

About unpaid carers

An unpaid carer is a family member, partner, friend, or neighbour who helps a person with daily activities that they would not be able to manage if they did not have help. This could be a partner, family member or friend who has a long term or terminal illness, someone who is disabled, has a mental health condition, is affected by addiction or who needs extra help as they grow older. There are approximately 800,000 people in Scotland providing such unpaid care¹. It would cost an estimated £13.1 billion² every year to replace the care they provide.

Key findings from State of Caring 2023

- Over a quarter of all carers (28%) said their mental health was bad or very bad, which rose to over a third (36%) of those who cared for someone with a mental health condition.
- A third (36%) of carers with bad or very bad mental health reported that they had had thoughts related to self-harm or suicide, rising to 40% of those who cared for someone with a mental health condition..
- 85% of carers of those with a mental health condition expressed that the main challenge they would face that year was the impact of caring would have on physical and/or mental health.

Carers Scotland recommendations:

1. **The Scottish Government should deliver a timetable for changes to eligibility for Carer Support Payment** including increasing the earnings threshold to ensure that the benefit does not restrict carers' employment choices. Particular attention should be paid in ensuring the benefit responds to caring for someone with a fluctuating condition such as mental health conditions.
2. **The Scottish Government should consider opportunities to improve carers mental wellbeing by increasing the pace of a right to a break from caring** including early pilots as part of the National Care Service and delivering additional funding for flexible short breaks through Carers Centres.
3. **The Scottish Government should urgently progress actions within the National Carers Strategy** to deliver health checks and flexible health appointments for carers, including providing replacement care for appointments and should go further to introduce dedicated mental health support for carers of all ages, including providing funding for local carer and young carer services to offer counselling services alongside their provision of emotional support services.
4. **The Scottish Government and NHS Boards should** ensure that the [Triangle of Care](#) is implemented across all mental health services in Scotland.

¹ Scotland's Carer vs update release, Scottish Government 2022

² National Care Service Financial Memorandum, Scottish Parliament 2022

The information in this paper is provided from [State of Caring in Scotland 2023](#), an annual survey by Carers Scotland³. It is Scotland's most comprehensive research into the lives and experiences of unpaid carers. This briefing is based upon the responses of the 538 respondents who completed the State of Caring survey and said that they were caring for someone with a mental health condition.

Health and wellbeing

When asked what impact caring has on their health and wellbeing, over a third (36%) of those caring for someone with a mental health condition reported that their mental health was bad or very bad. More than four in five (86%) carers said they felt stressed or anxious due to their caring role, over half (55%) said they felt depressed with a similar number (53%) saying they felt lonely. Most of these unpaid carers reported a feeling of hopelessness (86%) with similar numbers (85%) saying they had suffered from low mood.

"I have been so tired and lonely and worried in the past".

[Unpaid carer, responding to State of Caring]

"Debilitating and exhausting mentally, physically, and emotionally".

[Unpaid carer, responding to State of Caring]

Caring also clearly has an impact on physical health. Over three in five (63%) of respondents said that their physical health had suffered because of their caring role with around one in five (24%) saying they had suffered an injury because of their caring role. Carers often put the health of the cared for person above their own and half (50%) of carers of those with mental health conditions worryingly reported in this survey that they had put off their own healthcare treatment.

Taking a break from caring can improve both physical and mental wellbeing. However, responses to State of Caring showed that many face issues when attempting to take a break from caring. More than two fifths (41%) of unpaid carers of those with mental health conditions said they were unable to take a break from caring because it was too difficult to do so. Only 8% were able to take a break from caring with replacement care coming from health and social care services.

Experiences of caring and employment

Many providing unpaid care want to be in paid employment as evidenced by the fact 34% of those caring for someone with a mental health condition reported in State of Caring that being in paid employment improved their health and wellbeing. However, only a quarter (26%) of respondents caring for someone with a mental health condition were in full-time employment with less than one in five (18%) being in part time employment. The State of Caring survey highlights the significant impact that unpaid care has on a person's ability to be in employment as more than one in three (39%) with unpaid care roles for those with mental health conditions said that they had given up employment completely to provide care.

³ Carers Scotland is the Scottish nation office of Carers UK. Carers UK is a charity registered in England and Wales (246329) and in Scotland (SC039307) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (864097). Registered office 20 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4LX

The responses to the survey made it clear that issues in accessing support services have played a significant role in the decisions to stop being in employment all together. More than a quarter (28%) indicated that the reason for giving up employment was because of the lack of support from NHS or social care services.

Financial impact of caring

Caring has a significant impact on finances with 42% of unpaid carers of those with mental health conditions reporting at the time of the survey that they were struggling to make ends meet. Nearly three quarters (72%) reported that they were worried about living costs and whether they could manage in the future. More than one in five (24%) reported that they were in debt as a direct consequence of their caring role.

“Carer’s Allowance doesn't meet my living expenses”.

[Unpaid carer, responding to State of Caring]

All carers experience with mental health

Caring, particularly with insufficient support, can be damaging to a carer’s mental health. Over a quarter of all unpaid carers (28%) who responded to the State of Caring survey said their mental health is bad or very bad, rising to 37% for carers on Carer’s Allowance suggesting those on low incomes face additional struggles.

Worryingly 36% of those that reported their mental health as bad or very bad also reported that they’d had thoughts related to self-harm or suicide.

A sizeable proportion of carers reported that they had been unable to access mental health support. A quarter (25%) of carers said that delays in NHS appointments was the reason they had not accessed mental health support.

Conclusion

Across all caring groups, impact on mental health is considerable and delivery of the right support for caring and support for their own mental health is vital, including breaks from caring. However, it is clear from State of Caring that those caring for someone with a mental health condition face even greater challenges. Therefore, dedicated and tailored support for this group of carers is required.

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