



# Finding information about adult social care support

for an adult in Bucks

April 2025



## What we did

We talked with senior adult social care staff at Buckinghamshire Council and looked at the social care feedback and signposting we responded to in 2024. We decided to look at the first stage of many people's journey into looking for care or support for an adult – finding what's available and how to get it. There are various ways to access this information. We agreed a mystery shopping exercise would help identify what worked well and where improvements could be made. We wanted to share this with the people who provide these services, so they could understand people's experiences of seeking care, often for the first time.

Seven volunteers and staff used fourteen scenarios to contact [Buckinghamshire Council](#), [Carers Bucks](#) and [Prevention Matters](#). Depending on which option was available, these providers were contacted by phone, chatbot and via website search. All responses were collected between 19 February and 10 March 2025.

## Key Findings

### Information and Referrals

- The Buckinghamshire Council website contains helpful information, but finding your way around could take a lot of time and be confusing. It felt like there were too many pages about adult social care and no clear pathway. The online support for caregivers offered by Mobilise wasn't easy to recognise by our mystery shoppers.
- The [Buckinghamshire Adult Care Services Directory](#) produced some good results, but also some poor ones.
- Mystery shoppers who called the Council were often directed to a care needs assessment or Occupational Therapy assessment. However, few mystery shoppers were also directed to other organisations for support when they

phoned the council or used their website. In contrast, Carers Bucks and Prevention Matters were much more likely to recommend other local and national organisations for support, no matter how people reached out to them.

- The Council's [online self-referral form](#) has a time restriction which some users may find challenging.
- Carers Bucks website had a lot of helpful information and a good search engine tool, but some visitors had trouble finding what they were looking for.
- Prevention Matters had a simple one-page website that was easy to use. It provided helpful information when they returned your phone call or replied to your email. However, they missed chances to include links to other helpful resources about adult social care on their website.

## **Technology**

- There were several broken page links on the Council website, Carer's Bucks website, and between Bridgit Care's online tool and Buckinghamshire Council website.

## **Communication**

- Most calls to the Council were answered quickly. All calls to Carers Bucks were answered right away. However, when we called Prevention Matters, our calls went to voicemail, although they were all answered within 24 hours. Any emails we sent to Prevention Matters received a quick response.
- All staff, in all three organisations, were professional and polite. However, in two calls to the Council the mystery shoppers felt the person who answered the call was not friendly or understanding.
- Use of the Council chatbot could be frustrating if there was no customer service advisor available which often happened during the working day (as well as at the weekend and in the evenings). Most of the time, the chatbot would just share the phone number or website for the adult social care team or direct you to another page on the website. It didn't feel like a good way to have a detailed conversation. The Bridgit Care chatbot also struggled, not responding to two out of three questions we asked on three different occasions.
- We occasionally came across terminology e.g. 'Early Resolution and Safeguarding Team' which we felt the public might not understand.

## **Accessibility and reasonable adjustments**

- Callers to the Council were not offered information in large print or translated in other languages even when this was requested despite this being offered on the website.
- The possibility of immediate translation of any page on the Carers Bucks website and the Bridgit Care and Mobilise online tools was very welcome. However, this only worked on mobile phones and not on laptops.

## **Digital exclusion**

- Many people find it helpful to get support online through chatbots, tools, and websites. However, some individuals may not have access to digital devices or may not be comfortable using them. These people need to be able to get information about adult social care support by phone or possibly in person. We found Prevention Matters (once a call or email was returned) provided good support for these people. However, when mystery shoppers called the Council, they felt like they were often directed to look at the website or fill out an online form, e.g. for a care needs assessment, instead of having their questions answered directly
- Alternatives to help them were rarely suggested.
- We did not find information produced by Buckinghamshire Council about looking for adult social care support in any community location we visited. For services commissioned by Buckinghamshire Council, there were a few fliers about Prevention Matters and a lot of locations had information about Carers Bucks.

## **Our recommendations**

**We have made the following recommendations to Buckinghamshire Council.**

### **Waiting Times**

- If a customer service agent (managing a chatbot), can't find the answers right away, they should post a message to let the person now know that they are still there and trying to find the information for them.

## Information & Referrals

- Remind those answering adult social care calls to look at the whole picture and refer callers to local organisations who might also be able to provide support.
- In line with the aim to reach more carers (see [Buckinghamshire All-Age Carers Strategy 2025 - 2030](#)), encourage staff, answering the phone, to explain more about who a carer is and what support is available to them.
- Make improvements to the website to improve the customer experience e.g.
  - Improve the search engine so it shows more relevant results
  - Rationalise the number of pages containing relevant information about adult social care to simplify the navigation for the public
  - Make links to information about how to get in touch with Adult Social Care more prominent. For example, to the '[Assessments](#)' page and to the [Home | Buckinghamshire Adults Care Services Directory](#) e.g. on [Homecare | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#).
  - Regularly check all website page links work.
  - Think about how to make the Mobilise advert stand out more. Consider referencing this online tool on other related web pages not just on [Support for carers, friends and family | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#)

## Accessibility & Communication

- Remind those answering adult social care calls that tone of voice, and the speed with which information is given, affects the overall experience of the caller.
- Be aware that there are still many people who do not have digital skills or devices and need more phone support and access to paper referral forms/other information. Continue to promote information about accessing adult social care through printed channels e.g. community magazines in Bucks.
- Review comments made about language and jargon. E.g. could the terminology 'Early Resolution and Safeguarding Team' be changed to something easier for members of the public to understand.
- Ensure all front facing staff on chatbots or answering phones are aware of the translation services available and advertised on the website.
- Consider adding a translation tool/plugin to the website.

- On the 'Submit a Request for Support' [online self-referral form](#) adjust the wording to ensure people are aware upfront that there is a 'save for later' button if they need more time to complete this. This would mirror the message on the [Carer Self Referral](#) page.
- Consider adding Adult Social care as an option to the chatbot 'choice' (rather than having to pick 'Something else'). If the chatbot can't connect users with a human for assistance, it could direct them to the [Contact adult social care | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) page instead of the general contact page.

#### **Work with Carers Bucks to:**

- Make sure the translation feature on the Carers Bucks and Bridgit Care websites and chatbot works on all kinds of devices.
- Reformat the Bridgit Care pop up page 'How it works' so all of it can be seen when used on a laptop.
- Ensure all links to website pages work.

#### **Work with Connection Support (Prevention Matters) to:**

- Add links to the [Buckinghamshire Adult Care Services Directory](#) to the website.
- Add other links to general adult social care information to the website.
- Enhance the existing voicemail message, to manage customer expectations, to say that they return calls within 24 hours and that they may return the call from a Milton Keynes number.

