

CARER FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES AND SHORT BREAKS

Unpaid carers

An unpaid carer is someone who provides unpaid care and support to a family member, friend or neighbour due to disability, illness, frailty, mental health challenges, or substance misuse. Care and support can look different for each¹ caring situation, from emotional support to providing personal care, such as bathing and dressing. There are an estimated 700,000 – 800,000 unpaid carers in Scotland², with 3 in 5 of us likely to become an unpaid carer in our lifetime.

Introduction

This briefing has been developed by Shared Care Scotland and Carers Scotland. It uses evidence from this year's Carers Week report, Carers Scotland's State of Caring 2025³, Shared Care Scotland's 'Exploring unpaid carers' experiences of short breaks and respite care'⁴ research, and the latest Short Breaks Fund and Respite impact reports⁵.

Taking a break from caring can support unpaid carers to have good physical and mental wellbeing, maintain social connection, and take part in hobbies and activities that matter most to them. However, there is a significant gap between unpaid carers' need for breaks and what they can access, meaning many experience limited choice of breaks, or cannot access a break at all. Building carer friendly communities can provide flexible, informal support close to home, reducing loneliness and supporting carers to access regular, meaningful breaks from caring.

Key findings

- **60% of carers** 'often' or 'always' feel the need for a break, yet **only 7.5%** report 'regularly' or 'frequently' receiving breaks from caring.
- **A third of unpaid carers (33%)** 'rarely' or 'never' access a break of more than two hours.

¹ [Building Carer Friendly Communities](#), Carers Week Consortium (2026)

² [Scotland's Carers update release: March 2025 - gov.scot](#)

³ [State of Caring: the cost of caring in Scotland 2025](#), Carers Scotland (2025)

⁴ [Exploring Unpaid Carers Experiences of Short Breaks](#), Shared Care Scotland (2024)

⁵ These are available at [Shared Care Scotland](#) and [Respite](#) websites

- **32% of carers** report little or no support from family and friends as the main barrier to short breaks, indicating that many carers are navigating caring on their own.
- While carers **generally use breaks to attend to personal errands** (shopping, housework, admin, etc.), carers say they would **prefer to use breaks to engage with hobbies and personal interests or attend events or entertainment**.
- In 2025, **90% of carers who accessed Respite breaks** chose to take these in their local area. This further contributes to a steady shift towards localised breaks seen by the programme over the last two years.
- In 2024–2025, organisations funded through the Short Breaks Fund reported the significance of community engagement and collaboration in delivering short breaks, with **37% of Better Breaks funded projects** noting increased community input as critical in strengthening networks. Likewise, **Creative Breaks funded projects highlighted collaboration with local organisations, education and community groups broadened their reach**.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ when it comes to short breaks. Diversity amongst unpaid carers and their caring roles and responsibilities calls for a wide range of short breaks options, ensuring all carers can access breaks that offer rest, leisure and time.

While breaks away may work for some, others prefer to access short breaks that allow them to stay local or remain at home. These breaks include local leisure, entertainment and therapeutic opportunities; equipment and materials to support hobbies; and community groups and spaces. However, unpaid carers often face emotional and practical barriers to taking a break, such as feeling guilty, the cost of breaks, or a lack of suitable break options.

Communities that cultivate recognition, understanding and support for unpaid carers can help to alleviate and even prevent some of these challenges. Through collective action, these communities provide unpaid carers with spaces where they can be valued and supported. This creates equal opportunities for unpaid carers and empowers them to achieve life balance.

Why is building carer friendly communities so important?

Alongside intense caring roles, unpaid carers feel invisible or unable to participate in their community, maintain connections and take breaks, their health and wellbeing often suffer. **A fifth (20%) of unpaid carers** in the Carers Week research said that they did not feel able to maintain a healthy lifestyle but **over a quarter (28%)** said that they often find it difficult to participate in the local groups and activities that could support their wellbeing.

Where communities and services are not ‘carer friendly’, **nearly a third (32%) said that this had a negative impact on their health**, with many saying it contributed to feelings of loneliness and **over a third (38%)** said it made it more difficult to provide care.

With a third of carers already saying that their physical and/or mental health is poor⁶ and those with caring responsibilities experiencing greater ill health than those without caring responsibilities, building carer friendly communities has never been more critical.

Building communities that support carers to have breaks

Building carer friendly communities means creating places where carers feel recognised, included and supported in everyday community life. Community organisations, groups, local spaces and services, as well as employers and formal social care services can play an important role in helping carers feel connected and supported – and in turn support opportunities for carers to take a break and support their own health and wellbeing.

- Community groups and organisations can play a powerful role in building carer friendly communities because they are often trusted, local and accessible. Practical steps do not need to be complex – small, intentional changes such as asking if someone is a carer or making activities available at different times or more accessible - can make a significant difference to carers’ daily lives.
- A carer friendly community at work is one where carers can balance employment and caring in an understanding environment that identifies and supports them. Practical steps could start small with talking about caring in the workplace. For example, a leader sharing their own experience of caring and helping to fostering an inclusive workplace for carers, but also work towards building flexible working opportunities, carer policies and carer networks to build mutual support.

⁶ State of Caring 2025

The [Carer Positive](#) award helps employers start thinking about how they can build a carer friendly community in their workplace.

- Building a carer friendly community across the NHS means that the health service identifies and recognises the crucial role of unpaid carers and helps protect carers own health and wellbeing. Practical steps in communities to do so include working in partnership with community organisations, leisure services, community health and the voluntary sector to help offer flexible services and opportunities near where they live. [Community Link Workers](#) are a great example of such partnerships which help connect individuals with support, advice and local groups that can support health and wellbeing.

These are just some examples and Carers Week have produced a [Blueprint for Carer Friendly Communities](#) to help everyone to think about how they can play their part.

Conclusion

Simply put, if unpaid carers are supported in everyday life and have access to a good variety of local break options, this can help support maintaining good wellbeing and a life alongside caring.

As the Right to a Break progresses towards delivery for unpaid carers, they must be at the heart of decision-making locally and nationally. Shifting the discussion of short breaks from the language of legislation to instead focus on what helps carers feel like themselves will help to embed person-centred practice, focusing carers' own outcomes within the planning and delivery of short breaks.

Through carer friendly communities, unpaid carers can have more options and types of short breaks: a “market” that develops to not only help meet demand but also ensure unpaid carers can access the right breaks for them and be supported to do so. In turn, this prevents crisis, reduces isolation and supports carers' health and wellbeing.



Contacts:

Jenni McNab

Head of Policy and Communications - Shared Care Scotland

jenni.mcnab@sharedcarescotland.com

Fiona Collie

Head of Public Affairs and Communications - Carers Scotland

fiona.collie@carerscotland.org

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**Building
Carer Friendly
Communities**

