

Towards a better future for care: impactful events

CARE MATTERS Podcast episode transcript (automated)

Dan Williamson

Hello and welcome to another episode of CARE MATTERS My name is Dan Williamson, I'm the digital and communications coordinator for circle and the centre for care. I'm also the producer of the Care Matters podcast. With me today, I've got someone very close to me, literally, who sits right next to me and has done for the last year and a half.

It's Fay Benskin who is our impact specialist in the centre for care. Fay works with academics and external partners including stakeholders, voluntary sector organisations and policymakers to mobilise our research findings to achieve impact beyond academia. Her role is to work with our researchers to plan for impact. Fay identifies partnerships and explores collaborative opportunities to ensure research findings are widely shared to support practice and policy. Fay, Welcome to CARE MATTERS

Fay Benskin

Hi Dan, thanks for having me.

Dan Williamson

Fay has been working with us for over a year and has been instrumental in making sure our research gets in front of the right people, people who have the influence and ability to take our research and transform society in ways that can help millions of people. During your time at the centre for care. We've been extremely busy creating outputs and disseminating to different audiences, some online and some face to face, and it's the face to face events we're focusing on today.

In this first episode of a mini series, which looks at the centre for Care's impactful work, Fay we've had an extremely busy year, so it's been difficult to cherry pick what events we will discuss today. But let's start with the most important meal of the day and explore the two policy breakfasts we held in the House of Commons in 2025.

First of all, what is a policy breakfast and what were our events focussed on?

Fay Benskin

So a policy breakfast I probably need to take us back to, the summer of 2024, when I first joined the centre I'd started in the May. And that was a time when we started to think that we were ready to do something really outward facing, really focussed on sharing our research on a big platform. And, myself, my colleague Becky, who's a research associate who had led on a lot of policy work previously to my joining the centre.

We started to think, how would we do this and what would that look like? So the main initiative was to have a platform to share research. And we spent this semester of fact finding, trying to understand what kind of event that would be, how it would be hosted, where it would be hosted, who would be invited.

So we really had to break things down. And one of the main ways we did that was by thinking about the topic at first. So we were, really mindful that in the, in the public eye, there had been a lot of coverage around, pay care. So we knew that there'd been media coverage. There've been multiple articles from Patrick Butler from The Guardian.

There had been the introduction of Carer's Leave Act, and we had researched that we were really ready to share with people working on national policy. So over that summer, we spent a lot of time talking to experts that had hosted similar events. So people from our Impact Leadership Group meeting, including carers UK, the National Children's Bureau and we and Sky as well.

Then we also started to look externally to what, what we could gather, in our research from other people that had done events like this. And all of the advice was guiding us to doing a short and snappy event. And if we wanted MPs to be able to attend, it had to be at the House of Commons, had to be onsite for them.

And also by hosting something at the House of Commons, it would allow interest in the in the event and gather more people to, to be attending to gather the interest really. Over that summer, we did do a lot of learning and we decided to really then look at our research and understand what specific topics we could be hosting an event on.

So the advice was very much look at, look at being very specific, very focussed on the topics that you're going to be, hosting an event around and not just have a full day policy conference discussion. It had to be very specific. So for us, we broke, topics down around, pay care and we realised that we had an awful lot to say around, about carer's leave and the case for that leave to be paid.

And we also were keen to host an event about carer's allowance reform and the opportunities, surrounding that reform and what that could look like. During this process, we realised that also, if we wanted to host an event at the House of Commons, we would have to have a, a co-host that, was a member of Parliament.

So we started to map out the MPs that might be interested in hosting these events with us, and also mapping and identifying the key stakeholders and individuals that might be interested in coming to that event. And we were really mindful that the agenda of the event and the breakdown of the activities during this session would be really important.

So we were able to, to drill that down in terms of the agenda. And so we knew that we wanted to give, a platform to the research to allow the, the research to be shared. But what we also really wanted was to gain expertise from, from others that work in this sector and understand it, very well.

So for us, we were really keen that around that table were advocacy organisations, not for profit, organisations, civil servants, MPs, people that had been working in this sector for a long time and understood the intricacies of it. So we're able to sort of map out our invitation list, whilst also starting some conversations with some MPs to explore if they might be interested to host the event with us.

And at the same time, we were also really keen to include lived experience in our policy breakfasts. We felt that there is, little point in talking about something without people with the lived experience of those, those difficulties or challenges. So when it comes to the case of paid carer's leave, it seemed really, appropriate and important to have individuals there that have experience of, working and caring at the same time.

So it gave us sort of, this mapping exercise gave us the opportunity to, to understand who are the right people to be in the room. And how would we navigate, approaching them. We approached, MPs. The main one was Wendy Chamberlain first. She had recently hosted, had a debate in Parliament, and it was very linked to the topics that we were talking about.

