

# Briefing on unpaid carers' breaks in England

## Introduction

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Carers UK has produced this briefing to provide an overview of carers' access to breaks in England. It includes the following sections:

1. [Summary](#)
2. [Why breaks matter: evidence and carers' perspectives](#)
3. [Unpaid carers' legal entitlements to breaks \(in England\)](#)
4. [Barriers to accessing Carer's Assessments and breaks](#)
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*NOTE: This policy briefing provides details on carers' breaks in England only. This is due to the fact the Care Act 2014 only covers England.*

## Summary

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There are 5.8 million unpaid carers in the UK who provide vital support to family members, friends or neighbours who are older, disabled or seriously ill. Despite providing unpaid care that is valued at £184 billion each year, carers often feel invisible and overlooked, and struggle to get the support they need.<sup>1</sup>

This lack of support often means that carers are unable to access regular and meaningful breaks from caring, leaving them burnt out and exhausted, and unable to live a meaningful life beyond their caring responsibilities.

Research has consistently found that a lack of access to breaks and appropriate respite support can have a significant impact on carers' physical and emotional health and wellbeing, personal relationships, financial resilience, and ability to balance paid work with unpaid care responsibilities.

While the Care Act 2014 requires local councils to assess unpaid carers, provide support to meet their eligible needs, and promote carer-wellbeing, carers' breaks are not defined in legislation.

### The UK Government needs to improve carers' access to breaks by:

- **Increasing funding for breaks** – UK Government should invest an additional £1.5 billion in breaks and respite services in England (with consequential funding for Devolved Nations) to ensure that local authorities have sufficient and sustainable funding to enable them to fulfil their duties under the Care Act 2014.
- **Introducing a statutory right to a break** – UK Government should legislate to provide all unpaid carers with a statutory right to a break from their caring responsibilities, by placing a new duty on local authorities to prepare a Carer's Assessment that includes identifying whether the carer can take sufficient breaks.

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<sup>1</sup> Carers UK (2024), [Valuing Carers](#).

## **Why breaks matter: evidence and carers' perspectives**

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The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) outlines a break as “something that carers want to use for themselves. It should be planned, meaningful, and positive. The arrangement for a break needs to work for both the carer and the person they care for.”<sup>2</sup>

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that carers' breaks should “meet carers' needs for a break, for example in duration, timing, frequency and type of break” and “be arranged in a way that provides reliable and consistent support to the carer (such as avoiding last-minute changes that could lead to additional stress for the carer)”.<sup>3</sup>

A break can be accessed in multiple ways, including:

- Residential care – where the person being care for has a short stay in a residential care home
  - Day-sitting services – where the carer is enabled to take a break to go shopping, socialise, participate in hobbies, or have time to themselves
  - Day care centres – where the person being cared for goes to a day centre or takes part in activities part in activities away from home
  - Group activities including peer-to-peer support
  - Individual activities for the person who needs care, with support
  - Support from family and friends
  - Respite holidays
- Research has consistently found that having regular, reliable access to a variety of breaks is essential for carers' mental and physical health and wellbeing. Without breaks, carers frequently struggle to continue caring while maintaining their own health and wellbeing.
  - Carers UK's State of Caring 2024 survey found that:
    - 49% of carers need more breaks to take time off from caring.
    - 54% said being able to have regular breaks from caring would be a challenge over the coming year.<sup>4</sup>
      - Female carers reported more difficulty accessing breaks than male carers: 54% of women said they need more breaks (compared to 43% of men) and 57% said having regular breaks would be a challenge (compared to 47% of men).
      - Working-age carers are more likely to say they need breaks from caring – and are also more likely to anticipate challenges accessing them. Carers aged between 35-44 report the highest levels (54%) of needing more breaks and anticipating difficulty accessing them (58%).
    - 57% of carers feel overwhelmed often and always. The main reason carers feel overwhelmed is because they are not getting a break from caring. 65% of carers said they feel overwhelmed because they cannot take time away from their caring roles.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [Introduction for adult carers' breaks - SCIE](#)

