

Meals on Wheels delivers better outcomes for recipients and carers

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About the research

As local authorities across the UK finalise their annual budget-setting processes, Meals on Wheels services are increasingly being discontinued. These closures come at a time when over 20 million adults across the country live with increasing care needs linked to age, disability, and complex physical or mental health conditions, many of whom could benefit from Meals on Wheels to help prevent their needs from getting worse.

This research presents **the first study to quantify the association between Meals on Wheels use and social care outcomes for both service recipients and unpaid carers in England.**

We analysed two major social care datasets: the Adult Social Care Survey (2010-11 to 2023-24), capturing the perspectives of adults using services (n=863,336), and the Survey of Adult Carers in England (2012-13 to 2023-24), capturing the experiences of carers of adults who receive services (n=306,860). Analyses were aligned with key measures of the [Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework \(ASCOF\)](#).

This briefing summarises evidence from the project 'Exploring the role of Meals on Wheels in social care: a mixed-method study of service provision, use, and operation'. We share these findings ahead of formal publication to support timely decision making by local authority commissioners, Meals on Wheels providers, and policymakers in adult social care. These findings echo what advocates have long claimed, that Meals on Wheels delivers system-wide value and should be treated as a core preventative component of adult social care, not an optional add-on.

Policy implications

- Policy and commissioning decisions should recognise the multiple benefits Meals on Wheels provides, including its positive impact on unpaid carers. Improving outcomes for both recipients and carers will strengthen the wider care network and support sustainable care delivery.
- Awareness-raising campaigns should highlight the broader benefits of Meals on Wheels for both users and carers beyond nutrition, including their positive impact on quality of life, social contact, and satisfaction with care services.
- Commissioners, local authorities, and Meals on Wheels providers should consider this new evidence in business cases and service planning, particularly where Meals on Wheels closures are being considered.



Graham Oliver, 2015, Lunch is served!, iStock by Getty Images

Key findings

Using fully adjusted analyses of over 1.1 million adults and carers, we found that receiving Meals on Wheels is consistently associated with better outcomes across key areas of adult social care.

For people receiving Meals on Wheels:

- More than twice as likely (118%) to be satisfied with their care and support
- 81% more likely to feel safe
- 66% more likely to report higher quality of life
- 62% more likely to report having control over daily life
- 55% more likely to report adequate social contact
- 23% more likely to find it easy to access information and advice

For unpaid carers:

- 56% more likely to feel consulted and involved in care decisions
- 45% more likely to find it easy to access information and support
- 32% more likely to report adequate social contact
- 27% more likely to be satisfied with care and support services
- 27% more likely to report higher carer-related quality of life

These findings show that Meals on Wheels supports not only the individual receiving the service, but also strengthens the wider unpaid care network.

Further information

This briefing summarises new findings from the project 'Exploring the role of Meals on Wheels in social care: a mixed-method study of service provision, use, and operation'. This study is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) School for Social Care Research (SSCR) (Grant Reference Number NIHR-SSCR-CR1). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR SSCR, NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

These findings have not yet been peer-reviewed or formally published. They are shared to support timely decision-making by local authority commissioners, Meals on Wheels providers, and policymakers in adult social care. We will update this briefing as our findings are published.

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CasarsaGuru, 2016, Hot Meal Delivery to an Elderly Woman at Home, iStock by Getty Images