# What the project was about

## Background

When someone has an adult friend or family member needing more help with everyday tasks, they often look for extra support. It is our understanding from what we hear from Buckinghamshire residents that prior to this, most people know little about how to do this. They aren't aware of what services are available, where to find them, or who covers the costs. That's why it's essential to have clear information about the types of care available and how to get help. The NHS [Measures from the Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework 2022-23](#) shows that in the South East of England only 68.1% of people asked said it was easy to find out information about support.

Support can come from the local Council, charities, or be paid for privately. People can ask for an assessment to find out what kind of support they need or what is available to help them. Anyone is entitled to request an assessment at any time, free of charge.

After talking with senior staff in Buckinghamshire Council about a care needs assessment project, we agreed the first project should be about how people find information about adult social care. This would include everyone even if some didn't want a care assessment but just want some advice to help themselves.

We agreed to conduct a mystery shopping exercise. Some individuals may reach out to Buckinghamshire Council, while others might look for help closer to home or seek support from Carers Bucks or Prevention Matters based on what they need. Carers Bucks and Connection Support (providing the Prevention Matters service) are commissioned by Buckinghamshire Council to help caregivers and adults continue to live independently in their own homes.

It is important that people get the right information to support them to make decisions. When social care needs are not met, people's independence and health may get worse. We often hear about problems accessing clear and easily understood information about social care. We frequently get questions about how to reach adult social care departments at the Council, including their contact information. We realise that it can also be hard to locate care services and understand how social care costs are paid for. A member of the public also recently emailed us expressing concerns about when they could access support.

"I am an adult in full time employment and trying to care for an elderly relative. I haven't found any support available to me outside 'normal' business hours... There must be many others like me..."

## Our Aims

We wanted to share our findings with adult social care providers to provide them with additional insight to understand what people might experience when looking for information about social care support. We also wanted them to think about the challenges people face and how they can make accessing social care a better experience.

We expected to find out that information:

- is available but not always easily found
- about other organisations that could help is not always passed on
- is more difficult to access for some people than others.

## Methodology

We gave volunteers and staff a sheet to record the details of each call, chat with a bot (if available) or search they made on the website of Buckinghamshire Council, Carers Bucks and Prevention Matters. Sometimes, the website search resulted in an email or the use of a third party online tool. They used at least one out of fourteen scenarios covering situations in which older people or their relatives, carers or neighbours might find themselves and reach out to these organisations for information.

These scenarios included requesting information about care homes, care in the home, additional equipment and aids to help people remain in their homes and a request for a blue badge. Some scenarios also mentioned people had Parkinsons, memory, sight or mobility issues. One scenario also involved looking for information to give to someone else in a foreign language. These scenarios can be found in Appendix 1.

All contacts were made between 19 February to 10 March on different days and at different times.

## Limitations

Mystery shopping is when trained individuals (the "mystery shoppers") act as potential customers and objectively share their honest experiences using a service. With this research method, the service is unaware that the researcher is anything other than a customer. However, this methodology is limited as it only provides a snapshot of the

service for one point in time. Mystery shopping aims to improve service user experiences and the quality of the service rather than to evaluate the performance of specific employees.

## What we found

This report reflects the 60 contacts we made with Buckinghamshire Council, Prevention Matters and Carers Bucks.

Organisation	Type & Count		
	Phone	Website	Chatbot
<b>Buckinghamshire Council</b>	11	11	12
<b>Carers Bucks</b>	3	10	4
<b>Prevention Matters</b>	3	6	n/a

**Table 1 – Contacts made to each provider and type of contact**

## Buckinghamshire Council

To find information about adult social care from the Council, you can phone or email them or search their website. The latter includes a chatbot function. They have also recently added an additional online tool, provided by [Mobilise](#), to the [Support for carers, friends and family | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) web page.

“We [Mobilise] work with [Buckinghamshire Council](#) to provide a range of free online services to support you, in addition to what is already on offer.”

### Waiting times for calls /chatbot conversations to be answered / started

Most mystery shoppers found, and then phoned, the Council using the adult social care number – [01296 383 204](#). Most phone calls were picked up within 5 minutes; only two took up to 10 minutes before a person answered. Mystery shoppers did not feel calls were rushed or too long. The artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot response was immediate. Sometimes, when a customer service advisor was managing the chat, mystery shoppers were unsure whether they were still on the chat.

Sometimes it was also frustrating when the Chatbot was unable to help because there were no customer service advisors available. This only happened twice.

## Information & Referrals

The information mystery shoppers obtained, and how quickly, varied between individual, customer service advisor and type of contact.

### Phoning the Council

The quality of information provided varied across the scenarios. Getting information about applying for a blue badge was very straight forward. Most adult social care staff were also quick to suggest a care needs assessment and an occupational health assessment when appropriate. However, while many said an assessment could be done they didn't explain what it involves or why it needs to be done.

There were two excellent examples of Council staff giving a lot of information about what was available to the caller and other services that might be able to help. For example, one mystery shopper was signposted to Bucks Vision about sight loss related equipment, Age UK for help with house cleaning and gardening and Prevention Matters website for links to community groups. In these cases, the mystery shopper felt they had enough information and knew what to do next.

However, often the mystery shoppers did not receive the advice they expected. Sometimes, the staff member only heard one piece of information e.g. 'husband is getting frail' but didn't pay attention to the 'and forgetful'. They recommended a care needs assessment but didn't suggest seeing a GP for a memory check or reaching out to Carers Bucks for support.

