

**REPORT OF FEEDBACK FROM
HEALTHWATCH WORCESTERSHIRE
ON THE WCC ONLINE SUPPORT
NEEDS CHECKLIST AND ONLINE
SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM**

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FEEDBACK FROM HEALTHWATCH WORCESTERSHIRE ON THE WCC ONLINE SUPPORT NEEDS CHECKLIST AND ONLINE SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM

1. INTRODUCTION

Healthwatch Worcestershire are clear that online options are not suitable for everyone, and it is important that a range of non-digital options are available to people to meet their communication requirements as set out in the Accessible Information Standard. This is arguably more important for people wanting to access Adult Social Care services, as they may already experience a series of barriers to online use such as physical, sensory or cognitive impairment and lack of access to, or being unable to use, digital devices. There is a risk that online options can reinforce existing health inequalities.

Nevertheless we recognise that there is a national trend towards moving information and activity online. It is therefore important that user experience of navigating and using websites work well. In March 2023 Healthwatch Worcestershire published our Report 'Finding out about Adult Social Care Services from the NEW Worcestershire County Council website'. Our volunteers carried out a Mystery Shopping exercise on the County Councils 'Beta' website to find out how far the Adult Social Care information on the Worcestershire County Council's (WCC) website is answering common questions that people or their relatives may have about a service or situation.

Following on from this WCC asked for our input, alongside that of others, to review the newly developed Online Support Needs Checklist and Online Self-Assessment Form. We were also asked to review Draft PDF versions of the revised Care Act Needs Assessment form and the Care and Support Plan.

We distributed the link to the Online forms and the PDFs to 7 of our volunteers, all of whom responded with detailed comments.

Having had an opportunity to review these documents in advance, two face to face workshops were held with the County Council. The first focused on the Online Support Needs Checklist and Online Self-Assessment Form. One of our volunteers is Blind. They experienced considerable difficulties navigating the Online forms using their screen reader. A further session is being organised for these issues to be demonstrated to the County Council.

The second workshop focused on the Draft Needs Assessment Form and Care Plan, which provided us with an opportunity to see how these forms would be completed by the social worker in practice. Detailed feedback on these forms was provided, alongside suggested changes to language to make it more understandable to people not familiar with the Care Act or Adult Social Care. A summary of feedback has been provided separately to this Report and is not duplicated here.

In this document we have set out some key themes and recommendations that emerged from the review of the Online forms, based on the feedback and comments that we received from our volunteers, and discussions in the workshops. Unfortunately we are currently unable to access the forms to double check accuracy and to see if any changes have been made.

We appreciate the level of engagement that has taken place, and the willingness shown to take on board our comments and make changes accordingly.

2. WCC ONLINE SUPPORT NEEDS CHECKLIST

2.1 Purpose of the Support Needs Checklist in respect of Local Authority duties under the Care Act 2014.

We are unclear about the purpose of the Support Needs Checklist. Is this checklist considered to be a Needs Assessment as defined by the Care Act? If so we do not think it meets the requirements of Section 9 of the Act set out in the footnote below¹.

In our view the Online Support Needs Checklist should not be used to provide a suggested determination of someone's entitlement to a needs assessment or whether they appear to be eligible for support from Adult Social Care.

The Care Act is clear that Local Authorities must:

'carry out an assessment of anyone who appears to have needs for care and support, regardless of whether those needs are likely to be eligible' [our italics]

The wording on the Using the Support List checklist screen seems to us to suggest that someone must appear to be eligible for social care before being considered for a conversation with WCC. The introduction says:

'What is the Worcestershire Support Needs Checklist

Our checklist will indicate whether you appear to be eligible for support from social care and might benefit from having a conversation with us.'

In our view this is contrary to the duties on Local Authorities as set out above and goes against the spirit, if not the letter, of the Act.

The wording on the screen under the heading *'What will I be asked?'* seems to further suggest that the support needs checklist will be used to determine eligibility:

'What will I be asked?

