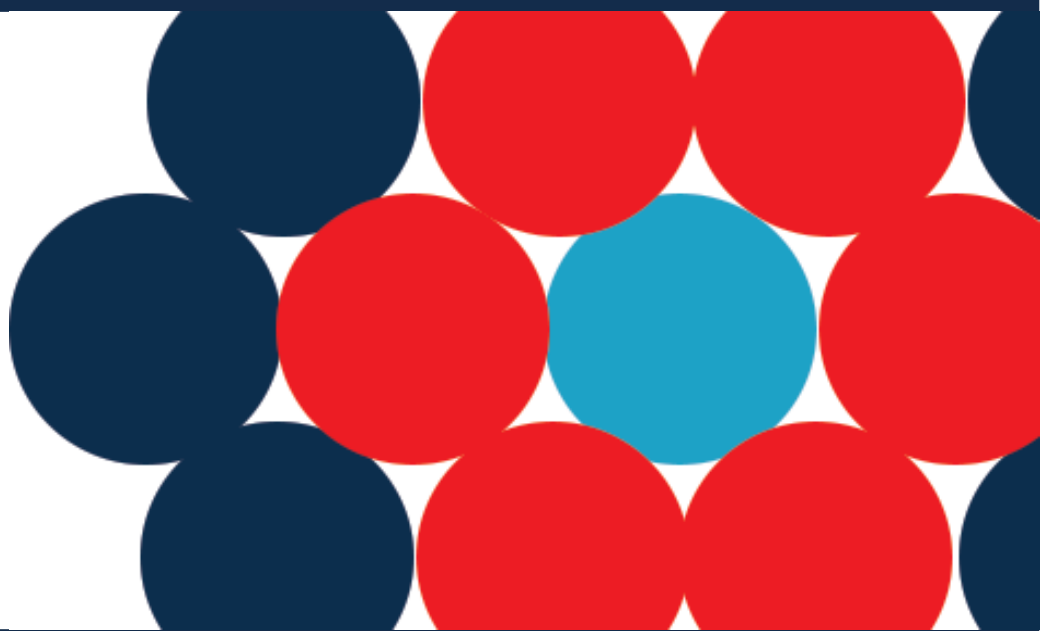


# **Social Worker Practice and Unpaid Carers: Findings of Comparative International Research**





## **Background**

Carers Trust Wales and Carers Wales are working in partnership to deliver a Welsh Government funded project called 'Carer Aware'. Together, we aim to transform the recognition, respect and support unpaid carers receive in health and social care settings.

Through the project, are working with carers and social care professionals to co-produce training sessions and resources to support professionals to be better able to identify, involve and support carers.

To inform the Carer Aware project, Carers Wales undertook desk-based research between January and February 2021, to identify best practice beyond Wales.

## **Social workers and carers in a comparative international context**

Research conducted for this project suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that unpaid carers are supported in diverse ways between different countries, where some have systems of social workers supporting carers that are broadly comparable to the system in Wales, while others diverge in their terminology and expectations of actors in the system.

While the Republic of Ireland uses familiar language of “carers”<sup>1</sup>, “family caregivers” is used in a North American context<sup>23</sup> and “informal caregivers” in Belgium<sup>4</sup>.

This research has considered practice and publications from England, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union. Even among these higher income countries, markedly different social safety nets, healthcare systems and forms of local governance impact on the comparability of how their social workers support unpaid carers. At the same time, a reasonable degree of commonality in perceived good practice for social worker interactions with unpaid carers can be observed.

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<sup>1</sup> OECD, 2011. Policies to Support Family Carers in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> National Association of Social Workers (United States), 2010. Standards for Social Work Practice with Family Caregivers of Older Adults.

<sup>3</sup> Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013. National Guidelines for a Comprehensive Service System to Support Family Caregivers of Adults with Mental Health Problems and Illnesses.

<sup>4</sup> Belgian Health Knowledge Centre, 2014. Support for Informal Caregivers.