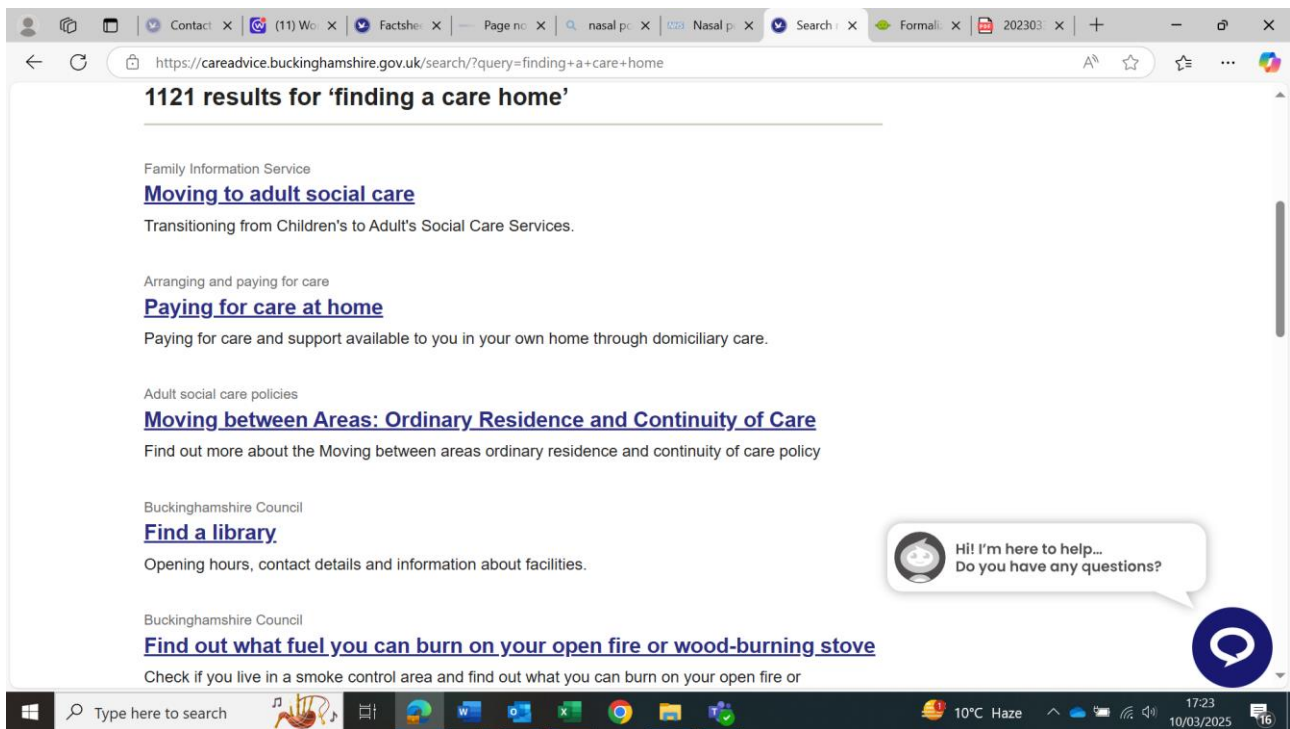
In only one call, the mystery shopper was told to also contact Carers Bucks. In only a third of calls were mystery shoppers given names of other organisations who might also be able to help them.

### The Council website

The Buckinghamshire Council website had useful information, but it was often hard to navigate your way around. Often the mystery shoppers did not always find the advice they expected for the scenario they were following.

"There must be a much easier way to navigate the countless pages."

Most mystery shoppers began their search at the [Buckinghamshire Council front page](#). Entries into the search box often returned between tens and hundreds of options many of which were not relevant. For example, entering 'finding a care home' resulted in:



If you are not sure what you are looking for this may stop you looking any further.

In another example, we searched for a 'walking frame' which again resulted in no relevant page being found.

"It brings up a lot of results – but I gave up looking for anything relevant on about page 7!"

When the same search was made on the [Buckinghamshire Adult Care Services Directory](#), 11 care homes came up but no references to any equipment.

"If I had had the funds I would have just bought one off the internet by doing a search elsewhere as no company came up in the Care Directory. And I would not have known that I could have asked for a care needs assessment or known anything about this."

However, when a search was made directly on the [Buckinghamshire Adult Care Services Directory](#) for many other scenarios, including for personal alarms and care homes, the results generated were very relevant.

"I entered 'care home' in the key word box, 10 miles in distance and Amersham in location. 142 results came back which I could filter by residential or nursing care home. Each entry had a name, phone no, email address, address and website."

However, this directory is not always easy to find especially if you don't know it exists.

"There is a lot of good information if you get to the Care Service Directory, but that's a big 'if'."

Not all mystery shoppers found the information they wanted. There were often many different ways to arrive at the same destination which meant searches were often time consuming or resulted in information not being found. Some mystery shoppers spent 30 to 45 minutes looking for what they needed, while others decided to stop because they thought it wasn't available.

"It felt like potluck to get to the relevant part of the Council website."

For those who tried all options they were often surprised to find they found information on one route that was not available via another. In the example below, the assumption is that the person looking for information knows a care needs assessment exists.

Option 1: I started on [Helping you to live independently | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#). This page looks relevant and useful. I then chose to go to [Could I benefit from Occupational Therapy? | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#). Here, there is a nice video of how OT can help over and above 'care at home' and the differences in keeping independent. And the next page [Equipment to help me stay independent at home | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) is also useful. None of these pages however mentions care needs assessments. I also looked at [Homecare | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) which was useful. But the only application form on this page was financial assessment. "Residents who think they need support can request an assessment from our social care team. You can do this online, or over the phone." But the links to get this information are at the bottom of the page and were not obvious to our mystery shopper.

Option 2: I started on [Care and support | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) This has useful high level information but an additional click needed to get to [Care Advice Buckinghamshire | Care Advice](#). From here I typed in "Care assessment for sight loss" The top find was [Better Lives Strategy | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) Again, it was not obvious to our mystery shoppers how to apply or ask for an assessment to be carried out although there are contact details in the footer.

I finally found [Our adult social care services | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) and chose [Care and support | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) before I moved to [Care and support | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#)"

"The layout of the webpages is good, i.e. not too much info or jargon, however there are too many clicks to get where you think you might want to go."

However, if the mystery shopper found the directory they commented that often the quality of the information found was very good.

"It's comprehensive, reasonably well written and clear. "

However, most mystery shoppers agreed that this was irrelevant if it wasn't always easily, quickly or ever found. Sometimes, mystery shoppers could not retrace their steps and find information they had found earlier that day. For example, one mystery shopper struggled to find the link [Safe and Well - Buckinghamshire](#) again, but instead found a new link to [Equipment for the home | Carers UK](#) that they hadn't found before.

"The website is an actual nightmare and very confusing for anyone trying to navigate."

The [Care Act 2014](#) requires the Council to provide people with information and advice relating to care and support for adults. The Council should assess adults who seem to need care and support, no matter how much money they have or if they qualify for that help. We found some helpful links on the website with Adult Social Care contact details or the [Online Self-Referral](#). However, there were other pages like [Assessments | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) where we thought the Adult Social Care contact details or the online self-referral form should have been added without having to click through further.