The questions will cover your health conditions, frailty and/or disabilities and how they affect your daily life. Your answers will allow us to provide you with relevant

¹ We have looked at the documentation in the context of Section 9 of the Care Act 2014 which informs that local authorities must:

- carry out an assessment of anyone who appears to have needs for care and support, *regardless of whether those needs are likely to be eligible*
- focus the assessment on the person's needs and how they impact on their wellbeing, and the outcomes they want to achieve
- involve the person in the assessment and, where appropriate, their carer and/or someone else they nominate
- provide access to an independent advocate to support the person's involvement in the assessment, if required
- consider other things besides care services that can contribute to the desired outcomes (e.g. preventive services, community support).

(our italics)

advice and information and to consider your needs against the national eligibility criteria defined in the Care Act 2014'

However in our view the Care Act makes clear that an eligibility determination can only be made on the basis of an assessment of needs. We do not think that the Checklist provides people with an adequate opportunity to discuss and focus on their needs.

The Checklist does not provide an opportunity to involve a carer/nominated person where appropriate. The wording states that if you are completing the form on behalf of someone else they will be contacted unless this is inappropriate. There is no opportunity for people to provide an explanation of why this may be the case (eg relative completing the form on behalf of someone without mental capacity), nor for a carer to offer their input on a person's needs.

There is no opportunity for people to record whether they have involved anyone else in completing the form

The Checklist cannot determine whether independent advocacy support may be required.

The Summary Page suggests whether or not a person qualifies for support based on the answers submitted. There are two potential messages, one which suggests that people appear to qualify for support. The other states:

'Your answers indicate that:

You appear to not qualify for support from Worcestershire's Adult Social Care service.'

Although the bottom of the page gives people the opportunity to continue with the Self-Assessment process we are concerned that they may decide that there is little point in doing so as they appear not to 'qualify' for support.

We do not believe that an apparent determination of an individual's need for support from Adult Social Care can be made from the completed Checklist.

We are further concerned that, having completed the Checklist, people will believe that they have communicated with the Council, even though there is a message explaining that unless people register for the online portal this is not the case.

The page does contain a link to the Community Services Directory. We have made comment about the Directory in 2.2. below.

Our overall concern is that the Support Needs Checklist may deter people who could benefit from a Care Act Needs Assessment, and may be eligible for support from Adult Social Care.

We are concerned that this could lead to a deterioration in people's circumstances. It may also miss opportunities to provide early help and support, which could prevent the need for costly future interventions.

At appropriate points in the Checklist a clear statement should be made about people's entitlement to a Needs Assessment under the Care Act.

2.2 Completing the Checklist

Respondents are asked:

'How does your physical or mental health condition, frailty, impairment or disability affect your daily life?'

The instructions state: Tick only those that apply to you.

We believe the instruction should read: Tick all that apply to you.

The latter encourages people to provide a fuller picture of their life. This is particularly important as this list is used to suggest who may 'qualify' for support (see comments above re Care Act requirements).

It should also be noted that people's needs are not clear cut, and do not always fit into a Yes/ No checkbox format. For example a person may be able to manage toileting needs when they are in their own home environment, but may require support when they are out in the community.

'Effects on Wellbeing'

Whilst we understand that these categories reflect the Care Act for some people they may not recognise this list as the effect that their difficulties are having on their day to day life.

For example, an older person whose mobility has become impaired, is unable to drive at night, is unable to go out as much as they used to and who is incurring further costs as their capacity to do the things they previously did is declining (eg they may now require help with gardening, window cleaning, paying for online shopping delivery) may not easily relate to the categories listed to their personal situation.

Some further guidance or scenarios could be added to describe how the situation described above could translate to the list presented as ways that their wellbeing may be affected.

Some of the categories as described in the Care Act were thought to be complicated for people without knowledge of social care and required some further explanation. We suggested some 'plain English' alternatives during the workshop session. These explanations should be carried through into the other forms under review.

Summary Page

In our view this page needs to include a statement about people's entitlement to a Needs Assessment under the Care Act (see comments above.)

We suggest that the section entitled 'Would you like to continue?' should be moved to the top of the page for all respondents, rather than being at the bottom.

