



**Independent
Age**

Navigating the system

Experiences of accessing adult
social care information and
advice for people in later life



Introduction

As people grow older, many will find themselves in a situation where they need a little more support to complete everyday tasks, such as washing, dressing or going to the toilet. Often people in need of care, or those close to them, find themselves seeking information and advice during an emergency – for example, following the death or incapacity of someone who provided their care, after a sudden illness or while in hospital. It is rarely a rational, planned or anticipated process. So, being able to easily access high-quality and timely information and advice about adult social care services as early as possible is vital to maintaining dignity and independence.

Receiving information and advice is a key part of many people's social care journey, particularly those facing financial hardship in later life who will likely rely on state-funded support. Independent Age is here to help and, as a national charity, we offer free information and advice on a range of topics, including social care. But, as a first port of call, people should be made aware of, and be able to receive, accurate and accessible social care information and advice from their local authority.

We know that every local authority is different, with many people in later life receiving a good-quality service in their area. However, Independent Age hears too many stories of people not getting the information and advice they need from their local authority and having to seek out charities and other organisations to fill the gap. This briefing sets out some of the human impact of not receiving good-quality social care information and advice, shares insights from social care professionals about what works well and what doesn't, and outlines what needs to change.

Providing good-quality information and advice benefits people across the board. Not only can it support people's wellbeing by increasing their ability to exercise choice and control and by alleviating stress and uncertainty, it is also a vital component of preventing or delaying people's need for more intensive care and support¹ – which, in turn, can lessen the workload on professionals in the sector.

We recognise that local authorities across the country face severe financial pressures, huge staffing shortages and many other significant challenges. To reflect this, as well as highlighting the need for good practice in a number of areas across local authorities, our recommendations encompass both improvements to local authority practice and actions the Department for Health and Social Care and other bodies can take to better support local authorities.

What should be happening according to the law and guidance?

The Care Act (2014) and associated guidance sets out requirements and expectations for local authorities' delivery of information and advice about adult social care. Local authorities should be providing a universal offer of information to the public about:

- how the social care system works in the local area – the types of care services and the providers available locally, as well as how to request an assessment of care needs
- how to access services, including housing services and benefits
- how to raise concerns over the safety or wellbeing of someone with care needs
- how to get independent financial advice – about benefits, household budgets and, for people thinking about how to pay for care needs now and in the future, regulated financial advice
- support available for people caring for a friend or family member.

The council can provide the information and advice itself or can commission another local organisation to provide it.

There are additional requirements on local authorities about the information and advice they should provide on specific topics, particularly when someone is entering the care system for the first time.

Local authorities are also expected to make efforts to ensure that information and advice is provided at an early stage and targeted at key points in people's contact with health and care services – for example, following a bereavement, diagnosis of a health condition or discharge from hospital.²

Independent Age research published in 2016 investigated councils' information and advice provision shortly after the Care Act came into force. It found a worryingly mixed picture: while some local authorities were meeting the requirements of the new Act, more than two thirds of local authorities reviewed were not able to demonstrate that they had sufficient online information in all the areas required by the Care Act. A mystery shopper exercise found that local authority call handlers were often unequipped to offer the kind of advice and information required by the Act.³

It has now been more than seven years since the Care Act came into force in April 2015, but the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that people seeking adult social care information and advice from local authorities continue to have mixed experiences. Polling conducted by YouGov for Independent Age in November 2022 found that among adults living in England who had sought information and advice about social care from local authorities since November 2017, only around half (51%) had found the information and advice provided by their local authority or council to be very or fairly helpful.⁴

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has seen a steady rise in the proportion of upheld complaints about social care, indicating that local authorities are not always able to provide the support that is required, and that people desperately need.⁵

Who we have spoken to

Independent Age offers free information and advice services to older people and their families, including about social care.

In 2021 our Helpline answered 3,187 calls about social care, health and wellbeing. If people have a more complex query, they are referred to our Independent Age social care advisers. Currently, our social care advisers provide around 100 telephone or video advice appointments and respond to between 20 and 25 incoming emails about social care issues every month. From these calls, themes have emerged that demonstrate some of the key challenges older people and their families face when trying to access information and advice about adult social care. These include people not understanding the care needs assessment process, how the financial assessment works and how they will be charged, and people not knowing how to challenge decisions made about care.

For this briefing, we synthesised themes from the calls we get and conducted in-depth qualitative interviews to understand more about what helps and hinders older people in need of information and advice. In our interviews, we spoke to seven older people or family members of older people who were trying to seek care and support, to our team of Independent Age specialist social care advisers and to external social work professionals.

Our interviewees had all been in contact with different local authorities across the regions of England, but many had similar experiences in terms of the difficulties they faced getting the information and advice they needed. In multiple cases, the challenges they experienced were not limited to poor information and advice, but it was a factor in all their stories.

We also commissioned a nationally representative YouGov poll of 1,921 adults aged 18+ that asked about their experiences accessing local authority information and advice about social care in England. This was conducted online between 21 and 22 November 2022.