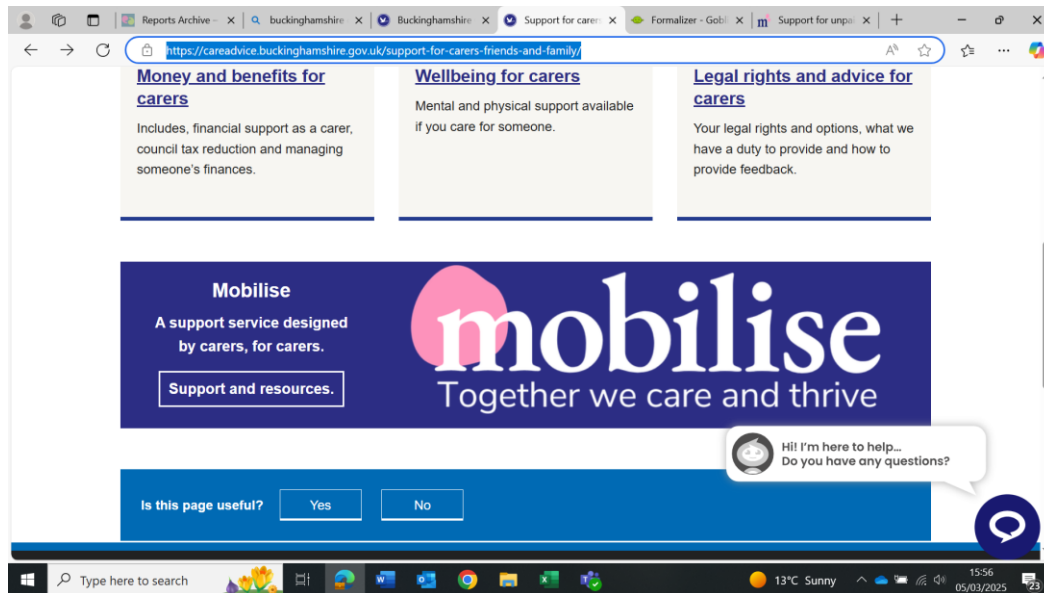
Some mystery shoppers felt that having to create an account might put people off completing the online self-referral. Also, depending on what information was required to complete this form, another message that could be off putting was

'The form will take 10 - 15 minutes to complete depending on the amount of information you need to provide. Please be aware for security reasons your session will timeout after 20 minutes of inactivity. The form will not have saved if the session times out.'

### **Mobilise online support tool**

**Mobilise** provides specialist support through various online tools that connect you to a network of carers, online support sessions and one to one support. Mystery shoppers like their 'Help & guides' and 'Blog' sections. We did not come across any language we could not understand or jargon.

Before we found out about this online tool in the spring edition of the Council's 'Your Bucks' magazine, three mystery shoppers had visited the Council's website where this service is promoted. None of them noticed the service, even though it was clearly visible at the bottom of the page. In a debrief, we concluded it was possibly because it was (a) blue like the footer and (b) it was not clear you could click on it and get more help if you were a carer. It also only appears on this one website page.

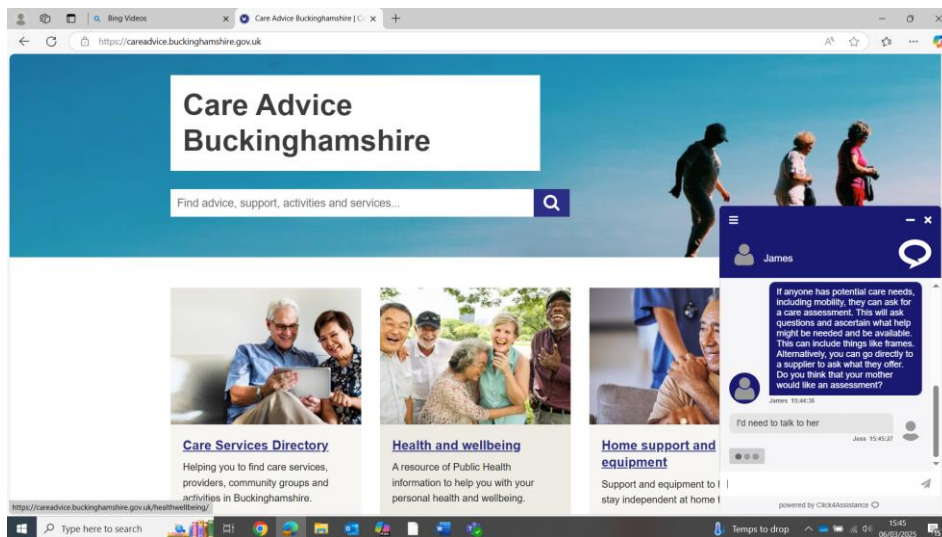


A key issue for our mystery shoppers was the requirement to register/log in to the online tool and give consent if they wanted to use the **Mobilise Assistant** (a chatbot). This may stop some people going any further. Some wondered why collecting (a) an email address and (b) postcode was necessary when (a) nothing was subsequently sent to them and (b) they came from a Buckinghamshire Council website onto a branded Buckinghamshire Mobilise platform.

The information provided by the Mobilise Assistant was often very general and mostly directed the mystery shopper back to the Council website they had visited before.

### The Council website chatbot

It was felt that when the chatbot was operated by a human the information given was relevant. One person commented on what they thought was a very good explanation of an adult social care assessment when they asked for an explanation.



However, when there was no human available, the chatbot told the individual to go to the general [Contact the council | Buckinghamshire Council](#) page.

"This ironically offers you a 'Chat with us' function as its first option. Went instead to [Other ways to contact us | Buckinghamshire Council](#) where again the chat function is offered but not available.... Have to either fill in a general enquiry form or ring a general phone number. Felt I'd gone backwards not forwards."

Mystery shoppers felt that it should at least direct callers to an adult social care page such as [Contact adult social care | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#).

The chatbot responses were not always consistent even when similar scenarios were given. Half the 'chats' sent the mystery shopper immediately to the Early Resolution and Safeguarding Team and half gave them a website page link. In one 'chat' about respite care, the person was told to ring the Adult Social Care team while the other 'chat' redirected the person to the [Take a break from your caring role | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) 'page on the Council website. The latter whilst informative gave no direct link to the [Home | Buckinghamshire Adults Care Services Directory](#) if the mystery shopper had wanted to organise and pay for their own respite care rather than going through the carers assessment process.

Consensus was also that a 'chat' with a bot is meant to be short which is not ideal if you have lots of questions.

"I did feel like I couldn't keep asking questions, as they repeated the suggestion to contact the Early Resolution team again – 'they will be able to help you' – felt like they were shutting down the chat"

Sometimes, it took a while to get answers from the chatbot, with conversations lasting around 15 minutes. This seemed like a long time just to be sent to a couple of pages on a website, leaving users to search for the answers themselves. Mystery shoppers felt that some people might become frustrated and stop using the chatbot altogether. Also it seemed that you could only get a copy of the chat if you filled out a feedback form, and most mystery shoppers didn't know about this requirement.

*"An offer of a transcript would have been really useful."*

Again there were very few signposts to Carers Bucks or other useful local organisations.

