, which was well signposted from the main page. In our experience this enhanced user-friendliness, as did the provision of instructions about how to use these pages and a guide of how to navigate the site to find the appropriate information. In some cases this includes a table of contents.

Finding the right information is easier when the site is well-organised, 'intuitive', and can be navigated from one central page. Sites where information was contained on a concise number of pages arranged in a logical order (for example 'definition of carers', 'assessment', 'eligibility', 'available support' etc) were easier to use. Some local authorities provide a helpful overview of their offer to carers, either on the main carer page or on a downloadable leaflet which is well signposted.

Not all local authorities have a dedicated area of their website for carers and relevant information is not coordinated but rather distributed throughout the Adult Social Care pages and/or requires a search via the A-Z index for the website. This demands that users know what it is they are looking for, or must search through many (often irrelevant) pages. Where carer pages are not coordinated in a single area, it is more likely that conflicting information is available on different areas of the website, presumably because the pages are not updated simultaneously. Some local authorities also have very useful information in their carer strategies, but these can be long,

jargon-heavy documents that are not aimed at the general public and therefore may not be read by carers. Other less useful practice includes carer information that is available only via easily missed downloadable leaflets.

3.2.2 Accessibility

Some websites offer users several options to make information more accessible. These include adjustable text size and colour, 'browse-aloud' options or 'speaking' pages, and information that has been translated into several languages. The best sites offer clearly marked accessibility tabs or buttons with instructions on how to use them. These accessibility options are often also applied to documents available to download. Even when users have no specific accessibility requirements, the use of 'everyday' language rather than jargon is helpful, as is well-written, clear text. There were examples of web pages that our researchers found hard to comprehend.

Some local authorities recognise that users may prefer interactive support and offer instant webchat, interactive help, or simply make the contact details for the relevant local authority staff clear on every webpage, with a warm invitation to get in touch.

3.2.3 Appearance

Websites that are well-designed make good use of appropriate images, often including video. These help make clear they are targeted towards carers, not health or social care staff and take account of the range of ages of carers.

3.2.4 'Tone'

Websites may often be the first point of contact for carers and the first impression they create is important. The collation of carer-specific information in a set of dedicated pages is one aspect of this. The best sites also offer a clear 'welcome' to carers, and make clear that the local authority values them. Ways of signalling this include a clear, inclusive definition of carers, and repeated invitations to access advice and support ('how can we help?'). Some authorities make a statement of support via a 'Carers' Pledge' or similar. Other means of setting a friendly tone include the use of 'you' or 'your' when addressing readers, the use of videos of staff or carers talking about their experiences, and images that are relevant to a wide range of carers.

Conversely we viewed websites that do not attempt to welcome carers or talk to them directly. A lack of welcome, the overuse of jargon and confusing terminology, inappropriate imagery and absence of any offer of support or clarity over how to access it can be off-putting. On some sites the description of an assessment implies that it is a judgement on the quality of care provided rather than an assessment of the carers' needs. Often, information about assessment, eligibility, direct payments and personal budgets are directed towards service-users, creating the impression that they are not relevant for carers. There also local authority websites that appear defensive in tone, concentrating mostly on what cannot be provided to carers because of budgetary restraints than the support that carers can expect and are entitled to.

3.2.5 Comprehensiveness

We recognise that some local authorities have not (yet) created dedicated carer pages on their websites and that relevant information may be distributed throughout their website but in several of these cases, the researchers could not find all the information that a carer is likely to need. Our reading of the guidance suggests that good practice includes providing information about the following areas: a definition of carers; the assessment process and potential outcomes of assessment; information about available services and support; charges for services and where these apply (and to whom); personal budgets and direct payments; respite and replacement care; emergency support; advocacy; and safeguarding. This information should be compliant with the Care Act 2014, and carer-specific rather than being targeted at service users more generally.

Some local authorities provide no information about services for carers on their own website, directing them instead to the local carers' trust or similar. While they may have commissioned these organisations to provide carer services, this is not often made clear and may give carers the impression that they are not entitled to local authority support.

3.2.6 User-friendliness and assessments

The quality and usefulness of information about carer assessments varies considerable across local authority websites. Where the self-assessment option is offered, good practice would include detailed guidance on how to complete the form, accessibility options, how to access support to complete it if required, and clarity over where the form is sent and what will happen next. Some local authorities make clear that they offer a 'light touch' self-assessment as a form of 'triage' to help identify the next steps for the carer, for example signposting to universal services offered by the local authority or carers' organisations, or accessing a full assessment by a professional.

Self-assessment forms are, however, sometimes difficult to understand and information on the website does not explain the implications of completing them. There may be no obvious offer of support to complete them, and often no other means of accessing assessment (for example a face-to-face option). On some websites, access to the form requires the user to register as a website-user first, and the researchers could not make this work. Overly-technical and poorly functioning websites are likely to be off-putting to carers.

Many local authorities provide a helpful account of carers' rights to assessment as defined by the 2014 Care Act, with a description of the changes this has brought in for carers since its implementation. Examples of good practice include where the following areas are covered:

- How to access an assessment;
- Who will undertake the assessment, where it will take place, and how long it will take;
- Clarity over joint and single assessment;

- A good description of the areas the assessment will cover (and not cover, for example making clear it is not a judgement on the quality of care provided);
- Support to prepare for an assessment. This may include a summary of 'things to think about', and in some cases, carers are encouraged to keep a diary in advance of the assessment;
- Examples of potential outcomes of assessment, including the support available; and
- Timescales for the assessment process and outcomes, and review

3.2.7 *Links to external sites*

Local authorities can encourage website users to access relevant information on external websites. These include those of national carer organisations (such as Carers UK) or UK Government pages with information about the 2014 Care Act and their rights to support. Some authorities also signpost users to local organisations that can provide information and support, including carers' trusts or similar, third-sector providers of services, health services etc.

Many authorities are working with carer organisations, either by formally commissioning them as a 'carer centre' or supporting them through financial support or other 'soft' commissioning arrangements. In some cases, local authority websites direct carers to the local carers centre as the first point of contact. Links to external websites can be useful, but in some cases local authorities appeared to be over-reliant on these, employing them as a default option or a replacement for local authority information. This can mean carers seeking support are expected to find and collate information from a range of sources and not all will be able to do this. Whatever the local partnership arrangement, the authority's duty to provide support for carers should be made clear.

4. Concluding comment

Many local authorities are making major changes to their services for carers at a time of austerity. We hope that this review will assist this process by highlighting quick and relatively easily obtainable returns on efforts to improve local information and advice for carers of all ages.

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Liz Lloyd and Tricia Jessiman
School for Policy Studies, 8 Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TZ

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bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/projects/current/support-for-older-carers-of-older-people/