Topics in focus

In this briefing, we will discuss three topics around information and advice in detail, which our Independent Age social care advisers identified as particular problems that they receive regular enquiries about:

- information and advice about the care needs assessment
- the financial assessment and charging
- how to make a complaint or challenge a decision.

As well as sharing what our interviewees experienced, we will also state what social work professionals told us about their experiences delivering information and advice about each of these topics.

Care needs assessment

Care needs assessments are a vital step to ensuring that people get the right care and support. The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services' (ADASS) Waiting for care report found that, in April 2022, almost 300,000 people were waiting for an assessment of their needs by social workers – an increase of 90,000 (44%) in five months. One in four of these had been waiting longer than six months.⁶ This clearly demonstrates a system under immense pressure, but it is essential that people receive the information and advice they need so they know what they are entitled to.

What should be happening?

- The local authority must provide information and advice in an accessible form, about what can be done to prevent, delay or reduce development of a person's needs.
- The local authority should provide in advance, and in an accessible format, the list of questions to be covered in the assessment.
- Individuals must be given a record of their care needs or carer's assessment. A copy must also be shared with anybody else that the individual requests the local authority to share a copy with.⁷

Older people's experiences

Some of our interviewees shared that they faced difficulties getting information about the care needs assessment and what to expect. This was echoed by our Independent Age social care advisers, who told us that they often receive queries from the public seeking more information about the care needs assessment – and there is evidence these queries are on the rise across social care advice services. Access Social Care's review of data from six charity advice services, including Independent Age, found the number of enquiries about social care needs assessments had risen by 229% in 2021–22 compared to 2019–20.⁸ Polling for Healthwatch found that only 40% of the public could correctly identify the primary purpose of a care needs assessment,⁹ so this is clearly an area that older people need local authorities to get right.

Another issue that came through our interviews was disappointment at not receiving a copy of the care needs assessment or other paperwork, such as their care plan.

"I've still never seen Dad's assessment, or a care plan... I know if my dad didn't have dementia, I'm certain when he appointed me as lasting power of attorney, and generally even then, in his 70s and 80s, he would say 'just ask our Sue, she sorts those things out for me', 'I trust her'." Susan

Providing this information is a requirement of the Care Act, so it is essential that older people and their families are always given it.

We also asked social work professionals for their reflections about delivering information and advice on the care needs assessment. Most felt confident giving the right information and advice about this topic. One professional shared what good practice would include:

“Sending information out prior to an assessment so people can read it and ask questions during the assessment. Being available to answer their questions, being patient with them.” Social worker

Jasmine and Wendy’s story

Jasmine lives at home in Suffolk with her nan, Wendy, aged 78. Wendy is immobile and unable to care for herself. They have had live-in carers to help Wendy for five years.

Earlier this year Wendy’s social worker informed Jasmine they were losing their live-in carers with no explanation why. Jasmine was very confused:

“I can get over the fact if we don’t get live-in carers back again, but I’m still a bit baffled to why you can have them five years and then all of a sudden, you’re miraculously okay not to have any help.”

Jasmine told us when she enquired with the care company and social services that she felt no one could give a clear answer about who had made these decisions and why. She shared that the whole process has been taxing for her and Wendy.

When asked where she thought the social services could improve, Jasmine said communication:

“I text them most days for answers and they just don’t listen. I’ve asked for paperwork. They say they can’t give me the paperwork.”

Jasmine also told us she found out that the local authority’s protocol hadn’t been followed. She received letters weeks later than she should have done, with no reasoning provided.

This was an ongoing situation that had not been resolved at the time of our conversation.



Financial assessment and charging

What should be happening?

- After an appropriate care needs assessment has been carried out and a local authority has identified that the support a person needs may be chargeable to them, the local authority must carry out a financial assessment of what the person can afford to pay.
- When a financial assessment has been carried out, a local authority must give a written record of that assessment to the person, which should explain how the assessment has been carried out, what the charge will be and how often it will be made, in a manner that the person can easily understand.
- Local authorities must provide information about how to access independent financial advice about paying for care.¹⁰

Older people's experiences

Financial assessments and charging are very complex areas, including deferred payment agreements, top-ups, client contributions, treatment of property, and treatment of capital and income. Paying for care is a topic most people know little about; our polling with YouGov found only 16% of the general public said they knew a lot or a fair amount about how to pay for social care services, while 78% said they knew nothing or only a little about it.¹¹

Despite many people needing reliable information and advice to navigate these topics, multiple interviewees shared with us the stress they experienced when trying to access information and advice on these themes.

"I was banging my head against a brick wall, and all they were bothered about was not providing advice but getting the money, and I felt very pressured to do that." Amanda

Some of those we spoke to had been passed between different people but were unable to reach anyone with the relevant expertise to answer their query. This included being unable to find out the rationale for the local authority's own decisions. Some felt that siloed working between teams might have been a reason for this – for example, poor communication between staff conducting needs assessments and those conducting financial assessments.