<sup>3</sup> NICE (2020), [Supporting adult carers](#)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Carers UK (2024), [State of Caring – The impact of caring on carers' mental health and the need for support from social care services](#)

- When carers are unable to take a break from caring, it can have a severe impact on their own health. Our State of Caring 2023 survey found that 73% of carers with bad or very bad mental health continued to provide care despite being at breaking point.<sup>6</sup>
- Carers Week 2025 research found that 40% of current carers had postponed or cancelled a medical appointment, test, scan, treatment, or therapy because of caring – an estimated 4.8 million people.<sup>7</sup>
- According to the ADASS Spring Survey 2025, social care service directors reported a substantial increase in the number of carers requiring support from 2023/24 to 2024/25. Following carer breakdown, 34% of directors saw an increase in support requests of less than 10%, while 20% saw an increase of more than 10%.<sup>8</sup>
- Directors considered carer burnout to be the most important factor contributing to carer breakdowns, highlighting the importance of breaks in maintaining carers' health and wellbeing.

### **Carers responding to Carers UK's State of Caring 2024 survey told us:**

- *"Instead of 'more' breaks, I would just like a break full stop. I haven't had a day off for 12 years."*
- *"I can't do the things I had hoped to do in my life because of my caring role. I can't get a promotion, go travelling, or spend time with friends. I can't relax. Ever."*
- *"I feel like my life is on hold whilst I care for my Mum. I can't leave her therefore I can't have any sort of break or go on holiday."*

### **Many carers responding to the survey said they wanted to see a future where there were more opportunities to take a break from caring:**

- *"I want to see a future for carers where we don't have to feel we are constantly at breaking point because we aren't able to have enough breaks."*
- *"I want to see future for carers where they have regular breaks so they don't become ill themselves."*
- *"I want to see a future for carers where we can find time to look after own mental and physical needs, to avoid becoming stressed, depressed and burnt out."*

## **Unpaid carers' legal entitlement to breaks in England**

The Care Act 2014 came into effect in April 2015. The Act requires local councils to assess unpaid carers, provide support to meet their eligible needs, and promote carer wellbeing.

If the local authority who carries out the carer's assessment determines that a carer has eligible needs, they have a legal obligation to meet those needs and must draw up a support plan detailing how these needs will be met.

- Part 1, Section 10, subsection 5(b) of the Act stipulates that the carer's assessment **must include an assessment of** the day-to-day outcomes that the carer wishes to achieve. Part 1, Section 10, subsection 6 (b) states that the carer's assessment must have regard to whether the carer is participating in or wishes to participate in education, work, training or recreation.

<sup>6</sup> Carers UK (2023), [State of Caring – The impact of caring on health](#)

<sup>7</sup> Carers Week (2025), [Caring about Equality](#)

<sup>8</sup> ADASS (2025), [Spring Survey](#)

- Carers frequently want to achieve outcomes that are related to breaks; sometimes carers view a break as an outcome in and of itself. Carers UK would therefore expect the majority of carer's assessments to consider carers' breaks, except where carers explicitly state that having a break is not an outcome that is important to them.
- The [care and support statutory guidance on the Care Act 2014](#) specifies that local authorities must have regard to the wellbeing principle of the Act.<sup>9</sup> This principle specifies that the general duty of a local authority is to promote an individual's wellbeing. The wellbeing principle applies in all cases where a local authority is carrying out a care and support function, or making a decision, in relation to that person.
- Paragraph 11.39 of the Care Act 2014 policy guidance<sup>10</sup> specifies that 'replacement care' may be needed to enable a carer to look after their own health and wellbeing alongside caring responsibilities, and to take a break from caring.
- Paragraph 11.41<sup>11</sup> specifies that local authorities must have regard to the wellbeing principle of the Act, as it may be the case that the carer needs a break from caring responsibilities to look after their own physical/mental health and emotional wellbeing, social and economic wellbeing and to spend time with other members of the family and personal relationships.
- Following a carer's assessment, the local authority can provide replacement care services themselves or arrange services through another organisation. Alternatively, carers can request direct payments to support them to have a break. For example, the payment could be used to go to the gym, or pay for driving lessons or a break away.
- If a person is receiving [NHS Continuing Care](#) (CHC), then the carer's right to an assessment still stands under [S.10 of the Care Act](#). If they have eligible needs, and their outcomes can only be met by breaks, then the ICB may provide additional support through NHS Continuing Care to provide additional care so that the carer can have a break. This is set out in the National Framework for NHS Continuing Care (2022) in paras 352 and 353.<sup>12</sup>

