

Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil

Your local county voluntary council



VOLUNTARY ACTION
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4. Volunteering

4.29 Carers and volunteering

This information sheet has been designed to give you information on how to support volunteers who are unpaid carers. It contains information about:

- Who are carers
- Understanding carers
- Supporting volunteers who are carers
- Carers rights and signposting
- Volunteering and welfare benefits
- Carers and employment

Who are carers?



Across the UK today 6.5 million people are carers, supporting a loved one who is older, disabled or seriously ill. That's 1 in 8 adults who care, unpaid, for family and friends.

Loved ones are living longer with illness or disability, and more and more of us are looking after them. Typical support a carer may provide includes any or all of the following; meal preparation, housework, shopping, dressing, personal care, paperwork and bills, help with medication or just keeping a regular eye on the person they care for. Caring can be round-the-clock or for a few hours a week, in their own homes or for someone at the other end of a motorway.

Caring is part of life but without the right support the personal costs of caring can be high.

Understanding carers who volunteer

For many carers, volunteering becomes their pleasure time, they describe their volunteering as a 'break' or a way in which they can feel valued and connected to the wider world. Caring can be an isolating experience as their lives focus on the person or people they care for and their networks tend to revolve around their caring role and the professionals who are part of the care.

All too often the 'end of caring' means a loved one moving into a care home, or dying. Carers want and need to develop and maintain skills and networks outside of their caring role, to make both the present and the future more manageable.

Carers bring with them knowledge, skills and experiences of giving support to others. Whilst these skills may be an asset in a volunteering role with your organisation, bear in mind that for some carers, what may be most needed is the chance to do something completely different and to develop new skills and interests.

Supporting carers

Carers lives can be unpredictable, there can be emergencies, last minute medical appointments, last minute cancellations of other support, meaning they have to step in. In addition to the impact on their personal circumstances they are likely to feel guilty about letting people down. Your understanding and support will be greatly appreciated.

- Consider developing a Carers Policy to demonstrate you have an understanding and appreciation of their role and its possible impacts. Your organisation may have a Carers Policy reflecting the statutory rights of working carers. If so, this would be a useful reference, as a starting point.
- Offer flexible volunteering if you can, which does not require a regular commitment at the same time every week. For example, it helps to ask for an expected number of hours which can be fulfilled as and when possible. Placing a carer into a role where weekly (or other regular) attendance is vital, on the other hand, may create stress when a carer is unable to fulfil agreed expectations.
- Reinforce the voluntary nature of the role. Carers may be tempted to avoid volunteering, for fear of letting people down.
- Without being intrusive, get to know their caring circumstances, maybe through one to one supervision sessions.
- Encourage carers in your organisation to meet and talk. Carers benefit greatly from sharing and learning from others' experiences.
- Offer practical support, such as somewhere private to make a phone call.
- Encourage carers to access support that might help them – more information can be found below.

Volunteering while caring – a case study

Lynne cares for her husband who has complex health and mobility issues. Without volunteering her entire support network of family, friends and professionals would revolve around care for her husband. Caring can be an isolating experience, where personal needs are put aside for the sake of caring for a loved one.

Lynne views her caring role as her 'day job' and her volunteering as her respite. She has sought out volunteer roles which enable flexibility, do not require regular commitment and provide a social network. She manages to fit in at least a few hours of volunteering each week. Lynne knows her caring role will come to an end, when it does she wants to know she still has a life to go back to.

Carers rights and signposting

Signposting

Carers can take a while to recognise themselves as carers, feeling they are just doing what anyone would do, and so they do not seek the support available.

It can be difficult and confusing trying to find out about your rights as a carer, and the support available. There is a wide range of support available in the community, including carers groups, condition specific carer groups, respite, support for alterations to the home, support for managing the caring role.

Encourage carers to recognise their caring role and to seek the financial, practical and emotional support they need. Most counties have a Carer Information service (though may be called by different names). Carers Wales can provide information about organisations in the carer's local area.