"Dad has then had a financial assessment. Well, that in itself was such a convoluted process, and they've sent me this financial assessment, and... when I've looked at it they've miscounted. One of Dad's private pensions, for example, they have interpreted that the amount is a weekly amount, but it's not actually, it's a very small pension, and the figure that I provided was the monthly total... and I cannot get to speak to anybody." Susan

“She told me to ring up and get another social worker as soon as she left, and took it from there. Tried to do that, got absolutely nowhere, and basically the council were just getting heavier and heavier about paying, and I couldn’t seem to get any information.” Amanda

It was clear from the people we spoke to that, in several instances, their local authority had not met its Care Act duty to provide information about accessing independent financial advice, because interviewees were left to figure things out on their own.

In a couple of cases, interviewees had received the wrong information about what they would have to pay for care, causing great distress.

“Then I knew I’d have to pay, that was not in dispute, there was no argument about that... Just when I thought I’d got it all organised... the guy from the finance department ringing on behalf of social services... it threw all the arrangements out the window that I’d made and gone back to their original decision. I was really upset and then in the evening, quite late on in the evening, [a manager] from social services phoned me to apologise because she said, ‘I can’t believe this has happened, that yet again we’ve given you wrong information.’” Carol

From our professional questionnaire respondents, there was a fairly even split between those who were confident delivering information and advice on this topic and those who weren’t. One noted that local authorities can make available online tools so people can calculate their estimated contributions to social care costs, and this can be helpful in helping people understand what they might have to pay for care.

Personal budgets

When a local authority is arranging someone’s care, they must provide the person with a personal budget, which outlines the money that has been allocated to meet the needs identified in the care needs assessment and recorded in their care plan – including how much the local authority will pay and how much they themselves will have to contribute.¹²

A personal budget should be sufficient to cover a person’s care and support needs. When a personal budget is assigned, the local authority should provide the individual with a written record, which includes the cost to the local authority of meeting their eligible needs and how to access financial advice. It’s vital that the process used to establish the personal budget is transparent, so that people are clear how their budget was calculated and that it is sufficient to meet their care and support needs. The local authority should also explain that the initial indicative amount can be increased or decreased depending on the decisions made during the development of their care and support plan.¹³

Some of our interviewees did not receive this information, while others were given incorrect information and advice, such as being told that they would have to pay a third-party top-up fee for any care home placement. This is despite the fact that local authorities are required to ensure that at least one accommodation option is available and affordable within the person's personal budget.¹⁴ This indicated that some interviewees hadn't received appropriate information and advice about personal budgets, and this is backed up by the calls our Helpline receives.

"So, we'd been told from the get-go basically, Mum can go into a care home, but you'll have to pay top-up fees on it. And we were like, well, my brother hasn't got the money, I haven't really got the money, but I didn't have much option but to say yes." Shantele

This picture is echoed in national evidence. Similar situations where local authorities didn't offer care home placements within a personal budget have been referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. In one case, the Ombudsman intervened, resulting in 30 families who had been forced to pay top-up fees being refunded.¹⁵

The professionals we heard from were not all confident to provide information and advice about what personal budgets are and how they are calculated. There was a reflection from one social worker that the topic is too complex to be covered in information leaflets and professionals need to take the time to explain it to families.

"I don't like it when people give information just on a leaflet. I think it's useful to give people a leaflet, but I think you need to explain it, and you need to give people an opportunity to contact you and go over it again because, actually, Social Care and how we fund it is really complicated if you've never had any dealings with it." Social worker

Anthony and his mum's story



Anthony supports his mum who lives in the Midlands. At the beginning of the pandemic his mum was in a rehabilitation facility after being in hospital. It had been agreed that his mum would go into a care home, but no plans had been made about where she would go. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Anthony was told she had to be moved immediately.

At this time local authorities and hospitals were under huge pressure trying to support people through the pandemic, but Anthony's experience is mirrored in many other calls we receive to our Helpline.

He says he was given no information. Instead, he and his partner had to find a care home by themselves and move her there with no contracts agreed regarding payment.

At the time he was trying to get information and advice from the council regarding top-ups fees on his mum's care home placement and information about how the 12-week property disregard worked.

"It was next to impossible, and very stressful at the time trying to understand the different sort of ramifications and positions."

He says when he sold the property he told the council, but it took them a year to acknowledge this, resulting in Anthony having to make a large back payment. His mum was also made to pay third-party top-up fees she shouldn't have had to pay. The council also sent Anthony the wrong financial assessment, which he realised when the details of the bank account didn't match his mum's.

Two years later this was finally resolved: his mum has been refunded for the third-party top-up fees she shouldn't have paid, and she is happy where she is. But Anthony says this has been a very stressful and confusing time, largely because of the struggles he's had with the council.

"The council's rectified the mistakes but for the last two years it's been, you know, it's tiring."

He also still isn't sure if he was given the right advice regarding the sale of the property. He told us social care support from the council felt like a lottery:

"It's the luck of the draw who you're dealing with, and I feel a lot of people are trying to get away with doing the least amount of work possible."

Complaints, challenges and feedback

Ideally, everyone needing care would receive high-quality information and advice and get the support they need. However, both our own evidence and that of others shows this does not always happen and, in these situations, people may need to complain or challenge decisions that have been made.

What should be happening?