## Technology

Some of the links on the website were broken. These included the following:

- Accessing the 'Getting support and care guide' from the [Online Self-Referral](#) page resulted in this error page [| Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#).
- Accessing 'Technology to help me live independently' from this search page [Search results for "personal alarms" | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) resulted in this error page [| Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) rather than [Technology to help me live independently | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#). The link worked from other pages.

## Accessibility and reasonable adjustments

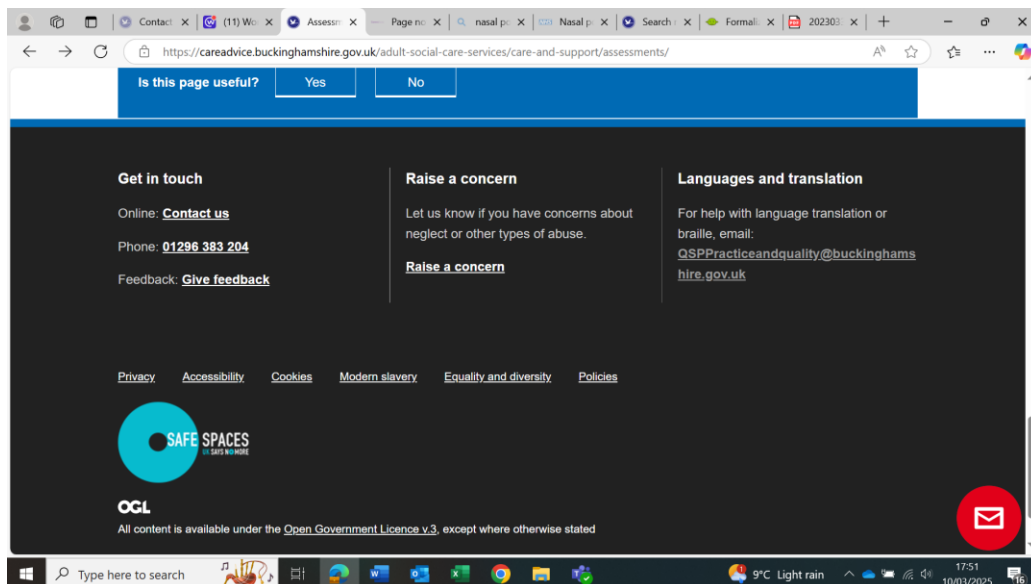
### Phoning the Council

When asked if there was information about assessments in a format that a relative with glaucoma could read themselves, the adult social care staff member said unfortunately there was not. The caller was not offered anything in larger print.

Neither were mystery shoppers offered any options for any support in a foreign language when this was requested. This is despite the statement on [Factsheets | Care Advice Buckinghamshire](#) page of the website stating

'If you would like any of these factsheets in a larger print, in braille or translated, please email: [QSPPracticeandquality@buckinghamshire.gov.uk](mailto:QSPPracticeandquality@buckinghamshire.gov.uk)'

The offer of translation support is also made on the footer of many of the Care Advice Buckinghamshire pages.



## The Council website

We did not always find references to information about translation and interpreting support on every adult care services webpage. Although it is on many it is not, for example, on the footer of [Care for adults | Buckinghamshire Council](#)

## Mobilise online support tool

The translation plug-in could translate their pages into 16 languages if you accessed it from a mobile phone, but it didn't work from a laptop.

## Communication with clients (including staff attitude, feeling listened to)

### Phoning the Council

How the call was managed could make the mystery shopper's experience better or worse. One mystery shopper said that on one call too much information was being given out too quickly. They had to ask the staff member to slow down by saying they were taking notes. This made it hard for them to think and ask questions about what they had just heard.

There were two excellent examples where people felt the staff member went out of their way to support the caller.

"The call handler was clear and patient and listened to what I was saying."

There were also two calls where the mystery shoppers felt the staff member was not very friendly or understanding. This related to callers who were digitally excluded.

"It is clear to say, that most of these people are just at the end of the phone to redirect you, regardless of your needs."

However, everyone agreed that all the calls were conducted in a professional and polite way.

The Adult Social Care team phone number, or any Council phone number, was not always on every web page through a mystery shopper's journey.

### The Council chatbot

Mystery shoppers noted that their conversations with the chatbot were professional, friendly, and polite.

"Friendly, trying hard to be helpful – gave phone numbers to call, said I could contact again."

Some questions got quick answers, but many shoppers found themselves wondering if the bot was still there because of slow responses. Most felt the service wasn't very personal, often getting directed to a website or advised to call Adult Social Care instead.

### Language and jargon across website, chatbot and phone calls

In about 25% of our searches, we came across terms that some people might not understand. For instance, the phrase "Early Resolution and Safeguarding Team" is used on [one of the pages](#) more frequently visited by our mystery shoppers as well as on the [Online Self-Referral](#) and by the Chatbot. However, we also noticed this team is mentioned as Adult Social Care in other places, which many people find easier to understand. The worry is that someone looking for information might hesitate to call because they don't see their issue as fitting under "early resolution" or "safeguarding".

On the **website**, sometimes a care needs assessment is called a Better Lives assessment which we found confusing. Mystery shoppers also commented that the adult social care staff on the **phone** assumed that everyone understood specific terms, which might not be the case for everyone. The main one was the use of 'OT' rather than 'occupational therapy'.

### Cost and funding of services

In most phone calls, the need for a financial assessment was mentioned but not in all. In these cases, the staff member always referred to the individual being entitled to help

from the Council if the individual had less than £23K in savings, and that they would be self-funding if they had over that amount.

## Technology

One mystery shopper said that the text on the chatbot is too small for them to read. They weren't sure how to make it bigger.

## Digital exclusion

The Good Foundation report (Sept 2024) [Digital inclusion: What the main UK datasets tell us](#) states that [4% of adults are offline](#) (c2.1m); [15% of whom are under 50 years old](#) (c310k). [Age UK report Facts and figures about digital inclusion and older people](#) (June 2024) stated 18% of people aged 65 & over, around 2.3m, do not use the internet.

People who don't use technology much and those who don't see themselves as caregivers are more likely to call Buckinghamshire Council for help. However, we noticed that customer service advisors, whether on the chatbot or in the adult social care team, often told callers to visit the website to get the information they needed.

"You need to look online really"

However, one mystery shopper, having been referred to the website, was patiently talked through the process screen by screen.

"From the welcome to Bucks Council page with the trees and snow on it, click on Care for Adults and then Factsheets."

But another reported that the person they spoke to was not willing to help them navigate the site.

During one phone call, a Council staff member kindly informed the caller that their GP could request a care needs assessment for them if they couldn't do it online. However, during other calls, when the mystery shopper said they had neither digital devices nor knowledge, no one suggested this option. When they asked to have the form mailed to them, two mystery shoppers were told that there wasn't a paper version available. However, in another call, the mystery shopper was told that they could send information in the post, but they 'normally' email a link.