## **Barriers to accessing carer's assessments and breaks**

Despite these legal entitlements, carers often struggle to access support and breaks through carer's assessments.

- According to Carers UK's State of Caring 2024 survey, the majority of carers have not had a carer's assessment. Only 23% of carers had had a carer's assessment in the last 12 months.<sup>13</sup>
- 42% of carers who had had a carer's assessment said their local authority had not supported them after the assessment.
- 47% of carers who felt they had not been supported said the assessment identified areas where they needed more support, but this had not yet been provided.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-act-statutory-guidance/care-and-support-statutory-guidance>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> DHSC (2022), [National Framework for NHS Continuing Healthcare and NHS-funded Nursing Care](#)

<sup>13</sup> Carers UK (2024), [State of Caring – The impact of caring on carers' mental health and the need for support from social care services](#)

- Carers often report delays in waiting for the results of an assessment and even having an assessment arranged.
- Short and Long Term (SALT) data is a collection of data on social care activity in England. This data is collected annually to track individual journeys in the social care system, assess needs, and understand service provision.
- SALT data shows that in 2023-24, 360,815 carers were either supported or assessed/reviewed by local authorities – about 8% of all carers.<sup>14</sup>
- SALT data also shows that 70% of carers who approached their local authority for support were only given information, advice, and other universal services/signposting, or did not get any direct support at all.

Region	Direct Payment	Total number of carers	Proportion of carers receiving direct payment
<b>England</b>	<b>77,420</b>	<b>360,815</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>North East</b>	3,645	19,355	19%
<b>North West</b>	22,855	64,955	35%
<b>Yorkshire and The Humber</b>	5,840	49,595	12%
<b>East Midlands</b>	9,090	33,950	27%
<b>West Midlands</b>	4,830	31,265	15%
<b>East of England</b>	5,565	31,225	18%
<b>London</b>	9,840	39,090	25%
<b>South East</b>	9,555	52,140	18%
<b>South West</b>	6,205	39,235	16%

*Table 1: Table showing the proportion of carers receiving direct payment as a result of carer's assessments, SALT data 2023-24*

- Nuffield Trust analysis of SALT data shows that there were 13,000 fewer carers getting direct support in 2020/21 than there were six years previously in 2015/16.<sup>15</sup> This means fewer carers are now being given the choice and personalisation that direct payments were designed to offer.
- The most recent data shows a fall in the overall numbers of carers in England who were supported through local authority social services from 380,725 in 2021-22 to 360,815 in 2023-4. This is a fall of 20,000 carers in 2 years. These figures include unpaid carers who did not receive any kind of direct support.<sup>16</sup>
- Carer satisfaction with the support they receive has also declined. Carers UK analysis of data from the Personal Social Services Survey of Adult Carers in England (SACE) shows that in 2023/24, only 36.7% of carers reported being extremely or very satisfied with the services and support they received, compared

<sup>14</sup> [Carers support by local authorities - NHS England Digital](#)

<sup>15</sup> Nuffield Trust (2022), [Falling short: How far have we come in improving support for unpaid carers in England?](#)

<sup>16</sup> Carers UK analysis of SALT data for 2023-4: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-social-care-activity-and-finance-report/2023-24>



with 41% in 2014/15 – a near five percentage-point decrease in satisfaction over the eight-year period.<sup>17</sup>

- Cost is often a significant barrier preventing unpaid carers from accessing breaks. Research by Carers UK found that 38% of carers surveyed could not afford replacement care, while 34% said they were unable to afford any activities to do during their time off.<sup>18</sup>

### **Carers responding to Carers UK's State of Caring 2024 survey told us:**

Some carers said there was limited support available from care services, often due to a shortage of paid care workers.