- A local authority must make clear what its complaints procedure is and provide information and advice about how to lodge a complaint.
- Each responsible body must make information available to the public as to its arrangements for dealing with complaints and how more information about those arrangements may be obtained.¹⁶
- Section 72 of the Care Act (2014) also sets out provision for the introduction of a statutory appeals system as an alternative method to complaints for challenging decisions made about adult social care.¹⁷ The introduction of a statutory appeals process is not reliant on the care costs cap being implemented, because it would cover more than this. Local authority decisions that might fall into the scope of an appeals process include the format of a care needs assessment, whether a person's needs are eligible for care and support, and the amount of a personal budget allocated by a local authority.¹⁸
- However, these provisions have not yet been implemented and only a minority of local authorities say they have an appeals process in place for adult social care decisions.¹⁹

Older people's experiences

While some of our interviewees said they had made a complaint about the service they received, others had not been given any information about how to do this or had been actively discouraged from challenging a decision or complaining.

"Everybody was telling me I couldn't challenge them, I didn't have the right to challenge them." Carol

The process of complaining or challenging decisions often wasn't clear and the people we spoke to did not know what to expect from the process. Generally, interviewees had little faith that concerns they had raised, whether formally or informally, would be taken seriously.

"I don't think there's any accountability. I think a lot of people just close ranks. A complaint comes in and there's no real working process on that, and it just disappears really. And I think they appreciate that you know, someone like myself, I'm the son of my mum, you know, I run a business, I'm very busy, I have a family, and I think they almost play on that, thinking you know, 'If we kind of ignore a few things, let's hope it goes away.'" Anthony

People's lack of faith that making a complaint is worthwhile is a growing problem. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has raised concerns that a decrease in complaints made to them about adult social care in 2021–22 compared to previous years reflects a general disillusionment with the efficacy of challenging local authority decisions.

Most professionals who shared their experiences with us said that they do feel confident providing information and advice about this topic and some felt it was part of their job to empower people to raise concerns and challenge decisions.²⁰

"In our local authority we have a complaints procedure as well, people usually email, things like that. But I'm also there to – like, the older generation that finds internet and all of that stuff a bit overwhelming, I'll link them in with this lady, who will independently support them."
Social worker

Worryingly, we also heard examples of pressure from line managers not to help with this.

"There will be managers in social care, and I've seen it a few times over the years, but also this shouldn't be – one of my colleagues gave her service user a complaints form, and he said she shouldn't be doing that. And you think, 'No, that's exactly what she should be doing.'"
Social worker

The insights shared with us reflect the national picture in England. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's annual review of social care complaints for 2021–22 states that it found fault in 70% of the cases it investigated last year. This reflects a consistently high 'upheld' rate, which has steadily increased over the past decade.²¹ This trend strongly suggests that many issues are not being effectively resolved by the complaints process at the local authority level.

Independent Age's previous research on adult social care appeals highlighted how local authority complaints procedures can fall short for older people and their families, and how a statutory appeals process may be a more accessible and appropriate avenue to challenging decisions about care.²²

Carol and David's story



Carol, 83, lived with her husband David, 89, in London and had been his carer for more than 20 years when he became ill and was taken to hospital. While he was in hospital, she was told by social care that he would be sent back home. Carol didn't think she would be able to handle being his full-time carer at home any more and wanted him to go to a care home.

"I cannot explain to you how frightened I was that they were going to send my husband home... I couldn't imagine how I was going to begin to cope, because it would've meant that I needed to be awake 24 hours a day."

Carol's local social services team said it was their choice to make because they had power of attorney over his health – not Carol. At the time she wasn't feeling very well and the whole situation made her very stressed and frustrated. She said she felt like no one seemed to be taking her needs into consideration. It was then that she contacted Independent Age and her GP. Both told her that the information she had been given was wrong and, because she was next of kin, she had to be included in decisions made about her husband's social care.

The hospital and social workers held a meeting about David's care, which Carol had to join on the phone because she was told not to come to the hospital. But, when she asked for minutes from the meeting, they refused.

"I was trying to write things down, because my daughter had said to me, 'Mum, have a paper and pencil down, take notes,' but during a meeting that's incredibly difficult."

Eventually it was decided that David would go into a care home. Carol told us she was sent letters with the wrong information about paying for David's care, which she said "knocked her sideways" again. Carol shared that the person in charge of their case phoned her to apologise when these mistakes were made, but Carol was also told that she didn't have the right to challenge decisions made about her husband's care. It wasn't until she talked to an adviser working at Independent Age that she was given information about the complaints process.

Carol explained she understands the enormous pressure social services are under but that it doesn't excuse the lack of support – and incorrect information – she received. She said she has no confidence reaching out to her local social services again.

Other issues shared with us

As well as the three key topics we have discussed so far, there are a range of other issues that older people call our free Helpline about on a regular basis. These were themes we also asked our interviewees about.

Our interviewees did highlight some positive experiences, including finding face-to-face meetings with local authority staff useful, social workers being responsive to emails, and one instance where good information sharing between a district and county council meant someone was proactively offered help with aids and adaptations in their home.