So we, we contacted one day and asked if, if we could meet and talk a little bit more about our, our initiative and our plans. And Wendy very kindly said, yes. And we were able to share the work that we'd already done in our in our planning for these events. And Wendy was, really keen to be part of the, the case, the paid carers leave being that it was her private member's bill that was the, the Carers Leave Act.

So at that point we could really move forward and start to put down the plans. So that allowed us to, contact the House of Commons with a sponsor to secure a room and, and then start to invite people along. So a policy breakfast essentially is a, a mechanism to share research, but to, broker those discussions around a table of what to do next.

And I think that when we were planning this event, that was one of the key aims of the session, that we wouldn't be a, and they were talking shop just to but around the, the complexity of the problem, but actually looking at how we could have a focussed discussion to, harness the expertise in the room and explore how do we move forward with this?

What are the opportunities? What are the, those pinch points where we might be able to, influence change and, and as a collective as well, not just the centre for care will move this forward. It's how do we move forward as a, as a group. So yeah, that's, probably a good overview of the policy breakfasts.

Dan Williamson

You mentioned a lot there about the connections that you made and moving forward, as a collaboration. How do you how do you enhance the success, if you like, of these events?

Fay Benskin

I think, it's fair to say that we learned a lot in the process of, of hosting, these two policy breakfasts. One thing to say is that if you want to do it right or as best as you can, it does take a lot of time and resources, and a lot of energy. And it's really fair to say that is a team effort as well.

We utilised expertise and skills from across the centre for care and wider. As I said before, we were really lucky to have, expertise from our policy and practice partners who are in leadership group, who were able to have done events like this before and were able to give us a little bit of guidance on, on ways to do that.

And at the same time, the efforts and expertise from within the centre include, such as yourself done having a communications coordinator that can ensure the invitation looks professional and the one page briefing is really clear. The ask of the attendees is made very, very explicit. And having those briefings and comms outputs, I think are really important for us.

And the expertise from the centre also include having, individuals that really know the research, very well and being able to bring those researchers on board with the initiative as well, so that they understand the platform and that they're able to and support it to share their research in a really quick and snappy way. It's actually quite difficult to, present research in a ten minute presentation when there are many intricacies to that.

So I think that, thanks to the, the research as being so, willing and eager to, to take on that platform, but that is, something that's really important. And I think also at the same time, being able to be clear at the beginning about the ask. So from the host, the co-hosts. So for Wendy or Steve Darling, who, co-hosted the events with us, them being informed of what the ask is and, and also of the participants that would be attending.

And at the same time, I think it's fair to say that it's really important to, to work closely with those individuals that are coming to share their lived experience. We were so lucky in our policy breakfast to work closely with four carers who were willing and able to, come to the House of Commons, take their time away from their loved ones, from their families, and and attend an event to be able to share very sensitive stories about their lived experience and the challenges that they faced.

But I think what's really important is that, the events were designed alongside those carers and the platform that they had stayed locally and enjoyed the opportunity. And I'm very grateful that they, they felt they got something from it. But what's really important is they were supported along the, the process. And they were compensated for their time.

And, and hopefully that allowed it to be much easier for them to, to be able to participate in those sessions. And I think it's fair to say that the benefits have been really, really huge for us. It's really difficult when you're planning an event like that. You don't really know exactly who will say yes and who will come and the outcomes of those things.

But I think looking, a year on from these, these events, we were able to, establish ourselves as a key knowledge broker in this, in this area. And the people that attended, it's allowed us to continue those conversations with them, such as civil servants, working on specific policies. It's given us the opportunity to have further discussions, further conversations, and share our work in, in, in those, those wider context as well.

So I think that they, they were lucrative and worthwhile. And I'm really pleased to say that those conversations have continued and they weren't a, a waste of our efforts.

Dan Williamson

Yeah. Thanks, Fay. And I think it's important just to mention as well that it is what it says on the tin. There is food served at the policy breakfast as well, with lots of nice cups of tea. So moving on then for we're going to talk about our board game Mind the Gap. So originally we had one version that was focussed on digital exclusion.

But this year we developed two more versions of the game. I want to ask you about the unpaid carers version of the game that, you worked with, with Carers UK. So if you could tell us a little bit about that and where the board game has been so far.

Fay Benskin

Sure. No problem. Well, I think it's fair to say that we're really lucky to have a tool, like the board game. So the board game for a bit of background, it was created, in, November 2024.

Dan Williamson

That was the launch.