- *“Assessment identified I need more support. Direct payment for respite given but not enough care staff available to provide the care.”*

Carers said they needed more help with accessing support following their Carer's Assessment.

- *“I have tried to contact assessor several times to ask for help securing a Direct Payment without success.”*

44% of carers said that the assessment did not sufficiently consider their needs. Several carers said they felt the assessment was just a 'tick box exercise', or did not cover all their caring tasks.

- *“I was rushed through the assessment and was made to feel as if I was a burden on them.”*

### **Statutory funding available for carers' breaks**

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- Funding for breaks for carers is primarily delivered through The Better Care Fund (BCF). As set out in the [BCF policy framework](#), to meet the objectives of the BCF, local areas should provide support for unpaid carers.<sup>19</sup>
- Funding for carers' breaks is not ringfenced within the BCF. This means that local authorities and Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) agree the amount of BCF funding in their locality that will be committed to supporting unpaid carers. As a result, actual spend by local authorities on services to support carers may differ.
- Support funded through the BCF for unpaid carers is mostly delivered by charities, voluntary organisations, and local authorities.<sup>20</sup>

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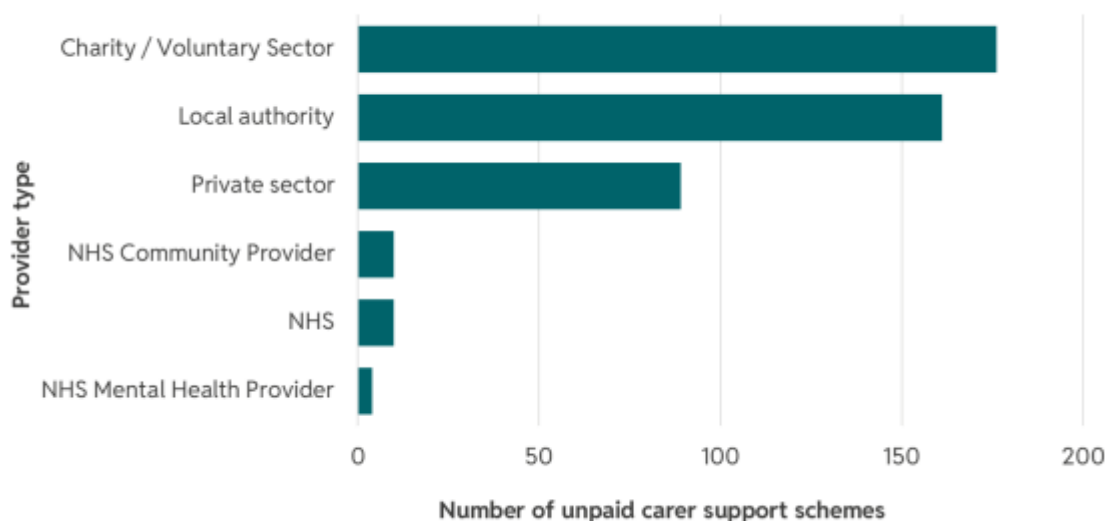
<sup>17</sup> NHS England (2024), [Personal Social Services Survey of Adult Carers in England](#)

<sup>18</sup> Carers UK (2022) [State of Caring 2022: A snapshot of unpaid care in the UK](#)

<sup>19</sup> <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-02-21/32763>

<sup>20</sup> Care Policy and Evaluation Centre (CPEC) (2025), [Support for unpaid carers funded through the Better Care Fund in England](#)

Figure 2: Number of unpaid care support schemes by provider type



Source: BCF financial reporting data (expenditure sheets)