“I think our social worker was very good at what she did. I mean, when she came in, she was extremely good with my mum, and she was quick to respond to my emails when she was there. You know, she phoned us regularly. So, things like that, on an individual basis, she was very good, but I think she was working within the constraints of the local authority.”
Shantele

However, we also heard about additional challenges that many faced.

Low awareness of what local authorities can offer

For many people, by the time they enquire about social care for themselves or someone close to them, they have reached crisis point, so the need for accessible and high-quality information and advice is essential. Our polling with YouGov found that 44% of people did not feel confident that they could arrange social care support for themselves or someone they know.²³

Multiple interviewees we spoke to described themselves as resilient and able to find information and advocate for themselves, but some were concerned about what would happen to people in later life who could not do this for themselves and did not have relatives who could help.

“It worries me that, you know, my mum has me and my brother to be able to advocate for her, whereas other people don’t necessarily have that, and they’d just be left, because they don’t shout loud enough, and because they don’t phone up, and because they don’t advocate.” Shantele

Nationally representative polling by Healthwatch found that fewer than half of people said they would know to go to their local authority if they needed care and support and, of those who had recently sought support, only 15% of the respondents had turned to their local authorities.²⁴ This demonstrates the need for local authorities to clearly publicise their social care information and advice and what people can have access to. The polling also found that those who did know that their local authority could provide information about social care were more likely to come from well-off households, which is concerning given lower-income households are more likely to need their local authority’s help to pay for care.

Difficulties getting accurate information

Many of the people we spoke to said that they had not received the information they requested from the local authority or had been given incorrect information.

When asked about the barriers to receiving information about social care from local authorities, several of our interviewees described having difficulty even finding the right person to talk to and instead being continually passed between different teams within a local authority. Unanswered emails came up multiple times too. Our polling with YouGov echoed these difficulties. Among adults in England who had tried to make contact with someone who worked at the council to seek information and advice about social care since November 2017, half (50%) said they had found it difficult.²⁵

"After COVID hit, well good luck getting hold of anyone. Number 1, there was no meetings obviously. Number 2, no one was picking up the phone, and number 3, no one was responding to emails. I was told by the person who actually resolved all this that it should have been business as usual via working from home, but there was no responses to emails." Anthony

"I said, 'Just a couple of queries on the financial assessment,' and this was the specific number that was given on the bottom of the financial assessment, you know... but it wasn't, it was a general line, and they said, 'Oh look, we're awfully sorry, but we can't answer your questions specifically, but we will email.' And I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm going round in circles here.'" Susan

Another issue was that information about social care was often only available online and was not produced in alternative formats or in other languages. One interviewee told us her council had initially refused to send physical copies of the information available on the local authority website, despite the fact that she didn't use the internet.

"There's no law that says you've got to have the internet. When I ring them up and ask them to send me something they say, 'You can go online'. 'No, I don't go online. You can send it to me.' 'No, we don't do that.'" Carol

Another shared that the information she found online was difficult to understand without specialist knowledge, highlighting the need for all local authorities to provide materials using simple language and explanations. Among those of our YouGov survey respondents who had accessed their local authority website to look for information about social care, while 62% said the website had been helpful, there was still a third (34%) who had found the information on the website unhelpful.²⁶

"Someone needs to just make it a bit more straightforward really and, 'this is what you need to do'. Even if it's just an easy to read, easy to understand, because a lot of the sites that you read it's all in solicitor speak, if you will." Amanda

In some cases, interviewees felt councils had given them incorrect information about important issues. Where this had happened, there could be real financial implications for older people and their families.

“The county council gave us wrong information regarding property disregard. I ended up selling my mum’s house without any contracts in place. My mum was paying a third-party top-up for her care that she shouldn’t have done, and it was all a big disaster zone on the financial side.” Anthony

Not feeling advised

When people find themselves, or someone close to them, needing care, receiving expert and personalised advice on issues such as how to pay for care and support is invaluable. However, many people who call Independent Age feel they haven’t received the advice they needed through their local authority, and this was reflected in the experiences of our interviewees.

“It was me that phoned them, I contacted them, I rang round places, didn’t really get much help about what suited her needs.” Shantele

“It’s being able to respond to specific queries rather than just giving general information. Most services appear to be giving general information which is not that useful really.” Susan

Impact of poor information and advice

As this briefing has made clear, the consequences when people receive poor information and advice about adult social care should not be underestimated. It can prevent people from making empowered decisions about care for themselves or a loved one, cause financial hardship or uncertainty, and result in people not knowing how to raise concerns when something has gone wrong.

Bad experiences can also affect the trust that people have in local authorities to be able to help them in future, with some of our interviewees expressing that they had lost faith in their local authority because of their experiences. Our polling with YouGov found that among those who had accessed local authority information and advice since November 2017, nearly half (48%) were not confident about the council’s ability to provide them with accurate information and advice about social care in the future.²⁷

When interviewees didn’t receive the social care information and advice they needed from local authorities, it often had a serious effect on the wellbeing of the older people in need of care and their families.

