

Mystery Shopper Report

Improving access to adult social care in Brent – Mystery Shopping 2025

Participants:

Staff: Ibrahim Ali;

Healthwatch Volunteers Akshaya Ramesh (volunteer), and Mary Evans (Volunteer)

Introduction

The mystery shopping project is part of Healthwatch Brent's ongoing engagement program evaluating Adult Social Care in Brent. The project aims to:

- Collect regular feedback from Brent residents regarding their experiences of accessing adult social care in Brent
- Gather additional information from our volunteers about the quality of service provided by the adult social care team, via mystery shopping exercises
- Share residents' views and feedback quarterly with the Brent's Director of Adult Social Services, ensuring it can feed into ongoing service improvement
- Ensure that any serious issues are escalated immediately to the relevant teams

The mystery shopping exercise aimed to gather additional information from our volunteers about the quality of service provided by the adult social care team, specifically looking at the experience of residents calling the telephone helpline. This report aims to share residents' views and feedback ensuring it can feed into ongoing service improvement

Methodology

Healthwatch Brent staff and volunteers developed various (scenarios) scripts covering a range of issues. These scripts were followed during telephone calls to the Brent telephone helpline. Details of the questions used during this exercise are listed in the table below:

Mystery Shopper Caller to Brent ASC helpline	Details of Caller's script used during phone call
SCENARIO 1	
<p><u>A carer who needs mental health support and is in crisis.</u></p> <p>My cousin has to look after her mother who has dementia. My cousin also has mental health problems which she needs support with. She is at crisis point and can't leave the house. She needs support as a carer. The Mental Health Team is failing her, and they only suggest that she goes to A&E. She needs someone to support her so she can navigate this system better. GP will not do home visits.</p>	
FINDINGS	
How quick did they answer your call?	Answered Promptly
Did you feel listened to?	Yes
Did they ask you any questions?	Yes
Were they friendly?	Yes
Were they accurate?	Yes
Did they signpost you to other services?	Yes
Did they explain options available to you?	Yes
Did they ask you if you had any other needs?	Yes
What is your final comments or reflection on the service provided?	Extremely friendly, warm empathy, and sign-posted to various services.
<p><u>Additional comments</u></p> <p>The advisor was calm and attentive. The advisor listened well, and the caller was able to explain the situation affecting their relative easily. A good amount of empathy was shown by the advisor. The advisor showed a desire to want to help and the caller didn't feel rushed. They felt that the conversation was a two-way conversation. The advisor attempted to provide signposting to community services by searching the database, and recommended Brent Carers. The telephone number was provided, and all communications was polite and friendly.</p>	

Mystery Shopper Caller to Brent ASC helpline	Details of Caller's script used during phone call
SCENARIO 2	
<p><u>Parent calling on behalf of young adult with autism.</u></p> <p>Hello, I am calling to find out what support my autistic daughter can get. She will be over 18 and going to university. What kind of support will she be able to access. I'm particularly eager to get support for coping with anxiety issues. Also, what support could she receive with her learning.</p>	
FINDINGS	
How quick did they answer your call?	Answered Promptly
Did you feel listened to?	Yes
Did they ask you any questions?	Yes
Were they friendly?	Yes
Were they accurate?	Yes
Did they signpost you to other services?	Yes
Did they explain options available to you?	Limited info
Did they ask you if you had any other needs?	No
What is your final comments or reflection on the service provided?	Didn't find a solution to my question - i.e. Autism support for individuals older than 18 yrs.
<p><u>Additional comments</u></p> <p>The advisor was very polite and friendly. The advisor only had relevant advice for individuals under the age of 18. As the young adult was 18 yrs of age, the advisor suggested signposting to the family front door team. When asked if there were any community services that could be accessed, the advisor was unable to list any. The caller was informed that the front door team could provide assistance to individuals up to the age of 25 yrs depending on their needs. They also informed the caller that adult social services tends to deal with individuals with learning disabilities covered by the SEND Team (special educational needs and disabilities team). Young people 18 yrs and over did not fall into this category and as a result there wasn't any relevant service suggested. The advisor was not able to list any community organisations which could assist the caller. The advisor did ask some questions, and the caller felt</p>	

that they made an effort to help. Unfortunately, they were not able to provide a suitable response for the issues.

