Finding Out About Adult Social Care Services from the NEW Worcestershire County Council Website

'Mystery Shopping' Exercise

Summary Report - March 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Healthwatch Worcestershire gathers feedback about local health and care services and makes recommendations to those who run them about how they could be improved from a patient, service user and carer perspective.

1. WHY THIS WORK

Councils have a legal duty to provide information and advice about care and support services in their local area, what is available, how these services work locally and how people can access them[1].

In 2019 we carried out a mystery shopping exercise to find out how far the Adult Social Care information on the Worcestershire County Council's (WCC) website is answering common questions that older people or their relatives may have about a service or situations. Whilst good information was available, navigating the site was complex and difficult. We had intended to repeat this exercise in 2023 to see if things had improved in response to our recommendations. WCC are currently developing a new website. The Council confirmed that this would add value to the development of the new site and enable them to identify changes to the website based on user perspective and experience.

Our shoppers therefore undertook an independent, extended mystery shopping exercise on the WCC Beta site in January 2023, so that the findings could influence the content and design of the new site. Our Report reflects content of the website at that date.

2. WHAT WE DID

We repeated the scenarios we had developed in 2019 covering situations in which older people or their relatives/carer might find themselves and turn to the WCC website looking for information. These covered: a carer looking for support for themselves; an older person looking for support at home for themselves; a person looking for support at home for a relative; a carer looking for information about residential care on behalf of a parent; a carer looking for information about Extra Care Housing on behalf of a parent; an older person looking for information about social activities and transport and a person looking for help for an older friend with a sight impairment.

In addition we developed three new scenarios covering: a working age person with a physical disability looking for a range of information relating to employment, care and support, and social activities; a person looking for support for a relative experiencing mental ill health and a person trying to help a friend with their drug use.

We asked our mystery shoppers to read the scenario, put themselves in that person shoes and then find the answer to a number of questions relevant to that scenario, using the information on the WCC website. Our team of shoppers have a range of IT skills, with some being relatively unfamiliar with websites to more experienced users. We also asked a volunteer who is blind to consider the accessibility of the website using their screen reader.

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[1] Care Act 2014, Factsheet 1: General responsibilities of local authorities: prevention, information and advice, and shaping the market of care and support services, Department of Health and Social Care, April 2016

3. OUR OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE NEW WCC WEBSITE

We appreciate that the County Council have invested time and resource to improve their website offer. It has been encouraging to note their commitment to involve people in the development and testing of the site, and their willingness to make changes in the light of early feedback received.

We noted some real improvements to the new version of the WCC website since our first Mystery Shopping exercise. Some of our shoppers were able to find the information that they were looking for with relative ease, and found the navigation simpler than in the previous site. We noted that the information available in some of the Adult Social Care sections is more comprehensive than previously, and pages are more coherently linked together. There are better links to other sources of information and advice external to the County Council and information about paying for services is much better integrated throughout the site.

However, many of our shoppers encountered real difficulties with navigating the site and finding the information they needed. We have focused on the challenges as this is where our feedback can add most value. Our aim is to improve user experience of navigating and using the site.

Language and Style

A number of our shoppers commented that the language used in the Adult Social Care (ASC) section assumed a knowledge of services or terminology that might not be shared by all. Examples given were terms such as 'Assessment and Eligibility' and 'Make a Referral' – some of our shoppers did not know what these terms meant.

It was also notable that there were variations in writing style across the website which could affect the understanding and flow of information from a 'users' perspective.

Search Function

The search function is obviously very important as it is the way that many people will first choose to navigate the website. Issues encountered included the number and relevance of the results returned. Searches related to 'losing sight' returned numerous, but mostly irrelevant results. The results do not differentiate between information for adults and children. Neither does the facility seem able to make connections to the terms entered and common synonyms. The terms 'asc' and 'desc' in the search functions are not explained (we later learnt that these are to sort in ascending and descending order). We could not locate an A-Z function on the site. We recommend further development of the search function on the website.

Navigation

Whilst some of our shoppers found their way easily to the information they required, other struggled with navigation. Issues included being taken back to the WCC Homepage as the trail on the top left of the screen missed out pages they had visited. Few of our shoppers appeared to notice the 'In this Section' drop down menu, or were unclear of its use. The way that information was titled did not at times help our shoppers to find the information needed, as the title did not reflect the content that they were expecting.

It appears to us that there is scope to expand the Useful Links section to think more widely about what information may be helpful to a person landing on a particular page. In addition not all external links open in a new window.

Sources of Information

We would recommend that, unless it does not make sense to do so, links to local information sources are provided first.

Our shoppers were frequently sent to the Here2Help Community Services Directory to look for local information. At times this yielded few relevant results. We appreciate the challenges but suggest that ways to boost the content on Here2Help could be through looking at information produced by, for example District Councils the NHS or the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Care Act requirements

Whilst there is good information about Care Act needs assessments on the website there are pages where we would have expected to find links to this information but did not do so.

We are concerned that the wording under 'Arranging Care' in the Care at Home and in the Care Home sections could be inadvertently misleading, as the second bullet point appears to link an assessment of need to eligibility for funding and a person's level of savings. We think these sentences should be removed.

