

# Engaging with unpaid carers and putting carers at the heart of care and support



# Foreword



**‘Putting unpaid carers at the heart’ – a crucial ambition and one that underpins the work we do together in the ADASS East of England Carers Network.**

This report captures a great variety of ways in which we are bringing this ambition to life – do read it for inspiration and encouragement, and then re-read it for a host of practical tips and ideas!

In reading the report I was struck by the commitment to really try to listen to, hear and respond to the voice of unpaid carers and I hope you will be too, it shines through.

I am very grateful to colleagues across the East of England Carers Network who have taken the time to capture and share what they are doing, and I hope this will motivate us all even further to keep on improving the experience of unpaid carers.

## **Helen Maneuf**

*Operations and Commissioning Director for Older People, Hertfordshire County Council and Chair of ADASS East of England Carers Network*

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# Partnership between the local authority and the voluntary sector

**An outline of how the local authority works in partnership with voluntary sector providers to understand the needs of carers in Bedford Borough Council and how feedback and continuous improvement shape services and the carers' offer.**

Bedford Borough Council commissions the Carers Support service through Carers in Bedfordshire, who are also commissioned to deliver the Dementia Navigation Service. In addition to this, Tibbs Dementia Foundation are commissioned to deliver support services to those living with dementia. The pathway which is in place between these organisations is well-established and robust. The Council endeavours to identify as many carers as possible through this pathway.

Through these established organisations and services, Bedford Borough Council is able to conduct co-production and consultation via existing groups and workshops, most recently in relation to the development of the Carers' Strategy.

Carers in Bedfordshire and Carers UK conduct annual carers surveys which are utilised to inform strategic direction for the Council, alongside the statutory carers survey conducted by the Council.

Quarterly monitoring of the above-mentioned services also enables user feedback and provides a range of case studies to not only demonstrate the outcomes being delivered but also to identify areas for improvement or possible change.

## **What do we understand about carers' needs and wishes?**

**We understand the following are important to unpaid carers:**

- easier access to services
- advice and information on what help and support is available
- understanding what carers might be eligible for
- respite care
- consistency in support.

## **How is support changing for unpaid carers?**

- The Council has removed the prescriptive menu of support options available to eligible carers.
- The Council has also removed the need to financially assess carers.
- The Council has introduced online carer's assessments as an alternative option for carers.
- Care Act refresher training is taking places for all social workers with an emphasis on carers' rights included.

### What difference is this making?

- A former carer had very recently lost his wife and was very concerned about the practicalities of being on his own, how to use IT, how to keep himself busy and how he would manage financially. He was referred to Carers in Bedfordshire where he was provided with emotional support and referred to the Former Carers Support and the Benefits advisor for financial support. Information was provided for the ELFT Recovery College. “Thank you so much for your help, I wouldn’t have known where to go without you.”
- A cared-for person was turned down for PIP and they had no entitlement to Carer’s Allowance due to PIP not being awarded. Carers in Bedfordshire discussed the tribunal appeals process and encouraged the carer to continue pursuing this. This was followed up with telephone calls to check and encourage the carer to continue with the appeals process. Links were sent to apply for Carer’s Allowance and to apply for a Blue Badge.

PIP and Carer’s Allowance was awarded and back dated, with a lump sum of around £14,500. This meant the household was better off by £227 a week and Blue Badge entitlement was guaranteed for the cared for person. “It’s so nice to speak to people who understand what is going on, thank you so much.”

### What have been the barriers?

- To be able to conduct co-production in its truest form.
- Carer’s assessments (and reviews) completed in a timely manner.
- Development of new services is hindered by budget constraints and operational staff capacity to support developing commissioning activities.
- Financial constraints overall.
- Reaching carers from a diverse range of communities. Bedford Borough has a very diverse community which requires differing approaches in raising awareness of services in the community and services from the Council. The Council have learnt that they need to go to these communities, but staffing resources make this challenging.

### What have been the conditions for success?

- Despite lack of resources, there is a willingness to make necessary changes. Change cannot be made without willing partners.
- The development of an internal carers working group, including representatives from all operational social work teams, system admin team, commissioning team and performance team representatives.
- The strength and resilience of the third sector in Bedford Borough and the connectivity between organisations.