Carers needs assessment

All carers, regardless of their age, have a right to a Carers Needs Assessment. The assessment is an opportunity to discuss with the local authority what support or services are needed to help with the caring role. It will cover what matters to the carer and the personal outcomes they wish to achieve, such as volunteering. Through this assessment, the local authority will decide if they are eligible for support, either for themselves or for the person they look after. Support can be provided by the local authority, or in the form of a direct payment which buys the support services to meet eligible needs.

Carers needs assessments can be arranged by contacting social services. A carers assessment is not an assessment of their ability to care, it is an assessment of what support is needed to help them care.

Carers Allowance and other benefits

Carer's Allowance is the main benefit for carers. If a carer is looking after someone for 35 hours a week or more, they may be eligible.

A carer and the person they care for may have entitlement for other benefits. For information contact the local carers service or Carers Wales.

Volunteering and benefits

The Department for Work and Pensions recognises the value of volunteering for reasons of health, community benefit and as a way of developing skills and experience.

- A carer should be sure to tell their benefits advisor about their volunteering
- In most cases benefits will not be affected by volunteering

- It is recognised good practice to reimburse volunteers for their out of pocket expenses. If this is the only payment made to volunteers, and if receipts are kept as evidence, then expense payments should not affect benefit payments.

More information can be found in the [Volunteers and Welfare Benefits Information sheet](#)

Carers and employment

Given the stresses and strains that can result from balancing multiple responsibilities inside and outside the workplace, it is unsurprising that one in five carers give up work when they begin to care full time. For some, volunteering (as and when they are able) may take the place of work in their lives, in providing opportunity for meaningful activity and social contact outside of the home.

Some may have an eye on opportunities for employment as and when domestic circumstances allow. Your understanding of a carer's motivations in volunteering and their longer term aspirations will ensure that everyone gets the most out of the experience.

A carers champion within your organisation

Having a dedicated carers champion, or an individual with specific awareness of carers' role, provides a central point of contact for carers and managers and a clear message that carers' needs are recognised. This could be someone within your human resources or health and well-being teams or someone with caring responsibilities themselves.

Further information

Carers Allowance enquiries – 0345 608 4321 www.gov.uk/carers-allowance

Carers Wales - Provides information and advice on rights of carers and the support available.

029 20811370 www.carerswales.org

WCVC/CVC Information sheet 4.12 [Volunteers and Welfare Benefits](#)

Appendix

Example carer policy

- I. *The employer* recognises that carers will constitute a part of its workforce. Carers look after family, partners or friends in need of help because they are ill, frail or have an addiction or disability. *The employer* further recognises that employees may find it difficult to combine paid work and caring. The Board of Trustees has therefore adopted the following code of good practice in order to support employees who are also or who are likely to become carers.
- II. Staff will in no way be discriminated against on the grounds of their caring responsibilities. For further information, please refer to the Equal Opportunities Policy.
- III. Employees are not obliged to disclose to their line manager that they are caring for someone but will be actively encouraged to do so. All line managers should ask whether staff they are supervising also have caring responsibilities, and should have due regard to issues of confidentiality concerning this information.
- IV. *The employer* welcomes comments and suggestions from all staff on how the organisation may further improve the working environment so that it is better equipped to deal with the varying needs of carers in the workforce.
- V. All employees will be entitled to request to work flexibly (e.g. to request to work part-time, to work from home etc.) in order to attend to the needs of the individual that they care for. For further information, please refer to the Flexible Working Policy.
- VI. All employees with caring responsibilities will be entitled to use the telephone at work in connection with their role as a carer. For further information, please refer to the Electronic Communications Policy.
- VII. *The employer* understands the difficulty that some carers face and is committed to providing as much support as is reasonably practicable. *The employer* encourages the carers in its workforce to access and use the resources available to carers in the wider community and through their local carer service.

For further information contact

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