The development of the online support for carers via Mobilise, and its Mobilise Assistant, provides more support to those willing or able to use a digital device. However, it does not help those who lack access to these or the skills to use them. So, it's important to

have access to information that isn't just online, especially for people who use Adult Social Care services.

## Mystery Shopper Satisfaction

Mystery shoppers rated each contact based on their experience. The feedback for the Council can be seen in Table 2. Overall, 56% of experiences were rated satisfactory or very satisfactory.

Type of Contact	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Not satisfied	Unsatisfied	Total
Phone	2	3	3	3	11
Website	1	6	2	2	12
Chatbot	1	6	3	2	11
Total	4	15	8	7	34

**Table 2 – Satisfaction levels of mystery shoppers after contact with the Council**

We also asked mystery shoppers to comment on what was done well and what could be improved. Their suggestions informed our recommendations.

Mystery shoppers were satisfied when:

- on the phone, they felt listened to, emails were sent when promised and they were given good information
- the chatbot was quick to respond and sent useful links to the Council website.
- they could find the information on the website which they thought was clear and well written. They also liked the Buckinghamshire Care Services Directory if they found it and it returned relevant options.

Mystery shoppers suggested the following improvements:

- On the phone, refer callers to other relevant organisations e.g. Carers Bucks, direct callers to translations or large print information, and ensure callers are digitally able before pushing them to the website.
- Develop the chatbot further to enable adult social care chats to occur when staff are not available or out of hours.
- Provide better navigation and search options on the website and fewer adult social care pages so that finding information takes less time.

## Carers Bucks

“An adult carer is someone aged 18+ looking after a family member, friend or neighbour who is disabled or ill, has poor mental health, is frail or has an addiction.”

While most of our scenarios did lend themselves to accessing this service, mystery shoppers were unclear how many people would see themselves as carers if this was a real life situation. Many still perceive unpaid carers as those who live with the cared for person rather than family members, friends or neighbours providing ongoing support in some way. The challenge to spread the message about who is a carer is recognised by the [Buckinghamshire All-Age Carers Strategy 2025 - 2030](#).

Carers Bucks have recently added a Bridgit Care online support tool for unpaid carers and a Bridgit Care chatbot option. Both are accessed from the website's front page [Carers Bucks | Dedicated to supporting carers - Carers Bucks](#).

### Waiting times for calls / chatbot conversations to be answered / started

**Phone calls** were answered promptly and the mystery shoppers felt they could spend as much time as they needed on the call.

The **Bridgit Care chatbot** worked very successfully for two mystery shoppers. The initial response was quick although both waited over 5 minutes for a personalised response to a question. However, two people were unsatisfied because the chatbot did not respond to their question. Screen shots can be seen in Appendix 2.

### Information & referrals

All the mystery shoppers were happy with their **phone calls** to Carers Bucks. They were all encouraged to register with Carers Bucks and were given information about various organisations who could provide support. This included links to the Council's [Home | Buckinghamshire Adults Care Services Directory](#). They were also signposted to Age UK, Care Choice Direct, as well as to other support such as attendance allowance, a care needs assessment and carers allowance.

“Friendly efficient. Good explanations. Gave lots of numbers / names of organisations to contact.”

The mystery shoppers who received a response from the **chatbot** were very satisfied with the range of information it provided. They liked the personalised plan and the way this then linked to more information, support groups and benefits on the Bridgit Care

online tool. They also liked that the personalised plan could be sent by email if they provided an email address.

Mystery shoppers found the **Carers Bucks website** very detailed and the search engine excellent. Everyone found the benefits section useful but thought there should be more about a care needs assessment and a link to the [Home | Buckinghamshire Adults Care Services Directory](#). However, 20% of our mystery shoppers found it difficult to find the information they were looking for. The links to other organisations were good but the navigation didn't work for everyone.

Four searches were also made using the **Bridgit Care online tool**.

"This site gave lots of information... had phone numbers , contact details... There were plenty of videos, support events , good advice pages. Very helpful and comprehensive website."

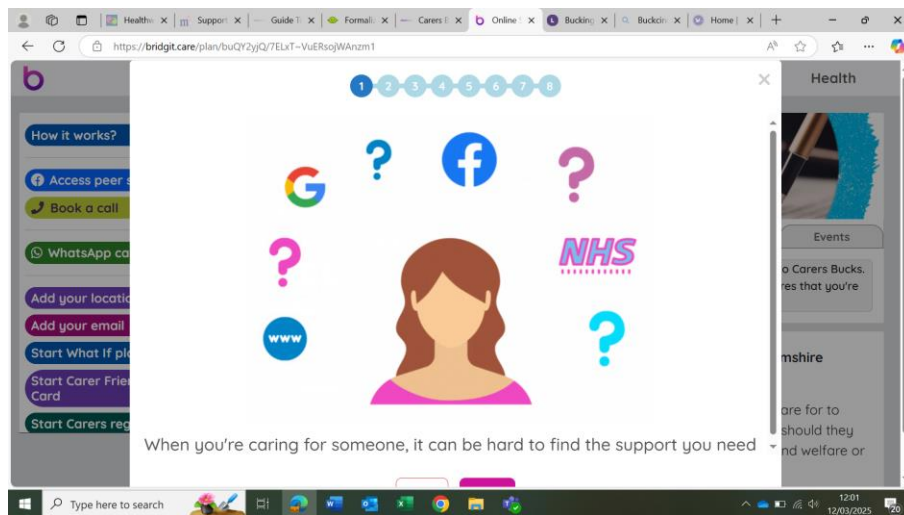
Although it offers a lot of useful information, it might not be easy for everyone to use at first. It could take a little while to learn how everything works and how the information is presented, depending on what you're looking for. There's a menu on the left with various options that works with some tabs at the top. Once you understand this, you'll see how you can change what information appears on the screen.

## Technology

One person found installing the **Bridgit Care chatbot** on What's App took several attempts.

"I would have given up after 5 minutes in a real scenario."

There is a useful 'How it works' pop up on the **Brigit Care online tool** which appears when you move from the Carers Bucks website. On a mobile, it is possible to see the 'Skip/Back' and 'Next' buttons. However, these are hidden when viewing this on a laptop.



We couldn't open the page titled 'Technology that can help me live independently' on the Council's website when we tried to access it through the 'local' section of the **Bridgit Care online tool**.

