An unpaid carer is someone who provides unpaid support and/or care to one or more people because they are older, ill, vulnerable, or have a disability. Carers may provide care on a temporary or permanent basis and caring can include physical, practical, emotional and mental health support.

Every day 6,000 people become carers. Many don’t know how or where to get help. It can be daunting and very lonely.

Carers are holding families together, enabling loved ones to get the most out of life, making an enormous contribution to society and saving the economy billions of pounds. Yet many are stretched to the limit, often struggling with poor mental health themselves.

Carers Wales’ mission is to make life better for carers and they are at the heart of everything that we do. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we had become increasingly concerned about the emotional wellbeing and mental health of carers contacting Carers Wales. We were pleased to be able to establish a psychological support service called ‘Me Time’ utilising Welsh Government funding announced in Carers Week, June 2020.

In creating this toolkit, we hope to share learning from developing our successful online wellbeing MeTime programme with other professionals who wish to develop their own online sessions to support the emotional resilience and wellbeing of unpaid carers.
2. Carer Wellbeing and Emotional Resilience

Whilst caring for someone, many carers will struggle with a mixture of emotions including stress, worry, anger, depression, low self-esteem and grief.

Our own Carers UK research (Caring Behind Closed Doors, 2020) undertaken during the pandemic found that many unpaid carers were at breaking point. They told us that during lockdown they felt “abandoned”, “set adrift” and expected to “get on with it” with little or no support. Carers UK previously found that carers were already seven times more likely to be lonely than the average person, and restrictions and shielding stripped away carers support networks leaving many feeling isolated. This has led to half of carers feeling lonely and isolated during the pandemic.

In Wales, more than three quarters (76%) of carers surveyed reported being exhausted and worn out by their caring role during the pandemic and more than half (54%) were more stressed than before the pandemic.

The promotion of carer wellbeing is hugely important to Carers Wales and is a key part of the work we do with carers. We wanted to support carers to look after their wellbeing to help them deal with the pressures of caring and the emotions they may be feeling to help reduce the impact on their lives. We wanted to find ways to help carers cope in challenging circumstances and to maintain positive mental health.

Our plan was to establish online wellbeing sessions that would support resilience, offer an environment that allowed for opportunities for active inclusion and enable carers to take time away from their caring responsibilities. We also wanted our sessions to promote fun, adventure, friendships, creativity, health and courage.

We aimed to provide a range of activities which would give carers a short break from their caring role, to provide something for their own enjoyment and to give them the chance to experience activities they may not have thought of doing and that this would be alongside other carers who understand how they feel.

3. How we started

Our first step was to seek feedback and input from unpaid carers about the sort of sessions they would like included in the new MeTime programme and timing for the sessions e.g. length of session, time of day/weekends etc.

Carers were clear that they wanted a mix of wellbeing activities and psychological support, so armed with this feedback we began researching online and via phone calls what sort of sessions we could include and which external organisations and professionals could deliver the sessions.

We contacted a variety of different people/organisations and looked at sessions on mindfulness, arts and crafts for wellbeing, nature and environmental talks, life coaches,
health and nutrition, music such as singers, group musicians and even contacted the Welsh National Opera to come along to do a session. No one is out of reach as everything is now online!

When looking for material for the sessions, there were three important factors we considered:

➢ Is the content clear and concise and can it be delivered in a short session?
➢ Are they totally inclusive and open to all?
➢ Will they support the confidentiality and safety of the attendees?

We then established several elements to support the delivery of the programme. As follows:

• Agreed protocols for the MeTime sessions via Zoom, including safeguarding and complaints procedures.
• Established a post-session evaluation survey in order to gather consistent feedback and suggestions for further sessions.
• Set up a page on the Carers Wales website for carers to find out more about MeTime, view and book the sessions. [https://www.carersuk.org/wales/help-and-advice/me-time](https://www.carersuk.org/wales/help-and-advice/me-time)

4. What We Delivered

The MeTime sessions started at the beginning of August. Sessions have ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours and have been delivered at a range of times in the day, evening and weekends.