Mystery Shopper Caller to Brent ASC helpline	Details of Caller's script used during phone call
SCENARIO 3	
<u>Unpaid Carer on Behalf of a Relative with Dementia</u>	
My aunt has early onset dementia, and I would like to know if her condition worsens what help is there that I can access. I live with her but work during the day.	
FINDINGS	
How quick did they answer your call?	Answered Promptly
Did you feel listened to?	Yes
Did they ask you any questions?	Yes
Were they friendly?	Yes
Were they accurate?	Yes
Did they signpost you to other services?	Yes
Did they explain options available to you?	Yes
Did they ask you if you had any other needs?	Yes
What is your final comments or reflection on the service provided?	Satisfied with service.
<u>Additional comments</u>	
Signposted to the council's social services for a carer's assessment and potential eligibility for support like respite care or home help. Yes, the information and signposting provided were relevant and appropriate. The officer guided the caller towards services and resources specifically designed to support both carers and the individual with dementia. The signposting to local authority services, dementia support charities, and carer organisations were well-suited to the needs of the caller and provided clear options for getting additional help. The officer directed the caller towards healthcare services, community support, and organisations that could assist the parent	

during her temporary illness. They also shared information about temporary home support. The officer outlined the steps for requesting a Carer's Assessment, what support the caller could potentially access from the local council, and how they could connect with dementia-focused organizations. The officer also mentioned what types of financial assistance or respite care might be available, which helped the caller understand the process and next steps. The officer took the time to ask about other potential needs, and inquired whether there were any other aspects of care that the caller might need help with such as medical care, mobility assistance, or other daily tasks. This was helpful and ensured that all possible areas of support were considered as part of the referral process.

Mystery Shopper Caller to Brent ASC helpline	Details of Caller's script used during phone call
SCENARIO 4	
Early onset dementia	
<p>Caller - Relative has early onset dementia and caller would like to know if her condition worsens what help is there that can be accessed. Carer live with relative but works during the day.</p>	
FINDINGS	
How quick did they answer your call?	First attempt - 10 minutes ringing with no answer. Several attempts with same result. Tried the next day with better result - only took 2 minutes.
Did you feel listened to?	No
Did they ask you any questions?	No
Were they friendly?	No
Were they accurate?	Yes
Did they signpost you to other services?	Yes
Did they explain options available to you?	No
Did they ask you if you had any other needs?	No
What is your final comments or reflection on the service provided?	The information was accurate, but the delivery was not friendly.
Additional comments	

The advisor answered in a robotic way. There was no warmth to the voice, and the caller felt that it was very standoffish. The conversation was one-way, and the caller didn't feel relaxed because the advisor gave quick answers with no questions asked. The advisor didn't ask the caller any other questions, or check that the caller understood what was said. They also didn't signpost the caller at all.

The information given to the caller was accurate and was understood by the caller. The delivery could have been better, and the advisor could have asked if the caller understood fully or if there were any other things that they could gain help with. The minimum amount of information was given, and the advisor did not check if the caller was happy with that information. It would have been beneficial if advisor had asked "Is there anything else you would like to know or have help with." The caller found that the taped voice messages that welcomes callers and gives a list of choices was actually more friendly than the actual human experience

Mystery Shopper Caller to Brent ASC helpline	Details of Caller's script used during phone call
SCENARIO 5	
<p>Adaption to a property – getting more information about what be might needed.</p> <p>Hello, I live with my elderly sister who had a stroke last year. The property needs to be adapted so she can shower and toilet.</p> <p><i>Details to share:</i></p> <p>I am on a pension and can't afford to adapt myself.</p> <p>Also, I can't lift her, and I am scared she might get injured.</p> <p>What support is there for us.</p> <p>[He owns his own property. Has been supporting his sister and is proud of being independent. Changes in her health has meant he needs some adaptations and help with her; but he has not asked before.]</p>	
FINDINGS	
How quick did they answer your call?	Took 6 minutes to answer
Did you feel listened to?	Yes
Did they ask you any questions?	Yes

Were they friendly?	Yes
Were they accurate?	Yes
Did they signpost you to other services?	Yes
Did they explain options available to you?	Yes
Did they ask you if you had any other needs?	Yes
What is your final comments or reflection on the service provided?	Satisfied with service
<p><u>Additional comments</u></p> <p>The call waiting time was six minutes. The staff member answered by saying she was from Adult Social Care and was polite and friendly throughout the call. After explaining the situation, the caller was told that Adult Social Care would be able to make adaptations and that there would be no charge. The advisor shared information about how the caller could proceed when they were ready to arrange a visit from adult social care.</p>	

Mystery Shopper Caller to Brent ASC helpline	Details of Caller's script used during phone call
SCENARIO 6	
<p><u>Request for mobility aids</u></p> <p>Request for mobility aids/ small equipment request – signposting by GP – understand what they are entitled to, e.g., walking frame, crutches, incontinence aids, etc. Hello, I am calling about wife/husband whose health has deteriorated and is bedridden. She now needs lots of support.</p> <p>Details to share:</p> <p>Only two of them in the house. Don't have any other support.</p> <p>Equipment needed such as incontinence aids, walking frames, etc.</p> <p>Can't go up and down stairs, need stair-lift.</p> <p>Needs a bath-chair so she can use the shower.</p>	
FINDINGS	

