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Exploring the significance of home-delivered meals among Meals on Wheels service users and their referrers: a qualitative study

BACKGROUND

Meals on Wheels (MoWs) is a crucial service delivering food to adults with care and support needs, who are unable to acquire ingredients and prepare their own meals.

Consistent evidence from quantitative studies suggests that MoWs improve nutrient intakes and nutritional status in recipients and offer benefits that extend beyond nutrition, including the provision of welfare checks, opportunities for social interaction, decreased rates of isolation and improved quality of life.

Less is known about the experiences of MoWs service users with the service in England. In addition, no study has explored how these experiences might have changed during the pandemic, and whether any modifications or additions to the service are required, in the light of service users' experiences of MoWs.

Further, no research has explored these experiences from the perspective of family members/individuals who support people with care and support needs and refer them to the MoWs service.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

- Meals on Wheels offer multiple benefits to service users, including access to a hot meal and social interaction on a daily basis, a welfare check to ensure users' wellbeing and promoting independence.
- Referrers benefit from reduced pressures and peace of mind about the wellbeing of service users, calling for Meals on Wheels to become an essential part of the social care package received.
- The process of setting up Meals on Wheels was deemed to be straightforward, but existing preconceptions could act as a barrier to accessing the service.
- There was variation in service referral routes, but referrers were more likely to be the ones enquiring about, and setting up, Meals on Wheels for service users.
- The COVID-19 pandemic was not perceived to have affected participants' experiences with Meals on Wheels, but allowing for longer interactions between drivers who deliver the meals

and service users would be welcomed to reduce loneliness further.

- Despite prices for the service increasing, it was deemed that Meals on Wheels are value-for-money due to the social care benefits they offer.

AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of this small-scale study was to explore the experiences of MoWs service users and their referrers, and their perceptions around accessing MoWs, and the benefits and challenges faced by the service. Further, we aimed to explore how these experiences changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in May-July 2022 with 28 participants (seven service users and 21 referrers) in four areas in England (North West, South West, South East and East Midlands). Interviews were analysed inductively using thematic analysis.

Service users had been using MoWs for an average of 25 months, were mostly female (n=5), with an age range of 57-94 years.

FINDINGS

Findings are presented under six themes:

1. Setting up and accessing the service

Participants reported that they found it easy to set up the service and that 'once you've ordered a few times, it's actually quite straightforward'. However, they perceived that some stereotypes existed that might prevent potential service users from accessing MoWs.

For example, it was mentioned that MoWs 'are for old people', which might pose a barrier for 'for anybody who has a need for a hot meal who physically can't do it themselves' to access the service. Various routes of signposting to the service were reported by participants, including via an adult social care assessment, support/ social workers and domiciliary carers.

However, some referrers indicated that the responsibility fell on them to contact the MoWs team to set up the service, instead of someone else doing the actual referral.

2. The importance of a nutritious, convenient meal and promoting overall health

Participants highlighted the importance of the MoWs service in providing a hot meal that does not require preparation or storage. This was particularly relevant for older service users ('... getting older, I'm getting lazier because making meals and starting from scratch does not appeal').

The meals were also perceived to be tasty and healthy, with a variety of options being available and also accounting for special needs ('... there's always an indication of whether you have a swallowing difficulty, then 'this meal would be good for you').

When asked how they would feel if drivers who delivered the meals encouraged service users to move more, if appropriate, participants' views were mixed. Some perceived that 'a reminder to go out in the garden would be really good', while others reported that unless they were trained, this was not the drivers' job, and that discussing physical activity might delay eating time so

the meal would not be hot anymore.

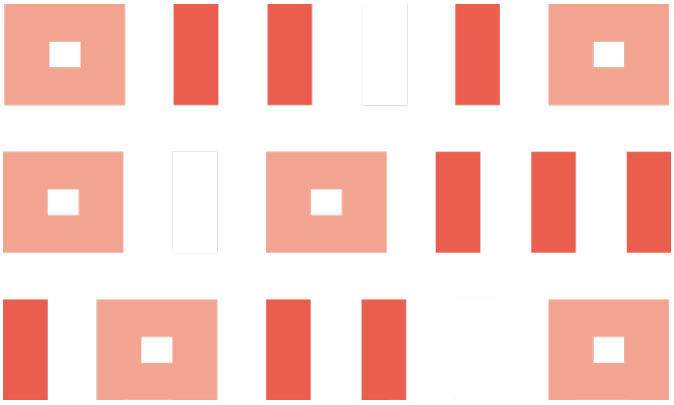
3. Carrying out safeguarding and welfare checks

Participants overwhelmingly reported the importance of MoWs in ensuring 'there are no safety concerns or concerns for people's welfare'. This was particularly reassuring for referrers ('At about half 12, if I don't hear from them, I know everything's fine').

