Emotional Support and Mental Wellbeing

“Carers tend to put everyone before themselves until they are so unwell they fall apart. We hide our feelings and our exhaustion so not to let people think we can’t cope”

Background

It is well evidenced that caring can have a significant impact on a person’s mental health and wellbeing and that a greater number of carers have been affected during the pandemic.

The Carers Act (Scotland) 2016 includes several duties which aim to support carers’ mental health and wellbeing. These include:

- A duty to consider the impact of caring on a young carer’s wellbeing when preparing a Young Carer Statement
- A duty to consider the impact of caring on an adult carer’s wellbeing when preparing an Adult Carer Support Plan
- A duty on local authorities to prepare a local carers strategy which must include an assessment on how plans to support carers reduce the impact on their health and wellbeing
- A duty to provide an information and advice service which must include information and advice on health and wellbeing (including counselling) for carers

It is important to recognise the links between the mental wellbeing of carers and access to regular breaks from caring, emotional support, financial wellbeing and supportive employment, amongst other things. We must also acknowledge that the majority of carers are female and the sectors they predominantly work in have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and lockdown, this has increased the pressures felt by working carers.

Alongside improving carers support services, attention needs to be given to carers whose wellbeing has already been impacted by their caring role where specific measures are required.

Evidence of the impact of caring on mental health and wellbeing

Even before the pandemic there has been clear evidence that caring often has an impact on peoples’ mental health and wellbeing.

---

1 COCIS carer survey on the National Care Service
2 Carers Week Research, Carers UK 2020 https://www.carersuk.org/for-professionals/policy/policy-library/carers-week-2020-research-report#:~:text=Read%20the%20full%20report%20here
The 2019/2020 Health and Care Experience Survey found that only 38% of carers said that caring had **not** had a negative impact on their health and wellbeing, this survey has consistently shown a decline in the health and wellbeing of the carer population since its inception.

Similarly, Carers UK State of Caring Report evidences the impact of caring on people’s mental health and wellbeing. Its 2019 report found that 27% of carers said their mental health was ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’

The 2021 State of Caring report found that the pandemic had contributed to a further decline in the wellbeing of the carer population, with 31% of carers describing their mental health as ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’

Further, the above report also found that, across the UK 1.76% of unpaid carers had to use a foodbank during April 2020. The use of foodbanks varied by sex and caring duties. Female carers were more likely to live in a household which had used a foodbank than women and men without caring responsibilities. As mental wellbeing is affected by many factors, including socio-economic ones, the impact onto wellbeing would have resulted in increased anxiety and worry.

In addition, VOCAL Carers Hub, which provides support to carers in Edinburgh and Midlothian, received 1,286 responses to their carer survey in 2021. 79% of respondents agreed that “being a carer has affected my mental health”, with 39% agreeing strongly. This compares with 57% in 2017 who agreed with the statement “being a carer has made my health worse.”

A review of national and international literature relating to impact of COVID on mental health in populations noted that families/carers of patients who survive critical illness can also be adversely affected with estimates that up to 30% may experience stress, anxiety, depression or complicated grief. Risk factors for family/carers to develop such outcomes include

- poor communication,
- having a decision-making role,
- lower educational attainment
- and the severity of the relative’s condition such as being close to death or dying.

The most common problems experienced by family members providing care and support include sleep deprivation, anxiety, depression, complicated grief, and PTSD.” (Rawal et al. 2017)

In research carried out by Carers Trust into the impact of COVID and caring on young and young adult carers it was found that 69% of young carers and 76% of young adult carers were more stressed as a result of pandemic and immediate response to it. The same report found that 38% of young carers and 44 of young adult carers feel less able to cope. The report also highlighted that just 4% of young carers and 15% of young adult carers currently access remote counselling or therapies.

---

3 Mental Health Effects of the COVID 19 Pandemic in Scotland, Dr John Mitchell, PMO Mental Health Directorate – 12.06.20

4 2020 Vision: Hear Me, See Me, Support Me and Don’t forget Me, Carers Trust Scotland 2020
There is therefore clear evidence that overall, the mental health and wellbeing of Scotland’s carer population has significantly declined during the pandemic.

**Recommendations**

**Phase 1 (COVID recovery)**

- Provide unpaid carers with access to tailored, mental health support, in the same way the registered care workforce has access to this support. For example, this could be delivered through enabling unpaid carers to get access to counselling services by providing funding to local carer support services.
- As part of mental health recovery planning, commission additional bereavement services and support for carers. For many carers, loss during the pandemic, whether through COVID or not, may be further heightened by restrictions in seeing their loved one prior to their death, an inability to properly mark their passing and by isolation during and following their passing. The Centre for Mental Health May report “Covid-19 and the nation’s mental health” recommends that the NHS should proactively offer tailored mental health support to people affected by bereavement.

**Phase 2 (Carers Strategy)**

- As part of the upcoming Mental Health Strategy, consider how in the longer term, unpaid carers can be provided with planned and accessible mental health support to support them at key stages in their caring journey. This should include the provision of increased peer networks for unpaid carers of all ages.
- The provision of advocacy services specifically for carers should be considered to help them assert their right to the highest attainable standard of health possible.

**Contacts**

Claire Cairns, Coalition of Carers  
coaition@carersnet.org

Fiona Collie, Carers Scotland  
fiona.collie@carerscotland.org

Suzanne Munday, MECOPP  
suzanne@mecopp.org.uk

Paul Traynor, Carers Trust Scotland  
ptraynor@carers.org