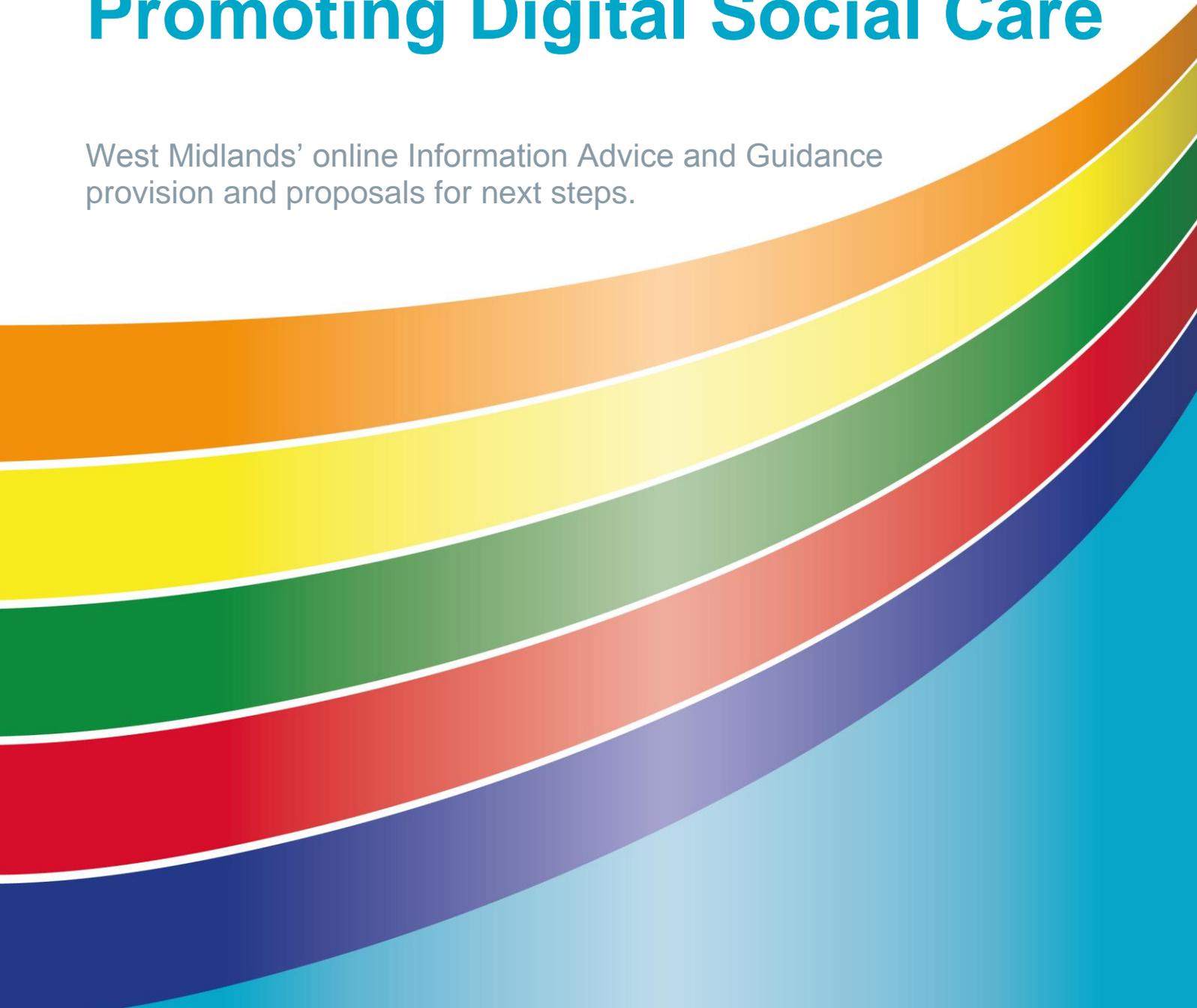


Promoting Digital Social Care

West Midlands' online Information Advice and Guidance provision and proposals for next steps.



Digital Social Care

WM councils' online IAG provision and proposals for next steps

During the Autumn of 2017, IEWM commissioned a piece of work to explore how the region's local authorities have responded to Care Act requirements to provide, for 'all comers', information and advice about social care provision.

This research, built on work done on the same topic in early 2015, looked at what each council has done since, the outcomes hoped for and achieved, and how social care commissioners anticipate developing this aspect of their work.

The work also drew on findings of the Socitm [Better Connected 2016-17](#) research that published for all English councils, results about the quality of their [online assessment processes](#) for care services as well as provision of [online information and advice](#).

Findings from this work were published in a PowerPoint presentation delivered at a workshop in Birmingham on 8 December 2017. [West Midlands IAG Provision](#)

Next steps

Three areas for future activity emerged:

- Improving effectiveness of directories and marketplaces
- Managing demand – current and future
- Measuring success

1. Improving effectiveness of directories and marketplaces

The research showed West Midlands authorities to be performing in line with councils across England as documented by Better Connected. Which is to say that they are very much still on the journey to providing a good service when it comes to social care information, advice and guidance (IAG) online.

After some experimentation immediately after the Care Act came in, most councils are now running a set of adult social care pages on their corporate site with information about arrangements and processes for council-delivered and funded services, along with directories of services and providers for self-funders.

Directories are mostly built on third party platforms provided by social care IT suppliers like OpenObjects, OLM, Public Consulting Group and others. One or two councils provide in-house built and maintained directories.

Key issues with online presentation of IAG that remain work-in-progress are findability of council delivered/signposted services via search engines; the usability of social care webpages and directories, the integration of information in directories with information provided via the council's corporate (council.gov.uk) site; and the task of keeping information – particularly about local services and providers - comprehensive and current.