Contacting Adult Social Care

A key issue for our shoppers was their ability to contact the Council from the website. Some felt that the requirement to register/log in to the online portal and give consent may be hurdles to proceeding. Some wondered what a 'portal' was, and whether more user friendly language could be used. Many wanted to speak to someone.

The telephone contact number for Adult Social Care was not easy to find, including on the WCC 'Contact' page where it is under the heading 'Proceed to contact us'. This is particularly concerning as the Out of Hours emergency number is also located in this drop down section.

We would like to see the telephone number to contact Adult Social Care available throughout relevant pages on the site, particularly those where there is a link to information about Care Act assessments.

We did not always find information in relevant sections about the availability of advocacy, translation and interpreting services. For example, we did not find information about how to contact Adult Social Care if you have a sensory impairment, such as through a text talk facility or with BSL interpreting support.

If there is a standard/target for response time to an ASC referral this should be added to contact information on the website, and if not consideration should be given to introducing this.

Accessibility

We asked one of our shoppers, who is blind, to visit the beta site and assess its general accessibility to someone who uses a screen reader. Positives were that, once a relevant section had been located, the information found was accessible to their JAWS screen reader. However some of the difficulties encountered included:

the screen reader seemed unable to activate the menu of different options for how search results are displayed (Relevance, Date, A-Z); not all search results appear as 'headers' – so the screen reader is unable to use the title as a hyperlink to the appropriate page; navigating through the site was difficult, particularly as our shopper was frequently unable to find a way to get back to the page before using 'hot key' keyboard commands on the screen reader.

A number of our shoppers commented on the small size of the font on the website. No one reported that they had found the accessibility tool that would enable them to enlarge this.

4. THE SCENARIOS

In the full Report we have described each of the ten scenarios that we developed. A brief synopsis of each is provided, alongside narrative about what our shoppers found out when they tried to answer questions relating to their scenario. We have then identified points for consideration for WCC, which relate specifically to the scenario and to the pages visited.

An example of a scenario and recording sheet are available as Appendices, and a copy of all the scenarios are available on request.

5. OVERALL

There are potentially a great many barriers to people using the WCC website including lack of access to or being unable to afford digital devices.[2] Therefore, non-digital access and information in different formats will always be necessary and important, arguably more so for people using Adult Social Care services.

For those who do use the website a lack of familiarity or facility with IT; variable availability of internet services (especially in rural areas); pressure to find solutions / information /advice in stressful circumstances and people's capacity (physical, cognitive or sensory) could contribute to poor outcomes in using the WCC website. It is important that the user experience of navigating the site is as straightforward as possible, and that the website works well to enable users to easily find the information that they need.

Suggestions to improve usability and equality of access have been identified in the recommendations and through the points for consideration relating to the Scenarios within the Report.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Review the language used on the website to make it more understandable to members of the public who may not have any prior knowledge of Adult Social Care (ASC).
2. Change the terminology for 'Assessment and Eligibility' and 'Make a Referral to Adult Social Care' to make it easier to understand.
3. Consider how writing styles across the site could be more consistent and check that terms are used consistently.
4. Further refine the search function in order to improve the relevance of the results offered, make links between search terms and common synonyms, and differentiate between relevant information for children and adults.
5. The terms 'desc' and 'asc' on the search screen need to be explained or changed.

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[2] See HWW Digital Access to Healthcare Report, January 2022

6. An A-Z function could be considered if this is not already available on the site.
7. Further consider how to assist users to navigate through the WCC website - in particular improve the visibility and explanation of the 'breadcrumb' function, and of the dropdown 'In This Section' menu.
8. Ensure that title headings in the drop down menus accurately reflect the content from a public perspective.
9. Further consider the role of the 'Useful Links' section – in particular how this section could be developed to think more widely about possible needs of someone looking at this page.
10. Open all links to external sites in a new window, and state this beside the link to aid navigation.
11. In most circumstances excepting where it does not make sense to do so, links to local information should appear first.
12. Consider how local information in the Here2Help Directory can be boosted, perhaps through liaison with other local information sources such as those held by District Councils and the NHS.
13. Ensure that the information about how to get in touch with Adult Social Care or links to the 'Assessment and Eligibility' page (however described) are included on relevant pages on the website - including the specific pages set out in 4.e of this Report.
14. Review the wording in the 'Arranging Care' sections of care at home and care homes pages to ensure that this is compliant with requirements under the Care Act.
15. Introduce more 'user friendly' language to describe the online portal and making a referral to Adult Social Care.
16. Integrate the Adult Social Care (ASC) telephone contact number into relevant pages throughout the pages on the website, and make sure that how to find it is clear on the enquiry and contact pages.
17. Response times to an enquiry to ASC should be stated if this is not already the case.
18. Review relevant pages to check that information about advocacy, translation and interpreting services is available.
19. Further review the accessibility of the WCC website, including working with people who are blind or visually impaired and use screen readers.
20. Consider how links to / information about the accessibility tools available can be better signposted on the website.
21. Review the Points for Consideration in Section 5 – 'The Scenarios' and Section 6 – 'Comments on other sections reviewed' and consider making the suggested changes.