#### Further information:

[Support for carers | Bedford Borough Council](#)

[Home – Carers in Bedfordshire \(carersinbeds.org.uk\)](http://carersinbeds.org.uk)

[Tibbs Dementia – Tibbs helps me be myself for as long as possible  
www.ageuk.org.uk/bedfordshire](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/bedfordshire)

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# Listening to unpaid carers incorporating feedback from the outcomes of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough All-Age Carers' Strategy 2018–2022

This example sets out how Cambridgeshire County Council has listened to and is responding to the needs of unpaid carers. Specifically in relation to developing more services for younger carers and doing more work for older carers and incorporating feedback on the outcomes of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough All-Age Carers' Strategy 2018–2022.

In developing the new All-Age Carers' Strategy, importance has been placed on the voice of lived experience and there have been several opportunities taken that have enabled Cambridgeshire and Peterborough to understand carers' needs and views including the following:

- Carers Experts by Experience panel – two workshops in 2022.
- Carers members of the Strategy Task and Finish Group.
- Carers Partnership Board – quarterly meetings that include 10–12 carers attending on average.
- Surveys/questionnaires such as:
  - NHS Digital Survey of Annual Carers 2021–22 (260 responses, a 40 per cent response rate)
  - Carers by Experience Panel (206 responses)
  - Caring Together (Adults Service Provider) Parent Carer Survey (26 responses)
  - Charity fundraising including an evaluation of the All-Age Carers' Services for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Following engagement with carers and carers' groups, the Councils learnt carers are often unaware of the support available to them, or are perhaps reluctant to ask, or not sure who to ask.

The engagement with people with lived experience in Cambridgeshire has highlighted what is important to unpaid carers:

- Being able to easily access information.
- Advice and support when needed.
- Support in the event of an emergency, the development and actioning of a 'What if' plan – [www.caringtogether.org/support-for-carers/adult-carers/whatifplan](http://www.caringtogether.org/support-for-carers/adult-carers/whatifplan)
- Support to manage carer wellbeing.
- Responsive statutory services.
- Ensuring that the needs of the individual they care for are met.

The feedback from carers has directly informed both the key priorities and strategic intention for the new strategy. The priorities selected are aligned with the NICE Guidance for carers, as shown below:

- information and support for carers
- identifying carers
- psychological and emotional support for carers.

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough All-Age Carers' Strategy 2023–2026 is intended to answer the most important questions that may prevent carers from accessing support. These intentions and priorities reflect what the Councils want to achieve with and for carers over the life of the strategy.

The 2018–2022 strategy was built round nine strategic intentions:

1. Joint working across health and social care for all carers.
2. Early identification of carers.
3. Access to information, advice and support.
4. Carers' work, training and education – life balance.
5. Improved care/professional relationships.
6. Reduced breakdown of care at home.
7. Young carers' support when moving into adulthood.
8. Carers' access to advocacy when they need it.
9. Carers' voice in how services are designed and developed.

Despite the negative impact of the pandemic on many carers and their families, positive progress was made against most of these intentions including:

- carers reporting better knowledge and understanding of how to access information, advice and support services
- carers feeling better supported in their caring role
- identification of many previously hidden carers
- increased numbers of 'what if' plans being registered and activated
- carers having a strong voice through the Healthwatch Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Adult Social Care Partnership Boards
- timely access to advocacy and promotion of self-advocacy to enable carers to be confident to speak for themselves in the future.

Following feedback from the co-production and engagement work, Cambridgeshire County Council has developed a new strategy which updates the carers' offer aligning it closer to their needs and wishes. The new strategy includes a detailed action plan which will be held to account by the Carers Strategic Board, Carers Partnership Board, and the Cambridgeshire County Council Adults Leadership Team. Working groups, aligned to the new priorities, are being established to deliver the plan. These groups will report to the Carers Strategic Group and will also provide regular updates on both progress and learning for discussion and challenge at the Carers Partnership Board.

The key priorities for the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough All-Age Carers' Strategy 2023-2026 include:

- support for parent carers
- young carers to be supported when moving into adulthood
- support for carers at risk of domestic abuse
- support for the emotional and psychological wellbeing of all carers
- joint working across health and social care for all carers
- ensuring webpages support easy access to information.

### **What difference has it made?**

Carer Counselling Service – JB was feeling overwhelmed and exhausted caring for her mother, who lives with dementia. JB felt her caring role was having a negative impact on her mental wellbeing and she felt she was 'grieving' her mother. Through the course of her counselling JB explored her grief, the dynamics between her siblings, including historical traumatic experiences. She was able to explore and link her low self-esteem to this and then used the sessions to begin prioritising her own self-care.