Resolving some of these issues is a matter of following good web practice, which is widely available including from the Better Connected programme (although as with all things digital, best practice is always changing).

Persistence of poor practice is explained by over-stretched and under-regarded web/digital teams and lack of digital skills and understanding of best online practice in some commissioning departments. This is not just issue for social care, it applies in other service areas that commission digital services including planning, waste management, libraries etc.

There are particular issues around commissioning of online directories of services around where best practice is yet to emerge and where the developing role of other important players including NHS Digital, voluntary sector organisations like Disability Living Foundation, and commercial players like Which? will impact the sector.

A further consideration is self-service. In some cases, provision of IAG online will prompt individuals to, for example complete self-assessment forms. This raises questions about whether this information then becomes available to case management systems. Some directories also function as e-marketplaces, which have potential to link to accounts associated with personalised care.

Finally, there is the question of the inter-dependence of online and offline provision, the need for 'whole council' approaches to meeting social care needs, and engagement of the voluntary sector.

In terms of work needed to improve online IAG in the short term, teams should focus on:

- Findability and usability, integration of directories and marketplaces with corporate sites, and adoption of best web practice
- Boosting usage by using other digital channels (social media, email alerts, SMS etc.) effectively
- Improving national/local/hyperlocal service and product information and how this can best be obtained and maintained

The workshop was presented with 10 top tips for improving current provision, although this list should not be regarded as exhaustive:

- 1 Test that services are findable in Google – there is lots of competition
- 2 Fully integrate directories with the corporate website & acknowledge ownership
- 3 Don't dump people into 3rd party websites/listings – test customer journeys
- 4 Make labels in everyday language ('Housing options'; 'day opportunities')
- 5 Call a spade a spade ('Do I have to pay for care?' NOT 'Money matters')
- 6 If a short label can't describe something, add extra text a la GOV.UK
- 7 Tell people about services NOT policy or legislation or what's happened in the past
- 8 Don't imply that dependence starts at 55 or that exercising means wearing lycra
- 9 Pictures and icons can be helpful but also get in the way
- 10 Like GOV.UK, write for a reading age of 8 – it also helps professionals

Recommendations for future activity:

- Enable and encourage sharing of developments in directories/e-marketplaces: e.g. Warwickshire CC are about to start a major project in this area
- Continue to follow NHS Digital's project on social care content for NHS.UK and invite them to return to present the beta stage of their project
- Follow results of Better Connected results from social care surveys

2. Managing demand – current and future

The web managers' questionnaire touched on the issue of demand management when we asked, 'What outcomes have you been looking to achieve' in the context of councils' investments in online IAG. None disagreed with the following statements of desired outcomes:

- Increasing take up of online services by council funded social care users
- Provision of social care online information and advice to self-funders
- Reducing total phone and face to face enquiries about adult social care
- Improving health and wellbeing of the local population

Three of the fourteen councils said the following were not currently desired outcomes of their online IAG activity:

- Encouraging self-assessment of financial costs of social care and support available
- Encouraging self-assessment of social care needs

In terms of levels of success achieved to date, almost all councils rated success in the low to medium level. On the most easily quantified measure, reducing total phone and face to face enquiries about adult social care, none claimed a high level of success, five claimed a low level and four medium.

During interviews with social care commissioners, two levels of demand management were discussed. The first concerned management of current enquiries for social care and how these were being handled through a range of different access points of 'front doors', including online, and sometimes via online self-assessment of social care need.

The second concerned management of demand in the longer term, and how councils might meet widely anticipated increased levels of future as a consequence of the ageing population, growth in long term health conditions, reduced funding for welfare, the housing crisis and so on.

The way councils are managing current enquiries and applying triage to incoming enquires appear to vary significantly and are also changing rapidly as councils react to demand that has already increased due to pressures mentioned above and to significantly reduced funding for social care.

Variations concern the way referrals from health and voluntary sector partners are handled as well as self-referrals and enquires from families, including those now coming in online.

As for future demand, those interviewed spoke about a range of approaches and activity including 'asset based commissioning' (finding local family, voluntary and community services able to support clients as part of council care packages); bringing public health resources into play to prevent/postpone demand; and bringing council assets in the community including libraries, leisure centres, and neighbourhood teams into social care activity to prevent/postpone demand.

Those attending the workshop agreed that the area of demand management, both short and long term, should be explored further.

Recommendation

Set up exploratory workshop with volunteers from the group to scope a project in this area, covering both short term and longer term demand management. Such a project might seek to:

- Explore and describe best/developing practice in using digital with other channels/front doors to manage demand
- Provide information to enable engagement of all parts of the system (internal and partners) on the 'why' and 'how' of demand management in adult social care

3. Measuring success

The project revealed councils to be hesitant about claiming success with their online IAG activity.

Data provided to indicate progress even in the relatively straightforward area of web visits to corporate sites and directories/marketplaces was patchy and not always relevant.

Any activity on demand management clearly needs to be supported by data that can measure success in achieving desired outcomes, having first agreed desired outcomes.

Interviews with social care commissioners, and discussion at the workshop on December 8th revealed a desire to start talking the issue of measurement.

Recommendation

Set up exploratory workshop with volunteers from the group to scope a project in this area, covering measurement of both current enquiries and also indicators of key behaviour changes that may impact term longer term demand. Such a project might seek to:

- Develop indicators that use web stats and other 'front door' data plus local demographic and population data to measure likely and actual demand
- Set up benchmarking of relevant data between the fourteen councils
- Explore KPIs relevant to long term demand reduction.