On average we have delivered 3 or 4 sessions per week, including during Christmas and New Year. The average attendance has been 10 to 15 people.

Numbers attending is fairly evenly split between those attending during the day, in the evenings and at weekends.

We have delivered a multitude of sessions including anger management, stress management, sleep strategies and anxiety management. We also run sessions on relaxation techniques such as mindfulness and yoga meditation. The wellbeing sessions have focused more on activities such as craft, bingo and music.

We have had a lot of very positive feedback from our sessions and have found that we are now getting to know the carers and they are getting to know more about our organisation and what else we can offer them. Here is a small selection of the feedback we have received:

“Me Time is my lifeline.”
“No one cares about me day to day.”
“I wouldn’t have got through the lockdown without you “
“Thank you so much for organising this. What a wonderful way to appreciate carers.”
“I was never able to attend outside group session due to my caring role and I felt very lonely and isolated. Since coming to the sessions, I have felt more included, more respected as a carer and importantly I realise that I am not alone in feeling the way I do about my caring role sometimes.”
“This session helped me because I was at my wit’s end and was not sure how to go forward, then lockdown happened, and I felt myself go into despair. I heard about your sessions and you made me feel so special and part of something bigger than me. I have met people I would never have known from across Wales and that has been a very special experience for me – Thank you so much.”
“You heard me speak and you listened – so many people hear me but don’t listen and that’s ok I am used to that now.”
“I thought I didn’t have time to come to Me Time sessions, my caring role is so complicated that I felt it was too intrusive – but now I eat my words, having come to one of the sessions it made me feel so involved and I thought to myself I need this time to re-evaluate myself as a person.”

Carers from 19 of the 22 Welsh Local Authorities have attended one of our online Me Time sessions. We have had 846 attendees.

Of the 846 attendees, 336 attendees provided feedback via a survey issued after sessions:

- 73% attendees said the session they attended was excellent
- 23% said it was very good
- 4% said it was good
- No-one has fed back that it was poor
- 76% said it had a positive effect on their mood
- 73% said it had a positive impact on their emotional wellbeing
- 55% said it helped them do something for themselves
- 53% said it enabled them to connect with other carers
- 48% said it helped them experience something new
- 31% said it boosted their self-confidence
- 29% said it supported them in their role as a carer

5. What We Have Learned

- It was very important to plan and be well prepared to ensure a nurturing environment and to give carers the opportunity to be heard and involved in decisions about the sessions. Using tools such as feedback surveys after sessions, as well as feedback during sessions, has helped us to fine-tune our sessions to make them as impactful as possible.
• We needed to respect the carers’ differing backgrounds, needs and experience of caring.

• Sessions need to be sustainable and consistent; we hear from carers all the time about how let down they feel when an organisation is unable to fulfil its promise of support in whatever form.

• We have a duty of care for the carers that attend our sessions. It is important to ensure that support is available for carers at every session. We undertook a thorough risk assessment prior to running the sessions, to ensure we had procedures in place for a variety of scenarios that could happen before, within or after the sessions. Where appropriate, we provide follow up support to carers who may need information and advice.

• We have planned sessions well in advance to ensure we had time to promote and advertise the sessions and demonstrate the range of sessions on offer.

• The promotion of emotional resilience has helped carers to explore positive coping strategies.

• Carers have learned about and built positive relationships with other carers by attending repeat sessions. Some of the outcomes of our sessions were that carers felt a greater sense of self-esteem and the ability to consider their own needs.

• Registrations for the event and then attendance is noted. This helps us see repeat registrations and those who do not attend the sessions. This also helps us monitor which sessions and times are most popular.

• We carefully record the dates of all the booked sessions with the zoom links on, the primary contact for the speaker and the person facilitating the session – this is especially useful if you have more than one person working on the project.

• All the information for the speakers, contact details and biographies of the sessions they provide for us is recorded.