End-of-counselling survey feedback results are shown below:

Health and wellbeing has improved – strongly agree

Feel listened to – strongly agree

Feel more able to cope – strongly agree

I have better quality of life – strongly agree

I feel better supported – strongly agree

Would recommend Caring Together – strongly agree

Rate the support – Very good

Carer review of counselling – "I feel so much better in my caring role now thanks to my counsellor. I feel more positive and certainly more empowered. I was on the brink of walking out of my caring role but now find I can cope a lot better."

### **Carer learning session**

Cambridgeshire provider Caring Together runs several in-person hubs across the county. These provide opportunities for carers to come together. During the first quarter of 2023, nine carer learning sessions were delivered through outreach work, five as standalone sessions and eight within hubs. Topics included finance and benefits, legal services, carers' rights and entitlements and emergency first aid. During Carers Week two virtual sessions were run, aimed at adult carers. One focused on cooking on a budget, for example, eating healthily and nutritionally on a smaller budget due to the cost of living and rise in food costs. The second was on vegan cooking, explaining how carers can improve their health and support the environment by reducing the amount of meat that they eat.

Carers' comments following the session – "Thanks for your follow-up with website addresses, etc. I really enjoyed the Zoom demo and have already followed up by requesting booklets from Vegetarian for Life. It was interesting and informative, and I am very much encouraged to eat more vegetarian. Appreciated the effort and expense Caring Together took to put this on. Many thanks."



“Thank you so much for the Zoom, Vegetarian cooking demonstration with X. Really enjoyed it and found it very inspiring. Been part vegetarian for some years but thinking of going fully vegan and very encouraged by this.”

### **What were the conditions for success?**

- Political will.
- Building strong relationships with carer groups.
- Working across the system.
- Willingness to listen to and incorporate feedback from all parties.
- Strong foundation and commitment to co-production.

### **What were the barriers?**

- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Limited resources prioritising competing requirements.
- Collecting good-quality information to inform decision making.

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# Co-produced Carers' Strategy

In 2022 the Central Bedfordshire Adult Carers' Strategy was launched following a co-production process with carers and those involved in supporting carers. Following this, an Adult Carers Board has been established with views of carers feeding into this, along with quarterly workshops between carers and social workers, during which carers are invited to discuss any issues they are experiencing and the progress on the work programme.

The Working Together for Change process was used for the co-production of the strategy. This involved asking carers three questions:

1. What is working well?
2. What is not working well?
3. What is important for the future?

A two-day workshop was then held with carers, front line workers, voluntary sector providers and commissioners to review the responses to these questions, theme them, look at the root causes and what the priorities were for us to tackle as a Council. From this the carers' strategy was developed.

As part of the ongoing work programme and as a result of the co-production process, quarterly workshops have been set up between social workers and carers to be able to discuss any issues, build relationships and continue to co-produce and co-design services. Outputs and updates from the strategy are also taken to this group to be discussed and to understand carers' needs and views.

## What does the Council understand about the needs of carers?

The biggest need that has come out locally is for respite, for this to be able to be pre-booked and for there to be different options available.

As the Council works through the work programme from the strategy there are a number of areas being reviewed with the aim to improve things. This includes but is not limited to:

- respite
- carer's assessments
- identify more carers earlier in their caring journey
- provide more support to carers 24/7 across varied channels
- improve communications with carers, including information available via websites
- transitions
- contingency and emergency planning.

### What difference is this making?

Mobilise have been commissioned to provide digital carers support services to enable earlier access to support and to target particularly harder to reach groups (e.g. male carers, working-age carers). This service is available 24/7 to carers, with many accessing outside of normal working hours. The service has been running for two months and is already finding:

- 2.8K carers have accessed the service
- 176 are fully engaged with the service, accessing email support, social media groups and other information
- 138 carers have received direct support from the service
- 78 per cent of carers accessing services have been caring for a while, and 58 per cent of these carers have never accessed support before.

### What are the conditions for success?

- Ensuring all providers and partners are working together.
- Time – getting time with front line workers for carers can be challenging, so this needs to be planned quite far in advance.
- Investment in time from senior management is essential.

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# Engagement and co-production work with carers

Essex County Council use several different routes to engage with carers, including surveys, focus groups, face-to-face workshops, Carers Working Group (to inform future service priorities and new carers service specification), Carers Voice Reference Group (network of carers' representatives) and All-Age Carers' Partnership Board. Engagement via these routes has been to identify carers' needs, to develop the new carers' strategy and subsequently to develop the new carers commissioned offer (April 2024 launch).

