

SCDIP Discovery Phase – Richmond and Wandsworth Councils

The Richmond and Wandsworth Councils team aims to improve the provision of information, advice and support to carers to improve their wellbeing across these two London Boroughs.

Improving carers' access to information and advice

The context

Unpaid carers provide an invaluable service that ensures the continued health and wellbeing of those they care for. However, they face difficulties in accessing relevant information, dealing with assessments, and find it challenging having to liaise with a variety of professionals to get answers to their questions. It is estimated that three in five people will become carers at some point in their lives, however the caring role is often misunderstood or undervalued in society, which can lead to carers feeling isolated or overlooked. The aim of this project was to explore how technology can help us to support carers in their roles and ensure that they are better connected to communities and have a better understanding of the local offer of support.

The challenge

Due to carers facing challenges in gaining information and advice to help them in their caring role and access to support, the project team focussed on addressing the problem question: *“How can technology support the identification and provision of information, advice and support to carers?”*.

What did the project involve?

During the discovery phase the Richmond and Wandsworth project team conducted a wide range of research including:

- user research (through attendance at events, online consultation and follow up interviews)
- attending carers week events in June 2019
- workshops to develop ideas
- a vote on which idea to take forward
- engagement of a technical partner to help with design and implementation.

Stakeholder engagement and user research

Stakeholder engagement has taken the form of user interviews with carers and those new to caring, and a workshop focused on pulling together the user views and selecting the chatbot prototype (a chatbot is a piece of software that conducts a conversation via sound/speech or text). The chatbot solution offers a single access point available 24 hours per day, seven days per week that the carer can interact with as frequently as needed and at a time that is convenient to them. As a virtual agent, it can offer support to multiple concurrent users, and is not restricted to working hours, so that advice can be provided whenever the carer needs help. The selection process was heavily influenced by user research, which was conducted through:

- 16 interviews with carers
- eight expert interviews
- a moderated focus group
- a visit to a carer peer support group.



Benefits of the proposed solution

The following benefits were realised from discovery phase:

- a clear understanding of what information, advice, support and services carers are looking for locally and some of the access challenges;
- a better understanding of how councils can support carers and how carers want to be supported by developing a technical solution with input from multiple stakeholders;
- ability to demonstrate/make the case for the value of the chatbot solution.

The likely benefits from the implementation phase include:

- carers receive personalised information and advice when they want, helping them to better look after their own health and wellbeing, have greater peace of mind that the person they care for will be safe if something goes wrong, have a better understanding of local support available for carers and the person they care for, reducing their potential feelings of isolation.

Key strengths of the project

- **stakeholder engagement:** the project had collected evidence which supports the anecdotal finding on the challenges that carers face in access to information and advice;
- **partnership development:** the team successfully engaged a technical partner (Accenture) to support the design and implementation of the project, including the workshops;
- **collaborative working:** the project team were able to work across two boroughs; as a result, relationships have been strengthened and they are working together collaboratively to produce creative solutions;
- **innovation:** the initial approach of building and validating a prototype has provided the basis on which the chatbot's capacity and capability can be developed.



The potential impact

The team have achieved what they were hoping for from the discovery phase and have developed a logic model to guide the implementation phase and to help in quantifying the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts which are likely to result from the delivery of this project. A number of key measures of impact have been identified:

- improved access to information about local support services for carers
- carers having access to more personalised advice to look after their own health and wellbeing
- an increased number of carers accessing respite through council services
- an increase in the number of referrals to the carers' centres
- an increase in number of carers identified by health and social care staff in the local area and increased number of carers assessments
- an increase in the number of carers accessing support groups and other activities that will reduce isolation.

Challenges to delivery and lessons learned

1. due to the wider carers project across the councils there are multiple initiatives across both Richmond and Wandsworth and the same people are often working on several projects
2. Carer Centres are mostly staffed by a small team and/or volunteers meaning there are time and resource restrictions when engaging them
3. there were complexities in working across two different boroughs due to their different ways of working, doubling the number of stakeholders to engage
4. the timescale for the discovery phase was also a barrier, limiting time available for prototyping and testing
5. many residents who the Council view as carers do not define themselves as such, something that needs to be considered when marketing services.

What would you do differently?

A lesson learned was to schedule and hold workshops earlier. There was the feeling that development didn't progress in a linear way, that there was an element of "going round in circles" on ideas and implementation. Focus on the problem statement at an earlier stage would have ensured a more structured approach to the development stage. Additionally, the team suggested that they would like to have developed clearer timescales for the different phases of their project, i.e. research, prototyping and testing.

Next steps, including sustainability and spread

The team feel there is significant potential to scale up and licence a product for wider use, building up to a full chatbot that provides advice and information to carers nationally. There are plans to use social media to promote the work and increase the future engagement of carers across Richmond and Wandsworth initially with plans to expand further. There is future potential to bring in Artificial Intelligence to further refine and improve the advice and information provided to carers about the support and activities available in their local area.

Contact details

- Nadine Hassler: nadine.hassler@richmondandwandsworth.gov.uk
- Steve Shaffelburg: steve.shaffelburg@richmondandwandsworth.gov.uk

Link to relevant documents

Richmond and Wandsworth Councils Discovery Phase review report:

<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Richmond%20and%20Wandsworth%20Discovery%20Phase%20Review.pdf>