**Tips for setting up and carrying out sessions**

• Before booking any session, we always have a meeting with new speakers to discuss what we would like the session to look like and if they can deliver this.

• We agree the cost, timings, and dates before booking.

• We looked at providing sessions outside of normal working hours and these out of hours sessions have been very popular. As we are all too aware, the caring role is not 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday.
It is difficult for some people who do not have access to technology to use Zoom, so we offer a service where we can book them onto the sessions and then we can text them the details so that they can access us by telephone.

This does not work as well with craft and some of the more energetic sessions, however, with life coaching or even any PowerPoint sessions, we ask for the material in advance and send a copy to those not accessing on a computer so that they can feel totally inclusive of the session.

- **We offer a buddy service;** this is where a volunteer can contact someone new to Zoom and meet with them virtually on a one to one basis to help them feel more comfortable to access the sessions.

- **We advertise widely** through our contacts, on our website and via social media channels to reach out to carers and we promote as often as we can when doing talks to professionals or other groups.

- When setting up the zoom link, we have a paragraph that explains that although zoom has a platform of security, these sessions are online and as such we do all we can to keep them as safe and secure as we can, however their information can be seen online under certain circumstances.

- We always warn that the chat can be seen online so participants must be careful what they put in there and that, as an organisation, we will not tolerate any bullying, bad language, or racism as these are unacceptable.

- We always have an extra facilitator on each session (usually a volunteer, who is willing to be a co-host) or the speaker so that if anyone has a problem or needs to speak to someone confidentially, we have the option to remove them to a breakout room away from the main room for a chat – we are always aware of how someone else’s interpretation of a session can impact on the other participants.

- We have a registration process that means that someone from the organisation has to approve each person before they have the link sent to them for the session– Zoom has this facility.

### 6. Wellbeing Days

Having delivered the MeTime sessions during 2020, we decided to put all the similar sessions into one day for carers who would like to ‘have a go’ and try something new. We called these our ‘Wellbeing Days’. We have run one wellbeing day in January, February and March.

We found that, on average, we had over 50% more interest in the all-day sessions from new carers and they went on to access our regular sessions.

Having a wellbeing day gives an option to have a go at something in a shorter amount of time. Carers can come in and out as it suits them and have access to a wider range of
activities in the same space. They can be confident knowing that if they miss a session or must leave early due to their caring role, this does not impede on anyone else.

We kept to themes for the wellbeing days and looked at Managing your Mind, Managing your Body with Movement, Craft for Wellbeing and Back to Nature themes which allow us to introduce different sessions and speakers in shorter one-hour sessions instead of the regular two-hour sessions we do.

With our budget, we can send out craft kits to carers prior to the sessions so that they can access these without worrying about what is needed to achieve the goal.

- 71% reported the sessions were excellent
- 21% reported the sessions were good
- 82% reported the sessions had a positive effect on their mood
- 74% reported the sessions had a positive effect on their wellbeing
- 58% reported the sessions helped them to do something for themselves
- 63% reported they experienced something new
- 47% reported the sessions boosted their self-confidence
- 55% reported that the sessions would support them in their role as a carer
- 14% reported that the sessions enabled them to connect to other carers.

7. Overall takeaways

Our overall takeaways from our learning are:

Be prepared for each session, set a goal and ensure you can achieve the goal for the session.

Always plan ahead and take the time to look at what you are delivering and why. Most importantly know how it is all going to look and what you expect the outcome will be for the carers who attend, as well as for those who are unable to.

Make sure that the questions you ask in feedback reflect the goals you want to achieve for example:

- what further sessions could be provided?
- was the time allocated for the session adequate?
- has the carer felt that they achieved emotional wellbeing?
- has the session improved their mood and ability to care?
- have they felt that they have done something different and made a difference to themselves?

Listen, take note and act on these answers. Change the times and days of sessions to see when they are more convenient for the carers (not yourselves) and always keep an eye on what you have learnt from the sessions and the carers who attend them.
8. For more information

We hope that this toolkit has been helpful. If you have any queries, please contact us.

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