- In 2022/23, £291.7 million of BCF funding was earmarked to provide short breaks and respite services for carers, as well as advice and support to unpaid carers.<sup>21</sup>
- According to SALT data, local authority gross expenditure on support to carers was £183 million in 2023-24, a drop of 6.1% from £195 million in 2022-23.<sup>22</sup>

## Existing good practice in delivering breaks

*Time Away from Caring: Good Practice in Carer Breaks*, is a report and resource developed by the Carers Partnership (Carers Trust and Carers UK) for commissioners and providers who want to develop and enhance their local carer breaks offer. It provides:

- evidence on the importance of breaks for unpaid carers
- highlights good practice in providing breaks
- Give Top Tips to commissioners and providers on what steps they can take to ensure the carers they support have access to breaks.

*The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) has also developed a 'Carers Hub'*, which provides examples of great practice and great ideas from social care teams and other organisations on how they are improving support for carers so they can balance their caregiving with other commitments in their lives. Some of the examples relating to breaks include:

- [https://www.adass.org.uk/campaign\\_articles/carers-improvement-programme/](https://www.adass.org.uk/campaign_articles/carers-improvement-programme/)
- [https://www.adass.org.uk/campaign\\_articles/carers-cookery-wellbeing-breaks-programme/](https://www.adass.org.uk/campaign_articles/carers-cookery-wellbeing-breaks-programme/)
- [https://www.adass.org.uk/campaign\\_articles/carer-break-service-north-yorkshire/](https://www.adass.org.uk/campaign_articles/carer-break-service-north-yorkshire/)

<sup>21</sup> Written questions and answers - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament

<sup>22</sup> Carers support by local authorities - NHS England Digital

## **Carers UK's position on carers' access to breaks**

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It is vital that all unpaid carers are given the opportunity to take regular, meaningful breaks to support them in their caring responsibilities.

**We recommend that the UK Government takes the following steps to improve carers' access to breaks:**

- **Increased funding for breaks** – the UK Government should urgently invest an additional £1.5 billion in breaks and respite services in England (with consequential funding for Devolved Nations).
- **Introduce a statutory right to a break** – provide all unpaid carers with a statutory right to a break for their caring responsibilities and place a duty on local authorities to prepare a Carer's Assessment that includes identifying whether the carer can take sufficient breaks.
- **Sufficient funding for local authorities** – UK Government should ensure that local authorities have sufficient and sustainable funding to enable them to fulfil their duties under the Care Act 2014.
- **Better Care Fund** – funding available through the Better Care Fund should be increased and ring-fenced to ensure it does not get lost within local budgets and it is used for the intended purpose. Local authorities should have to report their planned spending on carers' breaks within their Better Care Fund plans to strengthen the spending requirement. UK Government needs to be clear on the amount of money made available in each financial year through the BCF for supporting unpaid carers.
- **Investment in social care** – ensure that quick action is taken in the short term to support unpaid carers and include unpaid carers as a specific and central part of the Casey Commission into the reform of social care.
- **Enabling carers to juggle work and care** – build on the Carer's Leave Act 2023 and build the foundations for turning the existing statutory right to one week's unpaid leave to paid Carer's Leave, helping carers to balance paid employment with unpaid caring responsibilities.
- **A supportive healthcare system** – through delivery of the NHS 10 Year Plan more support needs to be provided to carers to help them look after their own mental and physical health and wellbeing.

Carers UK is also supporting Carers Trust's [Give Cares A Break](#) campaign, which is calling on the UK Government to make sure carers can access a legal right to a break from their caring role. Carers UK has campaigned for breaks for decades – having access to regular, meaningful breaks remains one of carers' key priorities.