From engagement and co-production work undertaken the Council understands the carers' wishes are:

- knowing where to go for support and understanding what's available
- enabling the system to support carers so they do not have to repeat their story at various points
- ensuring carers can access a break from their caring role
- the importance of carers learning from and being supported by other carers
- practical support to navigate the system, including finances, benefits information and rights.

The Council is investing in and expanding its carers' offer to support unpaid carers and has co-designed the following model with them:

- Enhancing Public Health commissioned Essex Wellbeing Service which is the front door for residents' health and wellbeing needs to be met. The service is being enhanced to provide a first point of contact for carers to access information, advice, guidance and support and access to community-based services and the carers core offer.
- Procuring a carers core offer which includes specialist information, advice and guidance and support, coaching, counselling, conflict resolution/mediation, personal wellbeing grants and peer support.
- Launching a Carers Priority Fund – a grant funding scheme for local organisations to develop community-based carer support and an improved local information, advice and guidance offer.
- Independently employing carers with lived experience to develop an involvement service that will ensure carers' voices influence and shape things that matter to them and enabling carers to become involved in decisions that affect them.
- Provision of training to support unpaid carers undertake their caring role, e.g. first aid, manual handling.
- Digital offer for carers.

### What difference is this making?

One example is 'Time 4 you' – a commissioned service which provides small grants (and a pre- and post-grant conversation) to support a carer to access a break from their caring role and focus on something that supports and maintains their wellbeing. The following is from one recipient:

“It gave me a great ‘buzz’ and provided me with the opportunity to approach my caring role with a new energy and passion. My partner also noticed how enthusiastic I was and this in turn made her feel happy and energised.”

### What have been the barriers?

- Essex is a large local authority so it can be challenging to work across a large footprint (three Integrated Care Systems) to implement quick change.
- Data collection and analysis is being improved.
- Hearing from unpaid carers that don't identify as carers and/or do not access any services/support, particularly carers from marginalised groups.

### What are the conditions for success?

- Involving carers throughout the process in engagement, co-design and co-production.
- Partnership working – including with social care operations, health colleagues, carers, community groups and carers' organisations.
- Getting buy-in and commitment from all levels of the local authority and stakeholder organisations.

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## Different ways to involve and gather the views of carers to ensure accessibility and inclusivity

Hertfordshire has eight co-production boards, each focused on a different area. There are several carers on each board, for example learning disability and dementia, as well as a dedicated carers' co-production board. The boards were set up to take a strategic view of co-production across Adult Care Services (ACS). Co-production activity takes place via separate task and finish groups/workshops that are set up on an ad-hoc basis.

The carers co-production board is made up of five experts by experience (carers), five statutory senior staff and five voluntary senior representatives. The co-production boards meet quarterly but also have an opportunity to attend a monthly virtual coffee morning to share good practice.

To make sure the Council has a diverse range of carers' views involved with co-production, it has a dedicated co-production team that completes regular outreach sessions with voluntary sector groups and public events. The object is to speak to local communities about care services and feed these views into the relevant co-production projects, or provide opportunities for individuals to get involved with a board role. The council also makes sure it has a combination of ways for carers to contribute to increase accessibility and inclusivity.

The Council's carer support commissioned provider (Carers in Herts) is funded to obtain the views and perspectives of carers in Hertfordshire through funding called 'carer involvement'. Unpaid carers are supported to raise their issues, discuss their needs and comment upon service delivery and development. Engagement includes focus groups/attending carer support hubs to collate views and experiences, surveys, one-to-one conversations and information sessions such as, 'What is Care Act Eligibility?'. Some of this work will focus on specific service issues, e.g. a review of carers' breaks services, experience of hospital discharge and dementia strategy, while others will have a wider focus such as a review and refresh of carers' strategy and Adult Care Services' three-year plan. Carers are also asked to participate in drawing up specifications and awarding tenders, e.g. Direct Payment Support Services and Autism Community Service.

There is great emphasis on the quality of practice regarding the completion of carer's assessments and carers' in case of emergency plans. This is through regular audit of practice. There is a dedicated carers' lead who works with all the Adult Care Services teams to promote the importance of recognising and supporting carers.

Hertfordshire uses [Connected Lives](#) to support approaches to practice with carers. This model promotes choice, control, independence and supporting what matters most to carers. Carer Direct Payments as well as commissioned services can be used flexibly in a way that suits the carers and their individual needs. Social care staff regularly attend carer events where they engage with carers and listen to their views as well as give relevant information and advice.