How quick did they answer your call?	4 minutes
Did you feel listened to?	Yes
Did they ask you any questions?	Yes
Were they friendly?	Yes
Were they accurate?	Yes
Did they signpost you to other services?	Yes
Did they explain options available to you?	Yes
Did they ask you if you had any other needs?	Yes
What is your final comments or reflection on the service provided?	Yes
<p><u>Additional comments</u></p> <p>The advisor answered by saying she was from Adult Social Care and was polite and friendly throughout the call. She explained that a care needs assessment would be needed to assess personal care around toileting and bathing, getting meals etc. Information was given about how the care needs assessment would be done, and about the financial assessment. When the caller mentioned problems with walking and getting up the stairs, she was told that they would need to be have OT assessment. If a stair lift was necessary and the couple owned their own home, they may be able to get a council grant. If they are renting, they would have to get permission from their landlord. The advisor explained who the caller should contact if they wanted to go ahead and stated that they could contact the Council again if they had any more questions.</p>	

Mystery Shopper Caller to Brent ASC helpline	Details of Caller's script used during phone call
SCENARIO 7	
<u>Next of Kin on behalf of a Temporarily Ill Parent</u>	
Next of kin calling about somebody who is experiencing temporary illness asking about what options are available.	
FINDINGS	

How quick did they answer your call?	No - took 20 minutes.
Did you feel listened to?	Yes
Did they ask you any questions?	Yes
Were they friendly?	Yes
Were they accurate?	Yes
Did they signpost you to other services?	Yes
Did they explain options available to you?	Yes
Did they ask you if you had any other needs?	Yes
What is your final comments or reflection on the service provided?	Satisfied with service. However, answering the call took too long.
<p><u>Additional comments</u></p> <p>The officer provided clear information about the different options for support. They explained the process of accessing local authority home care services and community resources. They also clarified what to expect in terms of eligibility, timeframes, and potential costs, which gave the caller a better idea of how to proceed and what support could be available in the short term. The officer clearly explained the actions they would take. They mentioned that they would submit the referral for screening and that, following this, a financial assessment would be conducted. The officer clearly explained what would happen once the financial assessment was completed, and how a social worker would get involved to assess the needs and discuss the support options available. The signposting was relevant and appropriate. The officer directed the caller towards healthcare services, community support, and organizations that could assist during the temporary illness.</p>	

Recommendations

The recommendations below are based on our experience of the calls to the ASC Customer Services telephone helpline.

- Officers could have provided more information about how long each step of the process typically takes, particularly the waiting time for the social worker's visit after the financial assessment.
- Officers could have provided more specific information on alternative or emergency care options in case of delays, especially since both callers

were dealing with urgent situations.

- Although the officers sometime explained the financial assessment, more details on how the assessment would be conducted and what criteria would be used would have been beneficial for clarity.
- Specialist conditions such as autism need more signposting and careful advice provision so that vulnerable individuals are not left to cope with issues they face alone.
- Sign-posting to community groups and services could be improved.
- Advisors should ask the caller if they had any other needs and if the caller needs any more assistance on other issues.

Conclusion and next steps

This task has reinforced the importance of clear communication, active listening, and empathy when supporting individuals in need. Through observing the calls, the team has learned how crucial it is to ensure that the person seeking help fully understands the process and feels supported every step of the way.

The experience has also highlighted how critical it is for officers to ask follow-up questions and capture all aspects of the caller's needs and provide relevant solutions. Additionally, it would have been beneficial for the advisor to have explained the entire process in detail, including potential delays or waiting times, to manage expectations and ensure the caller feels prepared. This task has deepened the understanding of the service provided by Brent Council helpline and the key role that effective communication plays in helping individuals navigate it.

Response from Brent Adult Social Care

We would like to thank Health Watch Brent for undertaking this mystery shopping exercise and providing such valuable feedback. Your report has given us significant insights into areas where we clearly need to provide additional training to enhance our customer service, particularly in relation to adult social care services for individuals with autism.

I'd like to clarify that our customer service team, who handle the initial calls, are not part of the Adult Social Care department. They serve as the front door to the borough, managing calls for various departments, including adult social care. We do have dedicated adult social care call handlers, and this feedback gives us the opportunity to provide the necessary training and development for these specific handlers.

In addition, I want to assure you that we have developed an autism pathway that is evolving. We recognize the need to train our call handlers

in this area. We also have an Autism Coordinator who is helping us deliver and develop our strategy effectively. Introducing our Autism Coordinator or Neurodiverse Coordinator to our call handlers will be a significant step in enhancing our service delivery.

The feedback you provided is tremendously useful in highlighting areas for development. I will be sharing this with the Head of Customer Service and other managers to ensure that they take the necessary steps to improve where needed. It's also important to acknowledge the positive responses highlighted in the report, and we aim to ensure that our service consistently delivers such positive experiences.

Once again, thank you for your efforts and insights. We are committed to using this feedback to foster continuous improvement and better support for individuals in need.

Claudia Brown

Director Adult Social Services (DASS)