“You can’t just leave Nan on her own for a long period of time... I never really go out as such... she worries about being on her own and because she’s had all these professionals telling her she shouldn’t be on her own, it’s made her more nervous. They’ve made her mentally drained, really. I’m tired from it all, so is Nan.” Jasmine

"I've had some counselling to manage the process, and to help me not be as stressed." Susan

"They were upsetting me enormously because I had power of attorney for my husband's finances, but I didn't have power of attorney for health... Social services then stepped in and told me that when somebody in my situation, I didn't have power of attorney for health, it automatically devolved to them and I would not be involved in any decisions concerning my husband's health." Carol

"I get annoyed because I feel like I'm doing all I can and [the social worker]'s got all the answers but I'm the only one that doesn't know what's going on." Jasmine

For some, the financial impact was also significant when accurate and timely information and advice wasn't received, with some interviewees facing huge bills for care and, in some cases, paying more than they should have done because of the lack of support they had received from local authorities.

"I was thinking we are going to run out of money, and I don't know what's going to happen then... He's saying that I've got to pay full fees of £855.37 a week." Carol

"It's quite difficult really, and you don't get much help from the council, they just seem to have fixed ideas in their head... and then I even got a letter recently saying basically 'if you don't do this within so many days, we'll just chase the full payment'. I'm thinking, 'Oh God,' because at the moment we're just paying the top-up, it's £800-and-odd a month." Amanda

The Personal Social Services Adult Social Care Survey makes clear the relationship between good information and advice, and how satisfied people feel about their care overall. For service users who rated their quality of life as either very good, or so good it could not be better, more than half (54%) felt they found it very easy to find information and advice about support, services or benefits, while 6% felt information was very difficult to find. By contrast, for those who rated their quality of life as either very bad, or so bad it could not be worse, only 7% felt they found it very easy to find information and advice about support, services or benefits and almost half (49%) felt information was very difficult to find.²⁸

A spokesperson from the Ombudsman told us that inadequate or incorrect information and advice forms a part of a large number of cases that reach them, and they often have to make service recommendations for local authorities about improving the quality of information and advice.

The high demand for independent adult social care information and advice, provided by organisations including charities, also indicates that people are failing to get the answers and support they need from their local authorities directly. Access Social Care's State of the Nation Report for 2022 found an unprecedented level of demand for social care advice from these independent services.²⁹ This is particularly concerning when non-local authority information and advice services may be struggling with recruitment and retention challenges, such as Community Care legal aid practice.³⁰

Shantele and her mum's story

Shantele became concerned with her mum's living conditions when her hoarding habits made her home uninhabitable.

"I'm talking about that it is squalid, that it's a danger to her, it's a fall risk, for starters, she's not very mobile, there's stuff everywhere."

When it was agreed her mum would go into a care home for respite, Shantele shared that they were given no support with filling out all the assessment paperwork to complete the financial assessment. Shantele was also told all care home options available required top-ups fees, which she would struggle to afford. But, because it was predicted that Shantele's mum would only need to be in a care home for few weeks, she thought she would be able to manage. However, her mum ended up staying in the care home for nine weeks until they found her a place to live in Extra Care accommodation.

When Shantele realised her mum would need to be in the care home for longer, she reached out to a locally based organisation and to Independent Age, because no real information or advice was given to her by the social services team about funding options. The top-up fees were crippling her financially and she didn't know what to do. It was then she realised she hadn't been given accurate information and should have been given options that didn't require top-up fees.

On an individual level, Shantele said she had some good experiences: for example, their social worker was very good, would keep in regular contact and was good with her mum. But Shantele felt she was stretched thin and stuck within the confines of the local authority.

One of the things Shantele found most frustrating was that she had no one to help advocate for her and her mum. She was working full time while organising everything for her mum.

"It was down to me, so on top of all the stress of dealing with what was going on with the house, what was going on with my mum, and then having to spend time ringing around people, hassling people about what's going on with the housing application, why hasn't she been considered for this. Speaking to the social worker all the time."



Barriers for professionals to deliver adult social care information and advice

To understand more about why people might be unable to access good information and advice from local authorities, we gathered insights from 12 social work professionals through a questionnaire and interviews.

While the professionals we heard from generally felt positive about the quality of the information and advice local authorities, and they themselves, were able to provide to the public, many acknowledged that cross-cutting factors at the local authority and social care sector level could limit the good information and advice given.

Barriers relating to pressure on the social care system

Some of the issues the social work professionals identified related to pressures on the social care system and stretched local authority resources and capacity. Respondents mentioned that there could be long waiting lists, making it harder for members of the public to get an appointment to talk to someone about social care, and the high caseload social workers could face could make it harder to give good information and advice to everyone they came into contact with.

“Telephone contact may not always be quick or easy to get through on, and waiting lists for assessments can be months.” Social worker

Part of the problem was having less time to build rapport and relationships with clients.

“I think we’ve become so distant, especially over the pandemic.” Social worker

One respondent noted that the limited number of care home places available made it harder to provide good advice about choosing a care home; another expressed that they felt they were having to limit people’s choice because of overarching funding constraints.