Hertfordshire has an All-age Carers' Strategy whereby carers have identified four priorities:

1. Be informed.
2. Life beyond caring.
3. Maintain health and wellbeing.
4. Receive consistent, joined-up services.

The Council is working with partners on action plans to address these four identified areas.

Access to appropriate transport has come up as a 'cross-cutting theme' across multiple co-production boards and is being progressed by a dedicated task and finish group.

In addition, carers have told the council that they would like:

- a named worker or at least one point of contact for social care
- good quality and reliable services for the person they care for
- services that enable them to work if they want to
- timely responses to contact or questions
- to be recognised as partners in care and involved in care planning for the person they support
- long-term planning for the person they support.

### **How is Hertfordshire County Council changing the carers' offer to support unpaid carers more effectively?**

- A review of the carer break service is currently taking place with a new model to be tendered by April 2024. A wide consultation has taken place and the need for a more flexible and responsive service has been identified.
- Carer's in case of emergency leaflet developed so more carers are aware that they can put a plan into place, held by Adult Care Services. In addition, the 'I am a carer' card now has a key fob option so carers can more easily be identified in an emergency.
- Carers involved in input to two specific webinars to support carers now run regularly by the NHS Talking Therapy Services.
- Two carer's co-production training sessions available on an ongoing basis for social care staff:
  - Listening to the Carer's perspective and learning together
  - Safeguarding enquiries involving unpaid carers.
- Development of 'Listen and Share' sessions. Three social work staff from different teams (e.g. hospital, disability, older people) share an example of a carer's assessment they have completed, explaining what the challenge was, what they did and what learning they have to share. The pilot sessions proved very popular and a great learning opportunity for staff so they will now be repeated on a regular basis. The aim is to improve the ability of staff to listen and understand how to respond to the challenges that a carer faces.
- Carer awareness training for frontline staff delivered by the commissioned carer trainer unit hosted by Carers in Hertfordshire. These sessions involve carers sharing their experiences and what did/would have made a difference to them.

## What difference has this made?

### Case study of the Carer Mentoring Scheme run by Carers in Herts

Ron, who is 72 years old, cares for his wife who has dementia. He contacted Carers in Hertfordshire because although he wanted to continue with his caring role, he found dealing with professionals difficult. He wanted to build his confidence as a carer, to cope with stress better and to improve his emotional wellbeing. He wanted to feel less isolated and to find some time for himself. He had been coping for four years when he requested a mentor as he was finding his caring role more and more challenging as his wife was not aware of what he did for her and resented what she saw as his interference in her life.

Rosemary has been a mentor for three years. She is a bereaved carer, having cared for her mother. Rosemary also helps run a Carers' Hub (support) group. After 10 calls with Rosemary, each lasting about an hour, Ron felt in a much better place. He felt much better informed as he had found out about other charities such as the Alzheimer's Society and about the support Carers in Hertfordshire offers.

Ron told us that he felt much more confident coping with his caring role, and he felt able to continue. Thanks to a carer's assessment and the support of a care worker he was able to return to working on his allotment which he really enjoys. He felt better able to deal with his stress, emotionally supported and less isolated. He said, "having an actual person to help think how to improve my caring role" was most helpful. He has started playing the piano again.

Rosemary lives on her own. She enjoys telephone or face-to-face contact with the carers she mentors but does not like using Zoom. Rosemary said, "I find the mentoring very rewarding; you learn so much, you are always learning from the other carers, and you feel that you are giving something back."

## What have been the barriers?

### From a carer's perspective:

- Do carers believe that it will make any difference?
- Have carers got the time outside caring to take part in focus groups?
- Can they leave the person they care for or secure replacement care if not?
- Does the council only hear from the loudest voices or a particular subset of carers?
- Is the cost of travel an issue or access to the internet where involvement is done online?

### From the local authority perspective:

- Volume of referrals.
- Staffing and replacement of dedicated carers roles.
- Supporting carers who have multiple caring roles and who deal with multiple teams.



## What have been the conditions for success?

### From a carer's perspective:

- Clear explanation of how the feedback and the outcome of these discussions will be given, with updates of what has changed as a result.
- Work with a strategic partner such as Carers in Hertfordshire to support involvement.
- Host carers face-to-face meetings in an accessible, comfortable location with good parking and public transport links and offer travel expenses and refreshments.
- Consider what digital inclusion support is available.
- Provide alternative care if needed.
- Ask local community groups to host a focus or discussion group.