For both service users and participants who cared for an individual receiving MoWs, the service was considered 'an important part of daily life' and 'on my team of caring'. As a result, one service user expressed their concern over what they would do if the service closed down, as they would not be able to prepare their own meals, while another emphasised that the service 'is really a lifeline' they could not do without.

4. Promoting independence and social interaction

Enabling service users to stay at home and preventing the move into residential care was deemed as a crucial benefit of the MoWs service by referrers, as this prevents subsequent costs to social care services and the NHS, and also due to the wish of many service users to live in the community.



The daily social interaction was also perceived as an essential component of MoWs for both referrers and service users, as it helps tackle loneliness and 'it gives a point to the day'.

Participants also discussed how the consistency of the service, the fact that food is delivered daily at consistent times, and the interaction with the same drivers were particularly beneficial for service users with dementia, as this provides a sense of uninterrupted support, and consistency.

5. Meals on Wheels operation and interactions with service users

All participants praised the efficient customer service, and characterised the MoWs management office as 'always available' to sort out problems and answer questions, accommodate individual and changing needs, and that 'you can tell they really care and it's not just all about profit for them'.

The drivers who deliver the meals were also commended for being very friendly and approachable, and the good relationships developed between the drivers and the service users was deemed to enhance the feeling of support that the service provides. Even though drivers 'don't hang around but they don't rush', participants discussed how interactions were brief, acknowledging the time pressures of drivers having to deliver hot meals to many service users within tight timeslots ('They've only got a limited two or three minutes to spend with people').

One referrer recommended that there could be more social interaction if there were more volunteers delivering the meals and having smaller rounds, which would allow drivers to spend more time with those service users who might need it the most.

6. Implications of external factors on the Meals on Wheels service

Service users continued to receive their meals on a daily basis throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, which offered reassurance and 'peace of mind' to both users of the service and referrers.

One participant, however, expressed concerns about whether food supplies would be affected if there was another outbreak, and another discussed that if the service stopped due to another future lockdown, this would have a major impact on the service user they referred, especially because 'a lot of the care homes were not able to take in new residents' during the pandemic.

Participants reported that the price of receiving MoWs had recently increased, likely due to the current cost-of-living crisis and the war in Ukraine. Although they emphasised that the service was excellent value for money due to the social care benefits associated with its provision, some participants questioned whether MoWs would be affordable for people who are struggling financially, or those who are on a state pension.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This small-scale study of MoWs service users and their referrers highlights a plethora of benefits from using the service, which go beyond having a hot meal every day.

These include the conduct of welfare checks, encouraging independence and identifying and addressing isolation and loneliness. MoWs were also identified as a lifeline service that reduces the need for relocating to residential care and that should form an essential part of the social care assessment package for individuals with care and support needs. For referrers, the service has an important role for reducing pressures on families of service users.

These findings are exploratory in nature, however they provide important insights for social care practice in England:

1. With more service providers terminating their MoWs services due to budget cuts in social care (NACC, 2018), an increasing number of people with care and support needs who would benefit from MoWs cannot access the service. Our findings highlight the importance of reviving, re-introducing or enhancing MoWs services at a national level to enhance the wellbeing of service users.

2. MoWs service users would benefit from longer interactions with drivers who deliver the meals, as a means to further reduce social isolation and loneliness. Social care commissioners should prioritise funding for MoWs, and explore different models of provision to allow drivers to spend longer time interacting with service users who might benefit from this social interaction.

3. The variation in the ways of referring service users to MoWs might create confusion on how the service can be accessed. With the onus of setting up the service often falling on service users' next of kin, local authorities should include the assessment of diet and nutrition as part of their social care assessments, so that everyone

who might benefit from MoWs can be referred to the service.

4. Service providers' websites and other publicity materials of the MoWs service should aim to tackle identified preconceptions and stereotypes surrounding the service, and raise awareness that the service is not only targeted to older adults, but any individual with care and support needs who is not able to prepare their own meals.

A diverse group of seven MoWs service users and referrers, drawn from different locations in England, was created as part of this study. A meeting of this group was convened to discuss the wider relevance of our findings for adult social care practice.

First, they consistently spoke of the importance of the service in enabling independence, for example a referrer highlighted:

'... without the meals on wheels my mom could possibly be in care now. And that's not what she wants... it's a lifeline.'

They also discussed the role of MoWs in contemporary social care, with a service user commenting:

'Food is really so fundamental... but it's the patchwork of social care isn't it?', and a referrer continuing by saying 'So the difficulty, I think, is, the fact that the fewer people who can afford it, the fewer people who use it, the fewer customers the companies have got, and therefore the prices go up, and that's a very difficult spiral to get out of. I don't know what the answer is, but I think that is one of the big questions, making it affordable, not only accessible, to lots of people who need it.'

STUDY INFORMATION

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