

Design in Social Care Programme

Suffolk County Council Project Summary

Helping people to access advice about their care and support

Context

Local authorities receive 5,100 new requests for adult social care assistance every day. In 2018/19 these requests were from 1.3 million people across England¹. At the same time, evidence suggests that people are often confused about what social care is and who provides it with IPSOS MORI indicating that almost half of the population think social care is available free at the point of need².

Suffolk applied to the Design in Social Care Programme in 2018 to explore ways in which they could deliver a more personalised approach to the information and advice relating to care and support. They were keen to ensure that people were able to take more ownership over their care and support needs by being empowered through more informed choice.

The challenge

Over 800 people a day contact Suffolk County Council for information on areas relating to care and support. The majority of these are through direct enquiries made by carers, friends and relatives.

Similar to other councils, Suffolk has been looking at ways to improve the front-door of adult social care whilst at the same time the council has been adopting more of a strengths based approach to care which engages people around their goals and aims, building on the personal and community assets they have available.

Suffolk used the Design in Social Care programme to help them better understand people's experiences of accessing information and advice and to explore areas where they might be able to change aspects of the service.

What they did

The team from Suffolk involved people working in social care, the customer service centre team and the digital team. Suffolk were keen that there was a range of people within a multi-disciplinary team with different perspectives to encompass the whole of someone's journey through all channels from initial contact to outcome.

¹ NHS Digital 2018: <https://digital.nhs.uk/news-and-events/latest-news/local-authorities-receive-5100-new-requests-for-adult-social-care-assistance-a-day>

² IPSOS MORI 2017: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/public-perceptions-austerity-social-care-and-personal-data>

The Design in Social Care programme helped Suffolk by giving them some tools and techniques from which to consider the problem they were addressing.

The discovery involved both a mixture of semi-structured in-depth interviews (around an hour in length) with 19 people from across the county. This was supplemented by an online survey which gained over 170 responses providing quantitative feedback.

Suffolk used a range of techniques from the Design in Social Care programme such as personas to help them understand the different types of people who are seeking information and advice from the council.

Supportive Stephen

Summary

- Elderly parents live in Lowestoft, who he visits monthly and phones weekly
- Parents have dementia and mobility issues

Day-to-day life

- Works full time
- Has a smartphone and uses Facebook

Challenges

- Staying on top of his own commitments as well as being the main support for his parents
- Finding local support for his parents in their area
- Doesn't understand the adult social care system

Needs

- Information on what

Carol the Carer

Summary

- Main support for her elderly mum who has dementia
- Juggles being a family carer, mum and employee

Day-to-day life

- Financially well-off
- Works part time
- Family carer for her mum, who lives in her home

Challenges

- Spending enough time for herself and family commitments
- Finding a healthy work/life balance
- Physical demands of being a carer

Needs

- Respite carer breaks, as she hasn't had a holiday in years
- Advice and support on arranging care options for her mum with dementia

Network

- Husband and teenage children
- Sue Ryder for dementia support
- GP
- Community support

What they found

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Suffolk found that **very few people understood what social care is or provides**. People were not always clear they may need to pay for care in the future and weren't always as well informed as they could be to make choices about their own care needs or that of their family. Where people did have some knowledge of social care they often had predefined expectations of what this meant in practice. The need therefore for improved provision of accessible information was seen as essential.

The team also found that the right information needed to be accessible to people before any crisis point was reached, and this meant having information available for people that don't know about or aren't engaged in social care.

Prototyping solutions and next steps

Two ideas emerged as part of the ideation work on the Design in Social Care programme.

The first was the **concept of a digital assistant** that can improve the online provision of information and advice but in a way that is tailored towards people. This links to what the team learned about their persona groups – particularly Supportive Stephen who is comfortable with use of technology and is seeking support on behalf of someone else (like a parent).

Using artificial intelligence, the digital assistant would harvest information from a range of online resources and present it back in a conversational way. The research identified that people wanted reassurance and confidence about subjects that can often be sensitive and emotive. Where digital was seen as a solution people preferred less static information and more conversational tools that could provide relevant information and advice tailored to the person.

As this first prototype develops Suffolk will be looking at how they measure success by asking people at the end of their conversation through the digital assistant about whether their query has been resolved and whether they can improve the effectiveness of the offer.



The second idea that emerged was that Suffolk needed to spend more time in helping people understand what they could expect, what the council would expect from them and whether they were delivering the right messages in the right places. The research identified old materials in the public domain with out of date information. **Co-designing an engagement strategy** which looks at the information provided is something the council intends to prototype and develop with people receiving care.

Both of these prototypes are now forming part of the Council's overall demand management programme whilst the user research and developed personas are being used to inform wider work within the council.

Overall Suffolk has valued support across the programme particularly in conducting and analysing user research which have helped them to better understand the challenges that people accessing social care experience. The team is now using the service design approach in other areas of social care change work within the council.