### From a local authority perspective:

- Staff who are passionate about responding to the needs and views of carers.
- Co-ordinated responses to the person who requires care and the carer's needs.
- Use of the practice model of Connected Lives in practice with carers.
- Strong partnerships with the voluntary sector such as Carers in Hertfordshire.

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# Inclusion East

## (CIC – Community Interest Company)

**Together we are stronger – peer support for family carers of people who have a learning disability and people with autism, living in the East of England**

Inclusion East facilitates and holds quarterly Eastern Region Valuing Family Forums to support families and share up-to-date and useful information. The meetings are an opportunity to gather views of family carers and the people they care for and then share these views with the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADASS), the National Health Service (NHS) and other providers at the meetings attended. Inclusion East also offer peer support to individual families around issues they are facing.

Inclusion East encourages and supports family carers of people with learning disabilities and autism to be involved in their local and regional co-production groups and sends out information about relevant events and opportunities to be involved in Social Care and Health Consultations.

### **What difference has this made?**

The facilitators of the group are family carers themselves and therefore understand the issues families have to deal with. Carers who attend the group regularly express their gratitude for having an understanding and empathic space to share their challenges and ideas, and for the useful information that is sent out.

### **What are the barriers?**

- Family carers often struggle to get funding and invoice paid in a timely manner.
- Family carers have extremely busy lives and often lack the time alongside their caring commitments to participate as much as they would like – having a choice of timings for meetings can overcome this barrier.

### **What have been the conditions for success?**

- Organising and facilitating lots of successful and inclusive training and networking events.
- Good contacts and relationships with professional groups and organisations in the Eastern Region.
- Able to bring suggestions gathered from the forum about what can really help improve people's health and wellbeing.

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# Listening and responding to the needs of unpaid carers through a mix of methods

Milton Keynes uses a mixture of methods to listen to and include unpaid carers in development work, such as face-to-face meetings in person or online, surveys, feedback via operational colleagues and providers, online event page which carers can use to provide feedback on events and which the council provides updates on past events and asking carers if they are happy for the Council to contact them after the introduction of any new scheme or service.

## What does the council understand about the needs of unpaid carers?

- **Easy access to information:** Some people told the council that they were not sure where to go for advice, or what they are entitled to in the way of financial help or practical support.
- **More support:** This could be a support group to talk to someone and share experience, or a break from their caring responsibilities. Some people who care for those with additional needs, or are the parents of adults, felt that there is no support specific to the challenges they face. Some people are happy with online support groups, but others said they would prefer more face-to-face support.
- **Diverse communities:** Services that meet the needs of the diverse community within Milton Keynes

## How has the support offer to unpaid carers changed?

- MyTime will be starting in September. This supports carers by working with the hospitality sector to provide short-term breaks to carers.
- Carers Milton Keynes is working with partners to increase support groups in Milton Keynes.

## What difference has support made?

- The Council has changed the carer's assessment to a carer's conversation, which is more person centred and is just a two-page form.
- It now offers a direct payment of £240 (minimum) to anyone who has a carer conversation.
- Introduced Mobilise, which is an online carers support service.
- Working with CareFree (a national charity to increase access to short-term breaks).

### **What have been the barriers?**

- Allowing sufficient time for engagement with carers.
- Communicating new changes to carers.
- Moving the focus from the cared-for person to the carer during discussions.
- Choosing the best format for providing feedback.
- The best approach/mixture of approaches to ensure good representation across the different carers' groups and carers supporting different client groups.

### **What are the conditions for success?**

- Engaging with carers who were not known to services.
- Suggestions from carers on what could work.
- List of carers who were willing to work with the Council in the future.

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# Co-production of the Suffolk 'All-age Carers' Strategy'

**Co-production development and increased involvement of carers to give carers and partners a voice across Suffolk.**

Co-production has been key to working with family carers and having their voices heard across Suffolk. This includes development of the adult carers' contract, development and review of the Family Carers Emergency Plan, the current development of the dementia strategy and the opportunity to influence national surveys such as the Survey of Adult Carers in England. Suffolk also has a Suffolk Carers Fund panel to help develop services for carers, and carers are very much part of this panel.

Suffolk has a Family Carers Partnership Board (FCPB), and this consists of a chair who is a family carer with lived experience, family carers, Suffolk County Council (SCC) Adult Social Care (ASC) and Children and Young People's Services (CYP), Suffolk Family Carers (SFC), Healthwatch, Integrated Care Boards (ICB) and a number of voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations. This enables co-production to take place on policy and procedures regarding carers both directly and indirectly. A key example of this was the co-production of the Suffolk All-Age Carers' Strategy 2022–2027.