Some of the links on the **Carers Bucks website** were broken. These included accessing:

- [how best to support the person you care for](#) from [New To Caring – Carers Bucks](#)
- [supporting someone coming out of hospital](#) from [New To Caring – Carers Bucks](#)

## Accessibility and reasonable adjustments

The **Carers Bucks website**, the **Bridgit Care online tool**, and the **chatbot** all allow you to choose the language for the text. You can select your preferred language from a drop-down menu in the top right corner of the screen. However, mystery shoppers discovered that this feature didn't work on their laptops, even though it did work on their mobile phones. When it did work, everyone thought it was a great feature.

## Communication with clients (including staff attitude, feeling listened to)

Mystery shoppers found the Carers Bucks staff they spoke to were professional, friendly and polite. We did not find /hear language or jargon we could not understand.

"She couldn't have been more helpful with the information given."

## Digital exclusion

When a mystery shopper said that they would be unable to register with Carers Bucks as they didn't have any digital knowledge, the staff member reassured them that they would register them over the **phone** if they were interested.

"I appreciate that online isn't for everyone."

The call handler made sure to provide phone numbers for the other organisations they recommended, although forgot to give the phone number for adult social care at the Council.

### Mystery Shopper Satisfaction

Mystery shoppers rated each contact based on their experience. The feedback for Carers Bucks (including their experiences with Bridgit care) can be seen in Table 3. Overall, 56% of experiences were rated satisfactory or very satisfactory.

Type of Contact	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Not satisfied	Unsatisfied	Total
Phone	2	1	0	0	3
Website	1	3	4	1	9
Chatbot	2	0	0	2	4
Total	5	4	4	3	16

**Table 3 – Satisfaction levels of mystery shoppers after contact with Carers Bucks**

We also asked mystery shoppers to comment on what was done well and what could be improved. Their suggestions informed our recommendations.

Mystery shoppers were satisfied because:

- on the phone, staff were friendly, efficient and gave good explanations, as well as lots of numbers / names of organisations to contact
- the chatbot responded quickly, provided good answers with a reasonable amount of information and a link to personalised plan
- they could find the information on the website

Mystery shoppers suggested the following improvements:

- On the website, make the link to the Buckinghamshire Care Services Directory more prominent. Fix the broken page links and the translation plug-in (on laptops) on the Bridgit Care online tool.
- Simplify the process of accessing Bridgit Care chatbot and ensure it responds to questions posted.

## Prevention Matters

“Prevention Matters supports people over 18 to maintain their independence and confidence.”

While our most of our scenarios did lend themselves to accessing this service, mystery shoppers were unclear how many people would seek information directly from Prevention Matters if this was a real life situation. The website implies that it provides ongoing support rather than one off information.

“People can receive anything from one to six visits, dependent on need, within an eight week period.”

### Waiting times for calls be answered

Disappointingly, no mystery shopper managed to get a call answered. One gave up after 8 attempts to get through and one after 2 attempts.

“I don't see how this helps anyone who is vulnerable or struggling, if they cannot even get to speak to anybody”

However, one left a phone number on the answer machine and that call was returned the following day. We also emailed them from their website asking about finding a care home and received a personal response within the hour.

### Information and referrals

The information provided during the call was very helpful. The staff member repeated that they could offer support for up to 10 weeks at no cost. They offered to email the necessary information which they did straight away. They also said that they could help the individual if they needed help with the referral form. There was no mention of the eligibility criteria though. In the email response, we were signposted to [Find activities, groups and services near you | Bucks Online Directory | Buckinghamshire Council](#), back to their website in case we wanted to make a referral and to the [Home | Buckinghamshire Adults Care Services Directory](#) to look for care homes.

[Prevention Matters – Connection Support](#) occupies one page on their website. For some mystery shoppers, it was clear what the scheme offered and how to apply. However, others felt it was unclear whether they offered support to older people.

“Not very, found the eligibility criteria confusing. Looking at the referral form, they might be able to help but not 100% sure.”

There is also an email address and phone number. At the bottom of the page, there's a box called 'Useful downloads and links,' but it only has the link to the referral form. Mystery shoppers suggested that this section could be more helpful by including more general information about adult social care, like a link to the [Home | Buckinghamshire Adults Care Services Directory](#), links to financial help etc.

"There are no examples of how the support is delivered. All information is very high level."

## Accessibility and reasonable adjustments

There was no offer on the website of any translation support, or any information in Easy Read or larger print.

## Communication with clients (including staff attitude, feeling listened to)

The staff we talked to were friendly and apologised for not being able to answer the phone when we rang. We felt the responses we did get were very person-centred.

## Cost and funding of services

It is clear that the service is free.

## Digital exclusion

Their referral form can be posted (or emailed) rather than completed online which gives those without digital skills or devices more options. The website also states that a person can get their GP, practice nurse, or CPN to refer them instead.

## Mystery Shopper Satisfaction

Mystery shoppers rated each contact based on their experience. The feedback for Prevention Matters can be seen in Table 4. Overall, 30% of experiences were rated satisfactory or very satisfactory.

We also asked mystery shoppers to comment on what was done well and what could be improved. Their suggestions informed our recommendations.

Mystery shoppers were satisfied because:

- when they returned the phone call, they emailed the necessary information straight away and offered help with the referral form
- the website is easily understood, and they state what they do.

Mystery shoppers suggested the following improvements:

- The phone should be manned as many will not chose to leave their number on an answer machine.
- The website could include more links to adult social care, particularly the Buckinghamshire Care Services Directory as well as links to assessments and financial support.

Type of Contact	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Not satisfied	Unsatisfied	Total
Phone	1	0	1	1	3
Website	0	2	1	3	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>

**Table 4 – Satisfaction levels of mystery shoppers after contact with Prevention Matters**

## Other places to find information about social care help

Between 3 February and 7 March, staff in various locations around the county were asked to look for any information about social care support offered by Buckinghamshire Council, Carers Bucks and Prevention Matters. For people who don't use digital devices, these could be places they might visit to find information about social care.

### Libraries

We visited 11 libraries including Aylesbury, Chesham and High Wycombe. We found no information about contacting to Buckinghamshire Council for information or help regarding support for an adult. Three had posters up about Carers Bucks, another had fliers and another a flier in a folder called 'Support & Advice – local and national'. Prevention Matters fliers were found in two libraries. We also found a Buckinghamshire Care Providers Association Care (BCPA) Buckinghamshire (incorporating Milton Keynes) Care Services Directory 2024/25 in two libraries.

### GP surgeries and hospitals

Stoke Mandeville hospital's main entrance area was being refurbished when we visited so we were unable to look for posters/fliers there. However, we did find Carers Bucks posters and fliers in various locations around High Wycombe and Amersham hospitals. We also found Carers Bucks posters and fliers in 3 GP surgeries. We did not find any information about looking for adult social care support in these locations produced by Buckinghamshire Council or Prevention Matters.