Barriers relating to local authority practice

Local authority websites were mentioned by a few professional respondents. Where websites were accessible and contained clear information, this was seen as an asset, but some felt that the quality of local authority websites was inconsistent. We also heard concerns that local authorities didn’t always provide information in alternative forms for people who weren’t online, and that it could be hard to find contact details on local authority websites if people needed more information.

“Some areas have clear information on the local authority website. Some organisations are well informed, but others give out poor information.” Social worker

“When they use the LA websites, they sometimes need to be master hackers to find a phone number or way of contacting a contact team.” Social worker

Multiple professionals told us that variability in different local authorities' processes around social care could make it hard for members of the public to navigate, as well as making it harder for professionals who had previously worked in other authorities to provide good information and advice, because they had to become familiar with different systems.

"Systems vary from local authority to local authority and area to area. Forms and procedures are different everywhere you go. People get support in some local areas and not in others. Lack of national systems is inefficient and unfair to service users." Social worker

Other concerns included lack of information materials and knowledge of local authority staff about certain complex issues, concerns about the quality of assessments done over the phone as a result of the pandemic, and lack of joined-up working and information sharing between professionals.

We also heard that local authority staff could have unhelpful attitudes to information and advice, such as not providing information in languages other than English for those who needed it.

Support for social workers

We heard mixed views on the quality of ongoing learning and development for social care staff, with some feeling they were not supported to provide good-quality information and advice, and others stating they weren't offered training in general.

"Not offered much training and I have to find information out for myself." Social worker

"Often feel very unprepared and ill informed." Social worker

We heard the view that sharing experiences with peers could be incredibly valuable.

Solutions

The insight we have gained from our services supporting older people and their families, our conversations with members of the public and the views shared by social work professionals has surfaced a range of suggestions that could make things better.

Provision of transparent and accessible communication

We hear regularly about the need for better transparency and communication regarding queries to local authorities about social care. Some interviewees suggested that having a single point of contact in a local authority, who could find information or directly put an enquirer in touch with someone who could help, would have improved their experience.

“They should have a worker that’ll deal with this one person, and maybe even if that person could deal with everything that affected them via the council... It would be easier for them because everything would be resolved in one place, wouldn’t it? Rather than you having to deal with different issues and different things and different people, you could email that one person or that one team or whatever.” Amanda

Another aspect of this is providing paperwork when requested, such as minutes of meetings and copies of family members’ needs assessment or care plans.

The interviewees we spoke to thought that local authorities should have clear and simplified information available on their website. Given some people who may need social care cannot, or choose not to, access the internet, we also heard suggestions of proactively sending information in the post about what support the local authority might be able to offer if someone is struggling.

“[The council] put letters, things through the door once, or whenever it is, once or twice a year. I think there could have been something more on there that was obvious. I’m saying that don’t be frightened to ask, this is the thing. Especially people my age, we lived through a time where you didn’t ask for these things, you thought that you were scrounging, or you would be called a scrounger.” Julie

The professionals we engaged with echoed this, saying there should be clear and accessible written information available in multiple formats that they could share with people, including up-to-date factsheet leaflets and clear information on local authority websites. This would help local authorities meet their universal duties to provide information and advice about care.

“I think having a tab where it says very clearly ‘How to get in touch with us’ and basically, the person clicks on that little application and there is a phone number, there is an email. If people wish to fill in an online form, there’s an online form, but it’s all in one area, whereas it’s actually spread over different tabs and I think it’s pretty difficult to navigate that.” Social worker

Professional respondents also suggested a greater presence of information and advice in communities, by making written information available and hosting informal drop-in sessions in community hubs like day centres to answer basic queries. Our polling with YouGov found that only 9% of people recalled seeing information in their community about how the social care system works within the past two years.³¹

“It’s, I think, having more community hubs, opening up care homes, opening up day centres, to the community.” Social worker

Many professionals seemed supportive of approaches to co-designing information and advice. One social worker told us that they'd been involved in approaches where people with lived experience of accessing social care were included – but that there was less time and resource available for that kind of activity than there used to be.

“Having that community [outreach] where people are approachable, there isn't this great big fear, really, of contacting the right person in social care, having to explain themselves impersonally.” Social worker

“Ask experts by experience to be information advocates, volunteer roles, who can link in with social work teams.” Social worker

“But I just think, having more generic information for people that isn't just all interpreted through a local authority, and that is maybe designed by people who use services and their families, because they're the best ones to actually tell us what we need to do to be different and make it easier to access information.” Social worker

Training and support

Interviewees who had struggled getting answers to complex queries, such as those related to charging, suggested that training and development could be improved so that staff providing social care information and advice were supported to give help beyond general information.

“I also think for me, there appears to be almost a lack of knowledge now, so people can't seem to be able to respond and give you specific information. It's more general.” Susan

Care professionals discussed the need for an open and supportive culture in local authorities, including opportunities to discuss experiences and best practice with colleagues in their own local authority and ones further afield.

“Good practice tips, a spreadsheet/doc to add what you've learnt about support and info for clients to share with colleagues.” Social worker

“Promoting models of good practice in regard to information and advice giving.” Social worker

They also shared the importance of a good multi-agency or partnership working approach, including information sharing with the local voluntary sector, and health professionals taking an information-giving or a signposting role.