Fay Benskin

That was the launch of the initial game for, the digital exclusion version. And, thanks to Dan, our communications coordinator. He had a very clever idea of, having a life size, enormous board game that would, translate research. And the initial topic was around digital exclusion. And, as I, got more involved in the game and understood it well, it allowed me to see that there was plenty of opportunities for other topics of research to be applied to this game format.

So essentially, with the game you will have four players. They take on a persona, and that can be somebody living in a community. They can be digitally excluded or in this case they will be an unpaid carer and they will navigate their way around the board, much like the game of life and experience complexities in terms of, barrier cards or chance cards, which often set them back in the game.

So it's really, important as a, as a way to share our research in the challenges and difficulties that unpaid carers may face, and also highlighting the, the benefits of different interventions as well with those chance cards. So I had attended a meeting, for your carers and spent some time with Melanie from carers UK.

During that time and we started to speak about how the board game could be, could be used for unpaid carers, research. So we got to work and we sort of broke down some of the topics that the pay carers face based on the research from carers UK. Research from the centre for care.

And I worked really closely with Maxine Watkins and Louise Overton who had undertaken their research, their qualitative research, with unpaid carers. So they were able to inform some of these, these real barriers that they had, they had heard from unpaid carers that they had spoken to and worked with. So essentially we managed to create a game, that is called, tackling inequalities from paid carers.

I think the game is, is a really useful tool because it's a way to share research without complexity. So it's taking the difficulty around, you know, reading a huge long report or, or, piece of research into something that is, really easy to listen to and understand. And the fact that it is enormous, it's a huge piece of lino, which is four metres by four metres.

And you stand on the game, you immerse yourself in the gameplay. We've really had so much interest in, in hosting events for stakeholders and different partners. Because it's so interesting and, and really helpful to get conversations moving around these topics. So, yeah, it's fair to say it's great design. So yeah, we had developed this, this game alongside carers UK.

And I think the, the first place we took it was the, the carers UK members conference that was hosted by carers UK. And during the lunch break we invited people, carers themselves to play our game and that was a really good starting point for us to launch this version of the game, because we've played with carers themselves and they were able to comment on some of the barriers and the chance cards and even contribute additions that they thought would be really useful and important to, to include.

We were very, very lucky to have the opportunity to host the game in Carers Week, thanks to carers UK and Greenwich Carers Centre, we host an event in the garden space at Greenwich Carers Centre and we were, very lucky to have Ed Davey, leader of the Liberal Democrat Party,

and Alison Bennett, who, is also a Liberal Democrat MP, who leads on care and carers for the third party, and they both came to spend time with carers at Greenwich Carers Centre.

And played the game with us and I think that was a really great thing to raise the profile during Carers Week that, they were attending that event and luckily we had some media coverage there. But again, it's, it's this opportunity to start these conversations around what are those inequalities like for, for unpaid carers and how can they be addressed by many, many different organisations, people with their attitudes, with their, how they might support workers, in employment, how the DWP could support them.

So I think that it's been a really useful opportunity and there is now an awful lot of, requests in for us to take the game around, during Carers Week. And we also have the opportunity to take it to the Department of Health and Social Care. We took it to Leeds, and spent some time with civil servants that are working really closely on policy related to unpaid carers and again, this was a really good platform for us to discuss the research in this May, but then brokering further discussions on how our research could be useful to, to people working in that sector.

So yeah, I think that's probably a bit of an overview of that game, but yeah, really, really happy with its progress. So far.

Dan Williamson

Thanks, Fay. And you mentioned, during Carers Week when we took it to Greenwich Carers Centre there as well. I remember that being an extremely hot day lugging that board game across London. And it was directly after a policy breakfast as well. So that was a very busy day on the impact events. And yeah, it's all well worthwhile.

You also mentioned Ed Davey and the Liberal Democrats there. So we attended the party conference in, Bournemouth in 2025. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about what we were doing there and what were our takeaways and connections from that event?

Fay Benskin

Yeah, sure. So we had not attended party conference previously. We were kind of new to, to this environment. And yet again, we took a lot of advice and guidance from our partners and other stakeholders that are very familiar with, attending these party conferences. I think essentially, we identified that attending party conference was, an important thing to again, allow us the platform to share our research, ensure that we are sort of a go to organisation in the topic of these conversations, I think sometimes if you don't tell people you exist, they aren't going to know.

So, by raising our profile in this environment was really important. And being that we'd already had an awful lot of support from MPs within the Liberal Democrats, it felt like a really good opportunity that we would go an exhibit at the Liberal Democrat Conference as a as a starting point. We also attended other party conferences, but we exhibited at, at this party conference, we did a number of activities at the Liberal Democrat Conference.