## Other community locations

There was no information on this subject in the six community locations we visited. There is a Carers Bucks poster up in the Oasis charity building in Aylesbury and lots of fliers in Unit 33, Friars Square, Aylesbury.

## Other

In Buckinghamshire, many free magazines are delivered to people's homes. We saw ads for Prevention Matters in some of them. In a quarterly magazine called 'Your Magazine' from Buckinghamshire Council, there was a helpful half-page article about finding support for adult social care needs and for caregivers. The article mentioned services that help people get online advice about adult social care (Care Advice Bucks) and caregiver support (Mobilise). It included website addresses, but it didn't provide a phone number for those who prefer to get advice over the phone.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the staff and volunteers who helped us as mystery shoppers on this project.

## Disclaimer

Please note this report summarises what we heard. It does not necessarily reflect the experiences of all people living in Bucks when looking for information about adult social care.

# Appendix 1

## More about our approach

### The scenarios

We looked at the common challenges that people with little experience have when trying to help an older adult find support. Most mystery shopping calls were made as a partner, offspring or neighbour of the person needing more support, as well as the individual themselves looking for help.

- Relative of a 90 year old man finding walking difficult. He's struggling to go shopping and look after himself.
- I'm concerned about my aunt who is looking after her husband. He has Parkinson's and dementia. He's getting worse and I can tell she struggles.
- I'm looking for a care home for my mother. Can you help me find one? Can you give me any advice on how to choose one?
- Neighbour of couple whose first language is not English. What support what might be available. Do you have any information in a foreign language?
- Relative looking for more support for someone who's nearly blind and needs more support at home.
- Where can my friend get help as the only carer for an aged parent with mobility problems and cancer?
- A friend is struggling to get up and down the steps into her bungalow and get herself in and out of the bath. Do you know where I could get some more information about some support?
- My husband is getting frail and a bit forgetful. Is there any help out there for us?
- Mum needs a frame as her walking is not great at the moment.
- I live on my own and have no children or relatives nearby. While I don't need any help right now I am conscious I might in the near future. How do I find out what might be available to me in terms of support at home?
- My dad uses a rollator walking frame, but my mum really needs a wheelchair for him when they are out of the house. Can anyone provide this for her?
- My parents need a bit of help at home, can you help with this? They struggle to get up and downstairs. I'm concerned they might fall inside and outside the house.

- My friend has MS and struggles to walk any distance. Can you tell me how her husband might get a blue badge?
- We're looking for some respite care for my uncle whilst we go on holiday for two weeks. Where do we start?

### **Who we will share our findings with**

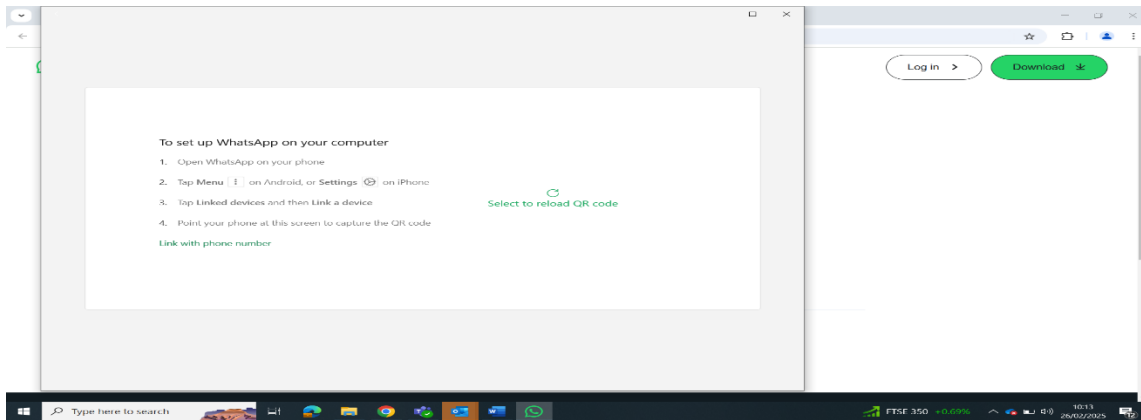
We will share our findings with the Care Quality Commission and Healthwatch England, the independent national champion for people who use health and social care services. We also share all our reports with the Buckinghamshire Council Health and Wellbeing Board and the Health and Adult Social Care Select Committee.

### **How we follow up on our recommendations**

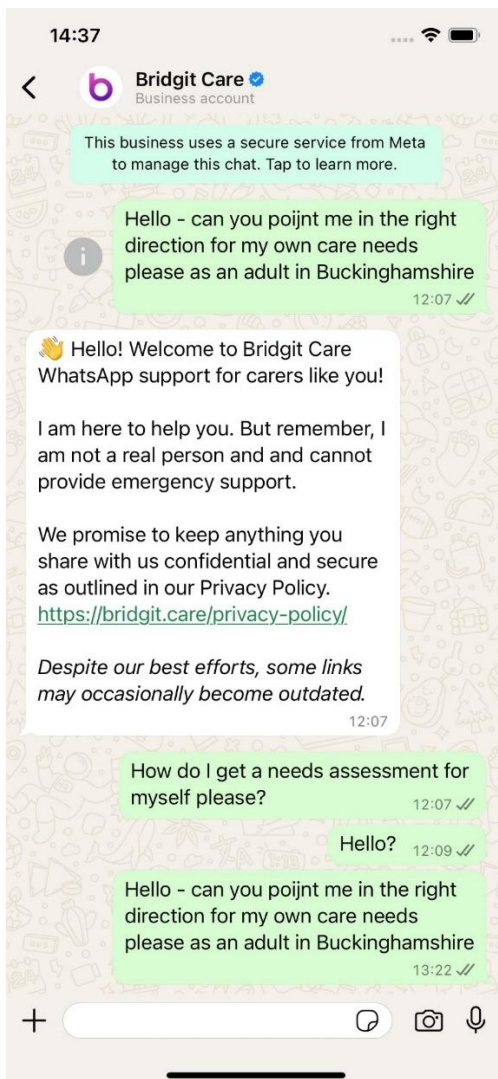
We will request a formal response to our recommendations from Buckinghamshire Council, Carers Bucks and Connection Support who operate Prevention Matters. We will follow-up their formal response to confirm what changes have been made.

## Appendix 2 – Bridgit Care chatbot screenshots

One mystery shopper found it difficult to install the chatbot on their WhatsApp and found the instructions were unhelpful.



Two mystery shoppers failed to get the chatbot to respond to their question.



If you require this report in an alternative format, please contact us.

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