

Summary Evidence Briefing / 2024



The urgent need for a new social contract for unpaid carers

SUMMARY

This briefing summarises the research evidence underpinning the urgent need for the UK Government to co-produce a National Carers Strategy which takes a cross-governmental approach to delivering the breadth and depth of support needed by carers.

A CARING SOCIETY MATTERS TO US ALL:

- *Most people are carers at some point in their lives.* The average person is just as likely to care for a loved one as to be a homeowner in the UK.¹
- Caring is a normal but unpredictable part of life. The caring population is not static. **12,000 people become carers every day.**² Others leave their caring role and need support, e.g. to re-enter the labour market.
 - Most will not be able to predict the length of time they will care for, or whether they will become a carer at another point in their life.
 - Different policy approaches are needed for different groups of carers, in terms of awareness campaigns, information and advice, the design of health and care services, support at work, welfare services, social security and pensions.
- *The economic value of unpaid care in England and Wales is greater than ever before, and is now estimated to be £162 billion* - exceeding that of the entire NHS budget in England for health service spending.³ Unpaid carers are an integral part of our health and care systems, which would simply collapse without their support.
- Current demands on unpaid carers are unsustainable. Evidence shows that many carers face a **triple penalty** in return for caring:
 1. **A deterioration in their own health** - especially when caring is intense, demanding or lasts for long periods of time.
 2. **Financial strain** - as the costs of caring mount and income and assets fall, with paid work abandoned or reduced, lowering earnings and pension contributions.
 3. **Isolation, loneliness**, and a feeling of being cut off from the daily life that others take for granted.⁴

PRIORITIES FOR A NATIONAL CARERS STRATEGY SHOULD INCLUDE:

1). A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO IDENTIFICATION AND RECOGNITION OF UNPAID CARERS.

- Across the UK, there are at least 5.7 million unpaid carers (9% of the population - as identified in the Census 2021), but the true figure could be as high as 10.6 million people.⁵ This uncertainty arises as many do not recognise themselves as carers, nor are they identified as such by organisations who could help.

- Carer identification matters, because it is the first step towards well-targeted support and addressing inequalities. Analysis suggests that there is significant under-recording of unpaid carers by the NHS and local authorities - e.g. GP records capture only 10% to 28% of the carers indicated by the 2021 Census.⁶ Public authorities need a strategic approach to systematically and pro-actively identify carers.

2). IMPROVING CARERS' HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- There is increasing evidence that caring should be considered a social determinant of health, and should therefore be included in national and local programmes to tackle health inequalities.⁷
- Caring responsibilities can have a significant impact on physical and emotional wellbeing, particularly when people care for extended periods of time or at a high intensity.⁸ Experiencing stress, burn-out, or neglecting their own health is likely to mean that carers have a greater need for NHS resources.
- A preventative approach is needed which supports carers to maintain relationships, activities and employment outside their caring role. This requires a wide range of policies such as the availability of respite and short breaks, flexible working and access to social care support for the person they care for.

3). LONG TERM, SUSTAINABLE INVESTMENT TO ADDRESS THE CRISIS IN ACCESS TO SOCIAL CARE

- The Care Act gives carers rights to holistic needs assessment and support, recognising the impact their caring role can have on their employment, finances, relationships, and wellbeing. However, there is widespread consensus that a lack of adequate investment in local government has undermined the potential of the Care Act to improve carers' wellbeing.⁹
- Since it was introduced a decade ago, the number of carers' assessments has fallen, and there has been a reduction in carer-related local authority expenditure - strongly suggesting that carers are not able to access the support they need.¹⁰

4). SUPPORT FOR CARERS' INCOMES AND FINANCES

- Carer's Allowance must be modernised and made fit for purpose, with a comprehensive review of both the amount paid and the eligibility criteria, learning from other countries

which have reformed the financial support provided to carers.¹¹

- Every day, 600 people give up paid work to care.¹² A range of measures - including paid carer's leave - could support people to stay in employment, with knock-on effects for their financial wellbeing, employee retention, and productivity.¹³

5). TACKLING INEQUALITIES AND EXCLUSION

- Women are more likely to provide care, to have provided care for longer and to care more intensively than men.¹⁴ On average, women can expect to take on caring responsibilities over a decade earlier than men. This has profound consequences for their employment opportunities, financial security and pensions, and their health and wellbeing.
- Many carers experience digital exclusion.¹⁵ Often, it is assumed that online services are more efficient and easily accessible. However, carers share concerns about unaffordable costs, privacy, the risk of falling victim to scams, a lack of skills and the need for some forms of support to be offered in a more personalised, face-to-face way.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Zhang, Y. and Bennett, M.R (2019) [Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life](#), London: Carers UK
- ² Petrillo, M., Bennett, M.R., and Pryce, G. (2022) [Cycles of caring: transitions in and out of unpaid care](#). London: Carers UK.
- ³ Petrillo, M. and Bennett, M.R. (2023) [Valuing Carers 2021: England and Wales](#). London: Carers UK.
- ⁴ Keating, N., McGregor, J.A. and Yeandle, S. (2021) [Sustainable care: theorising the wellbeing of caregivers to older persons](#). *International Journal of Care and Caring*, 5(4). pp. 611-30.
- ⁵ Vicario, S. (2023), ["Am I a carer?" Why self- and social identification of carers are becoming unavoidable topics](#)
- ⁶ Health Foundation (2023), [Can you tell we care? Identifying unpaid carers using local authority and GP records](#)
- ⁷ Public Health England, [Caring as a social determinant of health](#).
- ⁸ Zhang, Y. and Bennett, M. R. (2024). [Insights into Informal Caregivers' Wellbeing: A Longitudinal Analysis of Care Intensity, Care Location, and Care Relationship](#). *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, Psychological and Social Sciences*. 79(2): 1-12.
- ⁹ Glasby, J., Zhang, Y., Bennett, M. R, and Hall, P. (2021) [A lost decade? A renewed case for adult social care reform in England](#). *Journal of Social Policy*. 50(2):406-37.
- ¹⁰ Marczak, J. et al (2021) [How have the Care Act 2014 ambitions to support carers translated into local practice? Findings from a process evaluation study of local stakeholders' perceptions of Care Act implementation, Health and Social Care in the Community](#).
- ¹¹ Yeandle, S. (2024), [Carer's allowance: let's end this scandal now!](#)
- ¹² Zhang, Y. & Bennett, M. (2019) [Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life](#), Carers UK
- ¹³ Austin, A. & Heyes, J. (2020) [Supporting working carers: how employers and employees can benefit](#), research report, London: CIPD and University of Sheffield.
- ¹⁴ Zhang, Y. & Bennett, M. (2019) [Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life](#), Carers UK
- ¹⁵ Hamblin, K. and Black, R (2023), [Digital exclusion and unpaid carers in South Yorkshire](#)

ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR CARE

The Centre for Care is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), award ES/W002302/1, with contribution from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) (Department of Health and Social Care). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the ESRC, UKRI, NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.s and the UK's Office for National Statistics.

CONTACT

We would be delighted to discuss evidence about the needs of unpaid carers in more depth, and to put you in touch with researchers with the relevant expertise. Please contact Becky Driscoll for more information - b.driscoll@sheffield.ac.uk

