

Principles for the provision of information and advice



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Councils have a duty to commission a wide range of services to improve the general health and wellbeing of their local population. This includes a responsibility to ensure that all residents have access to comprehensive information and advice about care and support services in their local area that is accurate, accessible, of high quality and locally relevant.

The duty to provide information, updated under the Care Bill that entered Parliament in May 2013, recognises that people increasingly expect to make decisions for themselves about the services they use and that good information is at the heart of good decision-making, and it enables people to maintain control over their lives. Key decision factors in care and support are known to be availability, affordability, suitability, quality and safety.

The Bill states that councils must provide information on the range and type of care and support services available, the process for accessing these services, where to obtain independent financial advice, and how to raise concerns about the safety and wellbeing of someone who has care and support needs.

Councils need to develop a culture of information-sharing and an information and advice strategy that encompasses all of these factors.

Who are these principles for?

This document sets out some key principles for the provision of publically available information on care and support to enable councils to fulfil their role set out in the Bill. It is not a 'how to' guide for information providers. Instead, it offers a short practical framework of the main issues that councils need to consider when developing a local care and support information and advice strategy that is comprehensive coherent, and useful rather than a collection of separate initiatives. The strategy should be supported by simple tools that can be used to help information providers ensure that people have access to information that enables them to make the best decisions for themselves and their families.

The principles

Information about care and support in a specific area should:

Involve people who use services and carers in determining what is needed and how it is provided. Local information strategies need to involve people who are looking for information on adult social care services, to ensure that what is being provided meets their needs. People who use services and carers should be involved from an early stage in the design of local information services, and should then have the opportunity to give feedback. This feedback should be integral to the council's evaluation of its adult social care information strategy.

Be available at the right time for people who need it, in a range of formats and through a range of channels. Information must be readily available at the points in people's lives when it is most needed for example, as they get older, when they become unwell, when they acquire caring responsibilities and when they experience bereavement. Information should be available wherever people are likely to look for it. This will include online, face to face, via telephone call centres and across the community in places such as Citizens' Advice Bureaus, libraries, community centres and health centres.

Meet the needs of all groups. Councils must consider the language, communication and cultural needs of everyone in the community they serve. They must find ways of ensuring that information is accessible to people with sensory impairments and people who lack capacity. They must consider how people who are socially excluded, isolated or housebound can access information about care and support services.

Be clear, comprehensive and impartial.

Information should help people understand the adult social care system and enable them to navigate their way through it. It should help them understand their options, including what they are entitled to and what is available in their area. It should be clearly designed to be understood by the public and to be of practical use. It should avoid jargon and be written in plain English. It should be clear what care and support is available and which organisations are responsible for providing the service.

Be consistent, accurate and up-to-date.

Councils must develop mechanisms to ensure that information provided in different formats and through different channels is consistent, accurate and up to date so that people have confidence in it. There should be clear lines of ownership accountability and responsibility for maintaining information.

Meet quality standards. Councils should be confident that social care information provided to people in their area as part of their information strategy is good quality. The Information Standard is one example of a recognised 'quality mark' for health and social care information, and verifies that material is accurate, accessible, balanced, evidence-based and well-written. Councils may wish to develop their own local quality assurance and evaluation schemes. Any quality assurance schemes adopted should be used consistently on all public information.

Be based on a detailed analysis of the needs of the local population served by the council. It is the council's job, with its partners, to identify the needs of the whole population and the likely pattern of future adult social care need – regardless of whether the council will be funding this care. The local authority should also know

what it is like to be an individual looking for social care and support services in their area, and where the problematic 'pinch points' are. This will enable commissioners to see where the information gaps are, and either commission specific new information or ensure that existing information is made available at the points where it is most needed, from trusted sources in the community.

Be commissioned in tandem with advice, support and advocacy services. Councils have a responsibility to ensure that information is readily available both for people who are likely to be eligible for council funding and for those who will have to fund care services themselves. Good information enables people to understand their options and make choices, and is a key preventive service.

Avoid reinventing the wheel. Information should be commissioned, managed and delivered locally – but that should not mean replicating what is already available. Councils should draw on existing, good quality information from national sources wherever this is applicable locally (for example on national registered services, benefits or specific health conditions). They should also audit and evaluate what is available before commissioning something new. And they should not expect to create or write every piece of information about local services: the key is to know what is available and create links, so that people can easily find what they are looking for.

Signpost people to sources of further information. An effective local information strategy will be clear about what information can be provided by which organisation, and where people should go if they need to know

more. It is essential that local social care information links with wider sources of information, across professional and organisational boundaries, on benefits, health, housing, employment, education, leisure and other services. Signposting is a vital function, but it must be done effectively and must not result in people being lost to the system or making poor decisions because of a lack of information. Councils will need to monitor this, to ensure that people get the assistance they need and do not hit brick walls.

Be used to inform future planning. The use of information should be evaluated, to make sure it is effective and meeting people's needs. That evaluation should then feed back into the planning processes of council, health bodies and other partners through Joint Strategic Needs Assessments, Health and Well-Being Boards, and other forums.

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