Other suggestions included promoting more person-centred and transparent practice among all staff who might be dealing with enquiries about social care. Ideas included providing people with a crib sheet summarising what has happened after key meetings, such as the care needs assessment, to aid their understanding.

Funding the social care system

The experiences we heard through our interviews, and the calls our Helpline and specialist social care advisers take, all reflect a social care system under huge pressure, both in terms of the availability of services – for example, affordable care home placements – and the extreme pressures on a workforce in crisis.

An awareness of the pressures on social workers and local authorities came out strongly, with some respondents calling for more funding to improve every aspect of the system, including information and advice provision. One respondent also noted that increasing funding and growing the workforce would enable social workers to take time during their working day to keep up with training – something, at the moment, they didn't feel they could do.

“Not enough staff to cover training opportunities and help manage caseloads whilst you are retaking training.” Social worker

What Independent Age recommends

Best practice principles for local authorities

From the stories that were shared with us, there are a number of activities that could help local authorities meet their legal requirements around information and advice provision as outlined in the Care Act (2014) and associated guidance and regulations.

Some local authorities may already be doing many of these things, but we know from calls to our Helpline that the picture is not consistent across England. So, we suggest that all local authorities:

- ensure information about social care is easily accessible on their website to those who are less confident using the internet and lack specialist knowledge about social care
- ensure they are providing alternative ways – Easy Read versions, Braille, multiple languages – to make information about social care proactively available to those who do not use the internet, and to those who may have other access needs, such as a disability or English as a second language. This could include making information leaflets available at community hubs such as libraries and day centres, and regularly making social care staff available to conduct drop-in sessions at these locations to answer basic queries about social care and to signpost more support
- provide clear information to the public about who to contact with an initial query about social care and, moving forward, provide the person making the query with an individual staff member, or team, who is a single point of contact to talk to
- ensure any staff who are in contact with members of the public have a basic level of understanding about social care, so they can identify when a person might benefit from information and advice about social care, and can signpost them to resources or other staff in the local authority who can help. This might include developing crib sheets that staff can refer to and then providing basic signposting support
- engage with their communities to develop approaches to providing information and advice about social care. This could include consulting on what kinds of information should be made proactively available in community spaces or using co-design principles to involve people with lived experience to help review local authorities' existing procedures to delivering information and advice
- proactively provide paperwork, such as meeting notes, to family members
- proactively provide information about challenging decisions made by local authorities and establish an appeals process as an alternative to their complaints process. When something has gone wrong, be clear on what the next steps are to fixing it

- create opportunities for staff to share learning and best practice about how to provide good information and advice. This might include running webinars about community engagement approaches or hosting a shared space on the staff intranet where staff can share their learning about providing information and advice. Professionals should also look for opportunities to share learning and best practice between teams at different local authorities
- take steps to break down siloed working where it exists between teams within local authorities, and ensure information-sharing procedures between local authorities and partners, such as care providers and the health sector, are robust.

Recommendations for national government to support local authorities

It's clear that the financial pressures and high demands on local authorities limit the ability of some to always deliver good information and advice about adult social care.

Upcoming reforms on the care cap and how people pay for social care are still uncertain. But, if they take place, they will incentivise more people to ask their local authority to arrange their care, so that payments made will contribute towards the care cap.³² This will drive demand for local authority information and advice higher. ADASS's 2022 survey of directors of adult social services found that a majority (71%) were not confident that there would be sufficient funding to deliver reforms to the social care system, raising concerns that local authorities will be unable to cope when the changes come into effect in 2023.

The national government needs to take action to support local authorities and the social care sector more widely, including growing the social care workforce and providing sustainable funding to local authorities.

- The UK government needs to adequately fund social care. This is particularly urgent given the scrapping of the Health and Social Care Levy in September 2022. We echo the Local Government Association's call to invest £13 billion into adult social care to tackle immediate pressures and to help social care deliver its statutory duties.³³ The government should make sure any money invested in adult social care is distributed fairly, reflecting local authorities' levels of need.
- The government must publish a comprehensive workforce strategy for the social care sector, which should be co-produced with social care professionals, people receiving care and their families.
- The Department of Health and Social Care's Innovation and Scaling Fund should require local authorities bidding for pilot-project funding to set out how they will include lived experience and the voices of people receiving care and their families in developing approaches to information and advice accessibility.
- The Care Quality Commission should seek out and consider people's experiences of accessing local authority information and advice about social care as part of their new local authority assurance duties.

- The new adult social care data framework promised in the People at the Heart of Care white paper should include data gathering about people's experiences of information and advice, so that a national picture of local authority information and advice provision can be developed to inform policy.
- The Department of Health and Social Care should introduce a statutory appeals process through which people can challenge decisions made about social care, as promised in the Care Act (2014).
- The government should establish an Older People's Commissioner in Westminster to give older people an independent voice at the heart of government, championing their interests and amplifying their voices. Their role would be cross-cutting and work with departments across government.

Altogether, we hope that these recommendations provide a way forward for improving the information and advice provided by local authorities to those in need of care and their families.

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