If people are being sent to a Directory where it is hoped that the information may be sufficient to meet their needs, then this information source needs to be comprehensive.

In our Mystery Shopping exercise on the County Councils website we found that the information on the Here2Help Community Directory was not always comprehensive,

and was particularly lacking in some categories (eg help with housework) and for some geographies.

It is important that people are able to access the information they require when sent to the Online Directory.

It would be useful to consider including a direct link to the Worcestershire Care Services Directory from the Online Directory landing page, or from the Summary page, as feedback suggests that people find this a very useful source of information and advice about Adult Social Care.

2.3 Finance - Will I need to pay?

This page needs a clear statements about people's entitlement to a Needs Assessment under the Care Act, regardless of their level of savings.

The statement about levels of savings does not include information about what may be disregarded from savings before a determination of care costs is made.

Whilst it is helpful to inform people that Adult Social Care Services are means tested we do not think that it is necessary at this point to provide a link to the financial assessment, or to require people to tick a checkbox indicating their understanding about potentially incurring charges for services.

The wording suggests that online options are the only way to complete a financial assessment. This may be off putting for some and impossible for others.

Recommendations - Needs Assessment Checklist

1. Review whether the Online Needs Assessment checklist is necessary
2. Clarify its purpose and function
3. If the Checklist remains in place include a clear statement about people's entitlement to a Needs Assessment under the Care Act in relevant sections of the Checklist as indicated above (eg in the Introductory, Summary and Financial Assessment pages)
4. In the section '*How does your physical or mental health condition, frailty, impairment or disability affect your daily life?*' change the instruction to: Tick all that apply to you.
5. Provide some further 'Plain English' explanation of the Care Act categories, and carry these through across all forms
6. Move the section entitled 'Would you like to continue?' to the top of the Summary Page
7. Ensure that the Online Directory provides useful and comprehensive information for people looking for support
8. Consider including a direct link to the Worcestershire Care Services Directory from the Online Directory landing page, and/or from the Summary page
9. Replace the current wording of the Finance section to clarify that people are entitled to a Needs Assessment under the Care Act regardless of their level of savings.
10. Make it clear that Adult Social Care Services are means tested and subject to a financial assessment to determine the person's contribution to the cost of their

care, but remove the online link to further information and the compulsory checkbox statement about paying for care.

3. ONLINE SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM

3.1 Purpose of the Online Self-Assessment Form

We are unclear about the purpose of this document. Does this form constitute a Needs Assessment under the Care Act?

If the form is regarded as a Care Act Needs Assessment we do not believe it provides sufficient opportunity for a carer or nominated representative to be involved, and neither does it provide information about entitlement to advocacy support.

We are unclear about its purpose, as many of the questions are likely to be repeated either at the Adult Front Door or in a Needs Assessment by a social worker.

3.2 Portal Registration

Our volunteers fed back that they found the requirement to register via a Portal off putting. It was considered that the requirement to register may deter people from making contact with Adult Social Care, as it presents a potential hurdle to proceeding, rather than making this easier.

Our volunteers raised the issue of language (eg what is a 'portal?'). They suggested more user friendly language, such as Register Here to Contact Us Online.

The number of questions on the Person Being Referred page of the Portal marked as compulsory is extensive. We would suggest that the Registration section should only include information which is really required at this stage. For instance, having to provide both a National Insurance number and an NHS number may be off putting to some, and this is information which can be collected at a later date/more appropriate time.

Communicating with you

It is unclear whether people who identify that they have specific language or communication requirements should leave the process and wait to be contacted so that these needs can be adequately met. We would like to understand how this information is recorded and what happens next.

Consent for Third Party Referral

The form does not offer the opportunity to provide further details about why consent to a referral has not been obtained. How will a third party referrer (eg a family member) know what has been determined about consent and whether or not their referral will be progressed or has been accepted?

The form should provide an opportunity for carers/family members to ask that they are contacted instead of the subject of the referral, with opportunity to provide an explanation (with supplementary information submitted if possible) about why consent cannot be obtained.

