

How Shropshire Council worked with Mobilise to pilot digital support for unpaid carers

We started just at the start of the pandemic last year: we felt that we did have permission in a weird way to try something new.

Our partnership has been based on short term commitment but now we are in a position where we are just about to put out a tender for this kind of work for the next couple of years because we believe in it and if it works in somewhere like Shropshire with our terrible broadband and our population, it can work anywhere.

We're a group of carers essentially who've come together to launch Mobilise. Lots of us have personal experience of care and our mission is to use technology to reach a much larger number of carers than has previously been possible, really focus on early stage preventative support that we can offer and crucially think about how we can mobilise the knowledge, the wisdom and expertise that's already within the carer community being able to share all that they've learned from care and using technology to do that.

Particularly through the coronavirus. It's been really valuable to look at online technologies for supporting carers we've been working with seven local authorities around the country but also with the NHS as well.

We've been working with Shropshire for the last year now to look at how digital tools could aid carers in Shropshire region. We use this digital marketing approach to proactively identify carers. We target them, we nudge them through the journey with various messages.

Something you can do with a digital channel is actually look at the patterns of behaviour, collect a lot of data around people's journey through the system, what people are looking at, also collect a lot of demographic data from interactions without lots of forms - which carers hate filling in all the time - and then we can share lots of local information with them as well.

We've been able to reach through mobile and digital technologies thousands more carers. It's really been successful in making people feel that they are not alone, they don't have to cope by themselves, there are other people out there they can reach out to and get help from.

When the carer is with Mobilise, if the Mobilise staff feel they need some more traditional support, more face-to-face support, then they will refer them on to us - obviously with the carer's permission - and we're always referring people to Mobilise for that preventative support. We do work very closely with members of the Mobilise team, share ideas and suggestions. Sometimes the support is provided jointly, as in the case of the email course which linked into something that we developed in Shropshire.

The information that we've had from Mobilise, all that data and demographic information really helps us to target where we can give the support and what sort of support we should be giving.

I was just thinking about the importance of having something to signpost people to whilst they're waiting for their assessment, the carers' assessment or any kind of assessment, and Mobilise is a very engaging and useful place to signpost people to while they are in that limbo period of being told 'yes, it sounds like you need to talk to us, but we can't talk to you for three weeks'.

So we built in some information and training sessions working very closely with Margarete and the Carers' support team at Shropshire Council, raising awareness about unpaid carers, signposting to services in the local area, and a bespoke email course where carers could learn about building resilience, learning about what their entitlements were, what's the best access to information and advice, that they wouldn't have had in the past.

What the carers in Shropshire are saying is that it's good for them to be part of a group. And sometimes they'll be more open about their situation to other carers. Sometimes talking to a health professional or a social worker they feel they can't explain their whole situation or the terminology is not right for them.

So we get a lot of feedback where people come with problems and issues but when they finish that conversation they've said 'that's really helped' so they finish on a positive note.

We set targets of around some two and a half thousand carers to reach and we actually doubled them. There were so many people that wanted to get in touch and look at the information that was available on the Mobilise platform and those engagements and interactions, people actually signing up, for the e-support and those types of carers allowance forms details that was actually exceeded as well. Those detailed support interactions where people are having those one-to-one calls, joining in the Zoom cups where they're discussing their issues face to face, we got more people in those groups as well.

So we find that people are actually switching across to digital in large numbers. It's much more cost-effective to reach that group at scale by offering this type of digital approach hand-in-hand with some of those face-to-face services.

The Mobilise platform is actually reaching much younger group of carers than some of the traditional services were. A lot of those working age or young adult carers don't always have the time or flexibility to actually attend face to face sessions so they really found these services flexible by looking at them whenever they wanted.

56% of Shropshire interactions actually happened outside of the Monday to Friday 9 to 5. Giving that sort of 24/7 coverage gives people a lot more time to be able to choose when they want to interact with the carers service.

A lot more male carers were using the online service.

The mobile aspect is really critical as the majority of people actually using the mobile service are doing it through their smartphone and we know that 92% of the UK population has

access to a smartphone so if you design a service with phone as the primary point of contact that's how you actually interact with many many more carers.

Is there any evidence to suggest that carers' needs are being met at the point of contact with you, not necessarily coming through to the local authority for a fuller assessment?

I think a lot of the people who are coming through to the Mobilise platform may be people who need light touch support, maybe not the people with very complex needs. We try and intervene much earlier so we have that preventative approach and the number of referrals through to adult social services are actually very very small.

So the thousands of carers we are dealing with actually coming to the site, sometimes they're looking at a guide - it could be around caring for someone living with dementia or caring for a child with autism and they pick up the piece of information that they want at that time and that's often enough for them. We free up capacity sometimes for the adult social services by answering those questions at an earlier stage

Yes, although we have had an increase in carers' assessments, people who have been looking on the Mobilise site we haven't got those sort of numbers coming through for carers' assessments or carer's support. So whatever information they are getting and the contact with Mobilise is obviously enough for what they want at the moment.