It is essential that carers are seen as equal partners and part of co-production. This also means that consideration needs to be taken for equality, diversity and inclusion, with the understanding that not all carers want to be identified as a carer. To support this, equality impact assessments are also completed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was again identified how valuable carers are and Suffolk had an adult carers' strategy which was due for review. This led to an opportunity to develop a new strategy and funding was initially made available by public health and a carers development manager was recruited to focus solely on co-producing the new strategy.

Discussing the opportunity with the FCPB and other counties, it appeared the correct direction of travel was an All-Age Carers' Strategy and that this needed to be co-produced. A governance structure was put in place and the strategy is overseen by the FCPB and Suffolk Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB). The timeframe was one year, and we were often told this was not sufficient to fully co-produce the strategy. Although this was a tight time frame, having a dedicated person to lead the co-production and buy-in from all partners and carers due to building positive relationships, the strategy was launched a year later in November 2022.

The journey was not always easy as there was a lot of learning and attending carers' groups, both in person and virtually, and getting sign off at each stage from all the key organisations and partners was a challenge. Another challenge was education, because it was clear that when the word 'carer' was used, sometimes this was interpreted as a paid carer. After much research, options were given of the format from various other counties and a 25-page magazine-style strategy became the aim. Co-production continued throughout the whole process. After the draft was complete, it went to formal consultation and the final forewords of the strategy were not from organisation leaders,

but from a young carer and an adult carer, as it was their co-produced strategy. An easy-to-read version was also co-produced. Now we are at the stage of co-producing the living action plan with co-production events happening, and these have been requested annually by carers themselves.

The co-production of the All-Age Carers' Strategy 2022–2027 has seen many positive changes for carers across Suffolk, although there is still a long way to go to sustain this. Along with the Suffolk HWBB taking overall accountability for the strategy and action plan, a separate HWBB Oversight Group has been developed to make sure this is kept on track by all partners. This was also the result of the HWBB now having a councillor as a young carers' champion and a councillor as an adult carers' champion. Along with this both ASC and CYP now have assistant directors who lead on carers. The FCPB also has a steering group that has been meeting monthly to keep the development of the action plan on track with actions taking place.

Following the launch of the strategy and continued co-production, strategies across Suffolk (including the two ICBs) are being aligned, so there is less of a postcode lottery for carers who are seeking support. Suffolk County Council has also been making changes to the way it supports carers: a staff carers' network is in place and growing and SCC also has a Human Resources carers' leave policy, both contributing to SCC becoming a carer-confident employer.

Following a co-production action planning day, a carers' event was able to take place during carers' week in Ipswich town shopping centre on market day which led to positive relationships being built and aligned agendas. Further events are being considered moving forward across Suffolk. As co-production continues, it has been suggested that rather than use the word 'priorities' which can be confusing if they are given a number or hierarchy, the word 'pillars' should be used, as if any of the five pillars fall, the whole strategy could fall.

### **What was the learning that supported success?**

- Co-production takes time – carers are busy caring, so flexibility is required.
- Set realistic goals and expectations (SMART).
- Seek advice and work with partners as there is a lot of experience out there nationally, as well as research from Carers UK, Carers Trust, etc.
- The language used such as acronyms, labels (e.g. informal/unpaid carers) and terminology such as eligibility, assessment, one-off payment/direct payment/individual budgets, needs to be clear and in a language all can understand. Easy-to-read and accessible options are needed, as well as virtual and face-to-face meetings across the localities.
- Co-production is not a 9 am to 5 pm Monday to Friday option; it needs to be available at other times too, as many carers work and have other commitments.
- Do not presume carers' groups know about the support available, such as carer's assessments, personal budgets/direct payments, benefits or carers' emergency plans.
- Training for staff to carry out co-production may be required as this is very different from internal meetings.

### What were some of the barriers?

- Carers feeling they have shared their ideas before and nothing has changed.
- Time needed to complete co-production; this needs to be continuous and available in different geographical areas, different formats and times of the day.
- When contacting carers to be part of co-production, awareness that they may no longer be caring, and this can cause distress.
- Some carers/organisations may want to use co-production as an opportunity to share their personal caring role and so need a place to do this alongside co-production.
- Co-production may initially involve a larger cost; however, it could save money and time later as co-production can produce the support needed, not what people may think is needed.

