



Reimagine Local Government

Time for the Care Act to deliver



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“So you have to engage the frontline staff in the vision: how to fix a broken system. Because if anyone knows it’s broken, it’s them.”



- Momentum behind last year's Care Act risks stalling
- Councils struggling to create an accessible care market with well-informed consumers
- Local authorities must improve digital presence and engage providers
- Austerity need not be an impediment to progress. It could be an enabler

It is now 12 months since the initial implementation of the Care Act, a legislative success many years in the making. The act spoke of fair and equal access to support services, of vibrant and diverse care provider markets, and of people having information about how and when to access services. Put simply, it was to be generational change in the foundations of social care.

In the run up to its implementation, local councils focused intensively on what the act would mean for them. Directors and professional leaders sought to ensure their colleagues understood how services would need to change and a momentum built behind the changes.

Stalled progress

A year later, there is a real risk this momentum has stalled. Instead of surveying a diverse care market, we read headlines about providers considering an exit from the sector. Council websites are filled with pages about getting recycling bins or parking permits, but little about how to have a grab rail installed so you can stay in your home safely. For now, the vision of the Care Act largely feels just that: a vision rather than a reality.

It would be a real shame if that remained the case. The idea of councils as responsive organisations, guiding people to the best care, is the correct one. It is not only right for the wellbeing of our population, it is right in today's financially-constrained public sector. Less resources are forcing councils to consider making more radical changes to care, as they have already made to other services.

First, councils should strike a new deal with local people – making it clear both sides have a responsibility to maintain people's independence and wellbeing. That means everyone acting quickly when long-term care starts to be needed. People have to raise the issue before reaching the point where they need care at home, and councils need to respond with accurate advice about local services.

The need for digital

Second, to do that, councils must raise their digital game. People need to be able to visit a council website and find details of all the services available – voluntary, health and social. Some councils have done a good job of building directories. But often, they build portals which redirect users to other sites rather than offering immediate personalised information and advice.

Convening power

All of this costs money. Councils can raise some from a council tax precept, but that will not be enough to sustain the existing care system. A good place to start would be to bringing all major local care providers together into one room – not to drive down prices even lower but to work out how to help providers thrive, support new services coming to market and to create a digital platform offering access to these new services.

To promote a sustainable care system councils could choose to invest in training for specific staff groups, building investment in health technology into their economic growth plan, or working with schools to develop better ways to keep young people healthy.

The solutions are not necessarily expensive, but the benefits could be huge and lasting. They could be the foundation of the new era promised by the Care Act.

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