## **Our campaigning on carers' breaks**

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**Carers UK has a long history of campaigning for breaks for unpaid carers over the last 60 years:**

- Our first major success came in the publication of the first National Carers Strategy, launched in 1999. This led to the delivery of the very first dedicated carers' support funding worth £140 million over three years to help carers take a break.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>DHSC (1999), [Caring about carers: a national strategy for carers](#)



- In 2010, Carers UK ran the [Give us a break](#) campaign, highlighting the need for increased breaks for carers. Our [Carers at breaking point](#) report, published as part of this campaign, found that only 8% of carers felt they had been able to take sufficient breaks. 52% of carers said that they would use a break to spend time with family and friends; 50% would use a break to catch up on sleep.
- In 2019, Carers UK submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to local authorities and clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) across England. The findings indicated a postcode in the support available to carers, highlighting significant disparities and unequal provision of breaks services across the nation. Of the 98 local authorities and 18 CCGs who responded, and were eligible for inclusion in the report, there was considerable variation in spending on carers' breaks in the year 2017-18, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of their overall Better Care Fund budget.<sup>24</sup>

## **Supporting carers to access breaks**

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### **Resources to support better understanding of carers' breaks:**

- [The Carers Partnership \(Carers UK and Carers Trust\)](#), as part of the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Health and Wellbeing Alliance, has produced a resource to support health and care systems in England to improve the inclusion, support, and involvement of carers. These resources should be used by health and care professionals to better support carers to access support, including breaks.
- [Time Away from Caring: Good Practice in Carer Breaks](#), is a report and resource developed by the Carers Partnership for commissioners and providers who want to develop and enhance their local carer breaks offer.
- [The Social Care Institute of Excellence \(SCIE\) has produced guidance](#) for commissioners, providers and others involved in the planning, shaping and delivery of support for adult carers, primarily in England.
- The [ADASS Carers Hub](#) is a resource for good practice for anyone who provides support to unpaid carers in England.

### **Information and advice for carers about breaks:**

- Carers UK's [Taking a break factsheet](#) provides information on the importance of breaks, how to arrange replacement care and plan breaks, ways to find support with the cost of a break and the potential implications breaks may have on social security benefits that many carers access.
- Carers UK's [Supporting carers to take a break video series](#) contains interviews with carers about their experiences accessing and organising breaks, where they have found support from, and how it has helped them. These videos help carers better understand how to access breaks, using the voices of carers themselves.

### **Resources for carers to challenge decisions by local authorities:**

- Carers UK's [While you're waiting factsheet](#) provides guidance to help carers find support while waiting for a Carer's Assessment or the results of one.
- [Carers UK has teamed with Access Social Care](#) to help carers understand the law governing social care in England, through online tool AccessAva and provides resources on how to challenge poor care decisions for disabled people. It also

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<sup>24</sup> Carers UK (2019) [Carers at breaking point: making the case for carers' breaks in England](#)

includes template letters, including one to send to a local authority if the carer is unable to care temporarily.

## **Helpful links and other resources**

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- [Care Act 2014](#)
- [Care Act Guidance](#)
- [The Care Act and Whole Family Approaches](#)
- [Health and Care Act 2022](#)
- [Health and Care Act Working in Partnership with People and Communities Guidance](#)
- [SCIE Carer Breaks Guide](#)
- [NICE Supporting Adult Carers Guidance](#)
- [NHS England Commissioning for Carers](#)
- [NHS England Carers Toolkit](#)
- [Supporting carers in general practice: a framework of quality markers](#)
- [SCIE's guide to co-production and co-design](#)
- [LGBT Foundation's Pride in Practice](#)
- [Supporting Black, Asian and minority ethnic carers: A good practice briefing](#)
- [Carers UK: Supporting LGBTQ+ carers: A good practice briefing](#)

## **About Carers UK**

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Carers UK is a charity set up to help the millions of people who care for family or friends. We are a membership organisation of carers, run by carers, for carers. We provide information and advice about caring alongside practical and emotional support for carers. We also campaign to make life better for carers and work to influence policy makers, employers, and service providers, to help them improve carers' lives.

**Disclaimer:** *Whilst Carers UK has made every effort to ensure this briefing is correct, it is not an authoritative statement of law.*

**For further information, please contact [policy@carersuk.org](mailto:policy@carersuk.org).**

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