3.3 Completing the Online Self-Assessment

There is potentially a lot of information to complete in this form, which may be daunting for some. Some of the fields are quite complex and more prompts or advice would be useful to assist people to tell their own story in their own words.

The language used in the form may be confusing to those with little knowledge of Adult Social Care, and a number of acronyms are used. In the workshops we made some specific suggestions about changes to language in this form, which we have not repeated here.

We noted that the section which deals with a person's health condition, disability or frailty only shows the fields that people ticked in the Support Needs Checklist. In our view the other domains should be repeated so people can select these if applicable.

Some of the questions need to be more specific so that they provide some guidance about how to answer them. For instance the question relating to Personal, Family and Work History, including current hobbies and religious and cultural beliefs, should ask people to include information relevant to their current circumstances.

The question about current health needs, including medical history, diagnosis disability medication and how you manage this (aids and adaptations) is extremely wide ranging and may be off putting for some. This should be qualified to ask for information which is relevant.

It is helpful that the form acknowledges the role of unpaid carers, and that they may be entitled to help and support. However it is unclear whether a potential carer's assessment will be picked up from the completion of this Online form.

It is unclear to us what supporting documentation may be helpful to submit; some guidance and examples would be helpful. The opportunity to provide this documentation is not referenced elsewhere in the form. It should be stated at the beginning or at relevant points within the form.

3.4 Informing people about what happens after they complete and submit the Online Self-Assessment

On submission of the form an email is sent which acknowledges that the form has been submitted, and provides contact details should a person's situation become more urgent, which is helpful.

However there is no information about what happens next. Information about who will review and respond to the form, and by when, should be included in the email, together with a contact number if the person wants to follow this up.

Recommendations

1. Review whether the Online Self-Assessment is necessary from the perspective of people who will use it
2. Provide clarification as to its purpose and function under the Care Act
3. If the Online Self-Assessment remains in place consider whether the registration process is essential from the user perspective

4. Review the Portal registration page, so that only information that is required at this stage is marked as compulsory
5. Enable third parties to explain why a referral is being made without consent, include instructions about submitting additional information and clarify how a person will know that the referral has been accepted
6. Clarify and provide information about how people's specific language or communication requirements are recorded and how they will be responded to
7. Enable people to add additional categories when describing their needs, to appear alongside those identified in the Needs Assessment Checklist
8. Review the questions in the form so that they provide further explanation where necessary
9. Clarify how the information about Unpaid Carers will be used
10. Include information about the ability to submit supporting documentation at relevant points in the form, and provide examples about the sorts of documentation which may be helpful

Conclusion

We acknowledge that services are facing pressures and demand at a time when resources are constrained. However, Councils have a legal duty to meet their responsibilities under the Care Act and must be able to demonstrate how they do so in practice.

People contact social services at times in their lives when they feel they need advice, support and/or practical help and assistance.

We appreciate that online options are not the only way for people to contact the County Council about their social care needs. We are aware of the development of the Adult Front Door (AFD), whereby people can access telephone information and support AFD advisors will have a 'strengths-based conversation' to understand how an individual is currently managing independently, and what their likely needs may be, to agree the best support available. The Front Door uses a prevent, reduce, delay approach to further reduce pressures on Adult Social Care.

In our view there would appear to be a lack of congruence between the AFD approach and the Online Support Needs checklist as currently configured. Our concern is that this could discourage individuals who could benefit from signposting or who are entitled to a Care Act Needs Assessment away from this process. This could be further exacerbated by the requirement to complete a lengthy form to register on the portal before the person's needs can be considered by the Council.

Whilst we understand that some people may prefer to complete a Self-Assessment Online themselves we are unclear of the purpose, or the benefit to them, of doing so.

Part of the skill of advisors at the Front Door and of the social worker during a Care Act Needs Assessment is to be curious, to help people understand their strengths and the resources that they have available to them. It is also to explore their needs, and the support required, in an appropriate and realistic way.

We do not believe that an Online form should replace the interaction between the advisor/social worker and an individual. Given that a conversation is required we do not see the relevance of the Online Self-Assessment form at all.

We hope that the feedback provided above, and through the workshops, is constructive and serves to strengthen the process.