

Online information and advice to carers during the Covid-19 pandemic

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About the research

During the Covid-19 pandemic demands on unpaid (family) carers have increased dramatically and more people have begun to care for older and disabled family members. Services for unpaid carers from local authority social services departments (LAs) and third sector organisations (TSOs) have changed in many ways, with the closure of carers centres, day centres and council offices. Websites have become an increasingly important source of information and advice. As the importance of websites has increased so has the need to ensure that people using them are able to find what they need. This research identifies how they are being used, what information and advice is made available and how user-friendly they are.

We reviewed the websites of 150 local authorities and local third sector organisations in England. We adopted the position of a carer seeking advice and information about sources of support from different agencies in the local area. The evidence highlights a number of strengths and weaknesses and wide variation between local authority areas. A complex and variable picture of support for carers exists across England. Our review of websites indicates wide variations in levels of support for different groups of carers as well as wide geographical variation and suggests that more attention is needed on the ways that online information and advice is provided.



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Policy recommendations

- Websites could be used more effectively to show how LAs, TSOs and health services work together to provide support for all carers during the pandemic.
- Websites need to be clear and helpful to carers negotiating the complex system of support.
- Information from different local agencies should be checked to ensure it is consistent and up to date.
- Websites could be 'test-driven' by a range of carers, including those from BAME groups, to ensure they are relevant, useful and user-friendly.

Key findings

Websites reviewed varied along three main dimensions:

What websites indicate about how carers are valued as contributors to the social care system.

- There was wide variation between websites in the warmth of communication with carers. The message that 'you are not alone' was prioritised on some, with particular reference to the impact of the pandemic on carers' mental and physical health, the pressures on caring relationships, the potential for isolation, safeguarding issues and financial hardship. On the whole, TSOs were better than LAs at conveying the message that carers are valued.

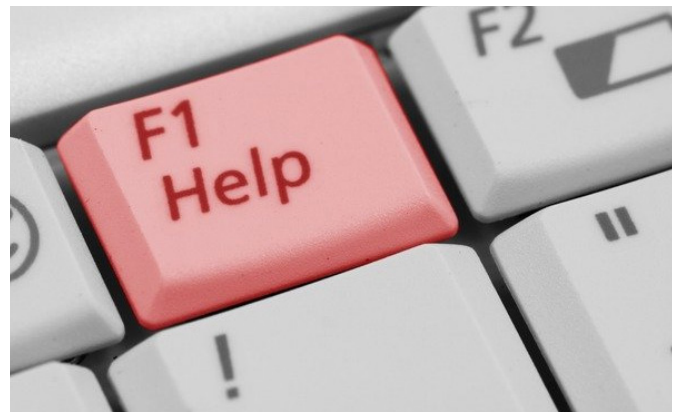
Information provided to carers about support available.

- Websites indicated a wide range of support for carers. Carers UK have produced useful information for carers related to Covid-19 and most websites provided links to this. Surprisingly few local authorities made effective use of their websites to point carers towards more widely available services, such as emergency help with food, medicines and financial difficulties.
- The websites of TSOs conveyed a picture of activity and togetherness, with Facebook groups, online classes, exercise groups and social gatherings. Many TSOs were proactively contacting carers known to be under pressure. We reflected on whether this togetherness might act as a deterrent to new carers,

such as those who are reluctant to join groups. We saw very few references to BAME populations. On some websites, it appeared that joining the organisation was a prerequisite to receiving support, another potential barrier.

The clarity and user friendliness of the websites.

- Around half of the websites were difficult to navigate for different reasons. Some resembled a maze of links, others had links that were broken, or easy to miss. The other half provided clear, well-organised and straightforward links that were easy to follow and gave up to date information about who does what at the local level and how carers could gain access to support related to Covid-19. Attention to the clarity and user-friendliness of websites would ensure that they are a more effective means of communication with carers.



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Further information

'Online advice to carers: an updated review of local authority websites in England'

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