### What were some of the conditions for success?

- Provide time and resources, with clear roles, to complete co-production.
- Provide training to all involved.
- Make co-production accessible and across organisations.
- Co-production needs to be a continuous process and needs to reward people taking part, even if this means expenses, and personalised support at the right place at the right time.
- Build positive relationships and expand these across all areas.

#### Further information:

[Suffolk All-Age Carers' Strategy 2022-2027](#)  
[Suffolk Carers Fund – Suffolk Community Foundation](#)  
[Family Carers Partnership Board – Suffolk Family Carers](#)

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# Engagement and Co-production – An independent review of carers' needs

The pandemic highlighted what the council does well to support carers and areas for improvement. Post pandemic, the council experienced a 100 per cent rise in the number of carers coming forward for support. With so much change, it decided to do a full review of carers' needs.

The council did not feel that it was best placed to carry out the engagement exercise as some people may not have felt that they could have freely critiqued council run or commissioned services. Although the council believed the voluntary sector led carers' support services were valued by carers and of good quality, it also felt that someone independent of all directly provided support should be appointed to carry out the engagement exercise. As such, Healthwatch Thurrock led the review.

The council was already aware that young carers transitioning to adult services was an area for improvement, so both adult and children's social care departments agreed to develop an all age strategy. Healthwatch Thurrock utilised several different engagement mechanisms to ensure that the voices of carers were captured. The engagement plan used a mixture of engagement tools (surveys, carer's diaries, school workshops and air tables for example).

The council felt that Healthwatch had captured the voices of carers so strongly that they did not want to 'rewrite' the findings into a strategy, i.e. they wanted to ensure those voices continued to come through. As such, the Health and Wellbeing Board for Thurrock agreed to use this report with an attached action plan forming the strategy. The action plan is currently being finalised with health and education partners (as most actions around young carers concerned schools and colleges).

## What does the council know from this work and the needs of unpaid carers?

For young carers, their needs and wishes are largely around improved understanding within schools and colleges and the ability to access support in this setting.

For adult carers, their main needs and wishes are around improved services and systems. These include:

- continuing to support and develop peer support options (valued by carers)
- improved training offer both specific and more general, e.g. first aid, carers' resilience, moving and handling and understanding LPA
- improved locality working between social care/health area teams and carer support services
- better explanation of carer's assessments process and improved assessment practice
- improved contingency planning mechanisms
- improved understanding and support of carers by local employers
- more flexible and responsive respite/replacement care options.



### **How is the council changing the support offer?**

Thurrock Borough Council is currently working with education partners to highlight the needs of young carers and to develop a more uniform support offering across all schools. can improve their

For transitioning and adult carers, although the action plan has not been formally signed off yet, during its development, the council has:

- worked with carers to develop new assessment documentation
- worked with carers to develop new contingency planning documentation
- developed a peer support group for transitioning carers (run jointly by young carer and adult carer support services)
- reviewed existing arrangements and agreed a process for transitioning carers between children and adult social care departments. This process and how both the Care Act and Children's Act work together is the focus of an event for frontline (children and adults') staff on Carers Rights Day 2023
- reviewed and refreshed the training offer to carers. The council is making condition specific digital training available to the carers service, and hopes to eventually offer a training 'prescription' for carers.
- finished reviewing our digital information. Carers will now review the information available in hard copy to ensure it is of high quality and easy to understand.
- aligned carers' officers with social work locality teams.
- Once information technology issues are resolved, the carers service will be able to carry out assessments on the Council's behalf. Adult Social Care staff have also attended refresher training regarding the Care Act and assessments for unpaid carers. This is being reviewed by the improvement team and will hopefully form part of the induction and annual mandatory training offer.

### **What difference has this made?**

There has been improved working between adult and children's social care services (including the young and adult carer support service) which has meant that young carers experience a far more seamless transition.

The alignment to community social work teams of carers officers, in conjunction with revised assessment documentation that was shaped by carers (and is therefore more meaningful), has meant an improvement (and generally increased discussion amongst practitioners) in the identification of carers.

### **What have been the barriers?**

- Information technology solutions.
- Identifying and engaging employers.
- Identifying what respite and replacement solutions will work in the future for such a diverse group as carers

### What have been the conditions for success?

- The externalisation of the engagement to the community and voluntary sector was successful. They heard the voices of hundreds of carers, many of whom were not known to formal services. They were able to use existing mechanisms (e.g. social prescribing) to find people who were new to caring and could track the difficulties they encountered in accessing information or services (via a diary) so that often small but important changes could be made.

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