We hosted a, an exhibition stand. So we spent four days, huge team of us went down and spent time exhibiting our work and engaging with all different people that were attending the conference. That included people that were, local councillors, MPs, many other stakeholders and lots of other organisations. And on our exhibition stands, we worked really hard in thinking about the, the ways and, tools that we could use to, to broker those conversations.

So we had our, interactive dashboard available for people to click on onto. So our own page care dashboard is a data dashboard with census data that allows local authorities to look at the landscape of the unpaid carers in that local area. And so it's a very useful interactive tool. And by having tablets and laptops available for people to click on this and have conversations around how they could utilise this data was really, really helpful.

We also had small versions of the board game and people came along and played. We had some lovely briefings that were summaries of our work that were branded with all of our clear marketing strategy, but also we had a bowl of sweets which allowed loads of people to come and talk to us.

Dan Williamson

Definitely lured the crowd in!

Fay Benskin

You never know what's going to what's going to work. But I think having, some really interesting outputs, and engaging activities on our stand and lots of smiley faces and a big bowl of sweets really helped. So that's that was, one part of the conference. We also attended a private roundtable. So our deputy director attended a private roundtable on children's social care.

And, we then hosted our own fringe event where we, showcased the on pay care dashboard and, started conversations on how a local authority or a commissioner or an MP could utilise the data within the dashboard to, to activate change in their local area. So that was, really well attended event. We, we thought it through a lot and ensured we had a really great panel which could comment on the dashboard.

So that included Alison Bennett, who, gave an instruction to, to the dashboard and the work. And then we had discussions with including local councillor representatives from Sky and from carers UK and our director, Kate Hamblin, who could speak in detail about the benefits of this dashboard. And again, that has, brokered an awful lot of further discussions.

Particularly, I think, is an overview of our attendance at the conference. Our engagement with the local councillors was really useful and allowed us to broker those relationships, to then move them forward outside of the conference and explore how we could support some of the, initiatives that they might have locally.

Dan Williamson

Nice. Thank you for and important to mention that also that we ended the conference with a nice fish and chips from a well-known fish and chip restaurant on the seafront at Bournemouth, where we, collectively lost our minds up after five long, hard days of working there.

Fay Benskin

Yeah, and then dipped our toes in the sea before driving home.

Dan Williamson

Very important to do that. Yes. So as we said at the top of the episode, it was really difficult to sort of cherry pick any sort of events that we've done this year because we've done so much, but we're coming to the end now. And I wanted to think about the future. So we do have an impact report, which is out in February 2026, which will be available on our website for people to go and find and see, a little bit more about the impactful work that we've done so far.

But it also looks to the future. And we have a quite an ambitious look ahead in terms of impacts for the next phase of the Centre. I wonder if you could just tell us now what are we going to do in 2026 to keep that schedule going? Where can people see us and how they can work with us?

Fay Benskin

Sure. So, 2026 is going to be a really, really busy year for us. I think as a starting point, we will be working with the partners and stakeholders that we've, we've met with already and those relationships we will be continuing to work with those individuals and those organisations we, really keen to work on some of the in the public eye.

There's been a lot of coverage recently around, a carer's allowance. And, we really came following the, the SAS review that now we, we look at what, what change that could, could actually mean. So we're, we're exploring opportunities there. And I'm really now pushing as well for reform of carer's Allowance and exploring the opportunities around paid carer's leave and how we can support employers locally and nationally in, recognising the need to have better support for those working carers.

So I think everything the Carer's Leave Act has done an amazing thing and been fantastic. But we're looking at what more can employers do, and we're also looking at how policy can be adjusted to support that as well. We are going to be attending quite a lot of conferences this year, so we are going to the Local Government Association conference, will be exhibiting there, and engaging with a lot of local authority representatives.

We will also be at party conferences. So do look out for us there in Carers Week. We are going to be touring the country with, with our board game and many other activities. So follow us on LinkedIn. That's probably the best place to find those kind of things happening. And we have just updated our website. So it's fair to say there's quite a lot of information on there.

So if you're looking to, explore our work in any more detail, understand the events that we've hosted or look at our briefings or our library of work, then everything is on there too. But if you wanted to ask any of the questions or, contact us, then that would be fine. So please do contact us via the website.

Dan Williamson

Thank you Fay. That's been great to talk to you today. This is the first of three episodes in a mini-series. It looks at our work on, the centre for Care's work rather on and on impact. In the next episode, we're going to be having a look at making the most of our research when sort of policy moments arise and a bit more of the inner workings behind the planning for impact at the centre. Thanks for joining us today.

Fay Benskin

Thanks for having me.

Dan Williamson

As Fay says, any more information that you'd like to know about, anything we've spoken on today can be found on the website and if you need to know even more than that, you can get in touch there too. Thank you very much.