## Themes in social worker practice regarding unpaid carers

This research has found such practice can be found in a diverse range of publications, from formal guidance to the social work profession from governments or regulators, to suggested good practice resulting from government funded projects that engaged with carers and other stakeholders, to booklets and guides published by condition specific or general third sector organisations concerned with the welfare of carers or those they care for.

The range of topics covered is considerable, but some common themes between countries and from diverse sources can be identified.

### 1. Respecting carer autonomy and preferences

In England, Skills for Care and Skills for Health worked with stakeholders, including carers, to develop a set of Common Core Principles for Working with Carers, aiming to shape behaviours, attitudes and actions towards carers<sup>5</sup>. One of their principles calls for social workers to “make no assumptions” regarding a carer’s capacity or willingness to begin or continue caring. The Institute of Public Care similarly sets out that assumptions on the part of social care professionals about a carer’s caring role can contribute to a situation “where carers feel they can’t say no”<sup>6</sup>.

Accordingly, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), in their statement of ethical principles for social work<sup>7</sup>, says social workers must “respect and promote people’s rights to make their own choices”. In addition to recognising the autonomy of carers, social workers should recognise they continue to have aspirations and interests beyond their caring role. The National Association of Social Workers in the United States describes it as “critical” that social workers pay attention to carer’s goals<sup>8</sup> while Skills for Care urges those working with carers to recognise that carers have roles outside caring, and that child and young adult carers in particular will require support to ensure they can “enjoy positive childhoods” alongside caring<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Skills for Care, The Common Core Principles for Working with Carers.

<sup>6</sup> Institute of Public Care. A Carer’s Life: Implications and Considerations for Commissioning.

<sup>7</sup> International Federation of Social Workers. Global social work statement of ethical principles.

<sup>8</sup> National Association of Social Workers (United States), 2010. Standards for Social Work Practice with Family Caregivers of Older Adults.

<sup>9</sup> Skills for Care, The Common Core Principles for Working with Carers.

## 2. Cultural awareness

A study into support for carers in Brussels<sup>10</sup> found that language barriers increased the perceived administrative difficulties for some carers seeking to access support, and that barriers related to cultural background can increase the burden of care on carers, even if formal services are available. The IFSW<sup>11</sup> urges social workers to have a respect for diversity and principles co-created with carers in England<sup>12</sup> similarly urged social workers not to make assumptions that someone will take on a caring role due to their cultural background, to consider that the carer's culture may not be shared by the person they care for and that social workers should strive to acknowledge and understand cultural factors when seeking to arrange services.

## 3. Being aware of, and making links between, different services

A multitude of services are often involved in supporting carers, from health services to local authorities and the third sector. This multi-agency approach can make it difficult for carers to understand and access the support on offer. Analysis focused on Belgium<sup>13</sup> found carers complained of incoherent, fragmented services and the study found a carer's knowledge level of the local services available to them can be influenced by their socioeconomic status. In England, an approach to reforming service delivery for carers "Making it real for Carers" was co-produced following workshops with carers in Lewisham, Durham and East Sussex<sup>14</sup>. Carers called for support through the "maze of care" and for council and NHS staff to understand "the system" completely. Similarly, the Belgian Health Knowledge Centre has recommended "professional[s] involved in the care plan should be fully informed about the different services available" for carers<sup>15</sup> and the English Department of Health suggests social workers can assist carers by signposting them to services that can support them, saying social workers should be "up to speed with the resources in your locality as much as possible"<sup>16</sup>. An awareness of local services on the part of social workers will assist carers in understanding the support they can access, but signposting alone is unlikely to be enough, and social workers should support carers to "use the information you've given me"<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Belgian Health Knowledge Centre, 2014. Support for Informal Caregivers.

<sup>11</sup> International Federation of Social Workers. Global social work statement of ethical principles

<sup>12</sup> Skills for Care, The Common Core Principles for Working with Carers

<sup>13</sup> Belgian Health Knowledge Centre, 2014. Support for Informal Caregivers.

<sup>14</sup> Making it real for carers (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Belgian Health Knowledge Centre, 2014. Support for Informal Caregivers.

<sup>16</sup> Department for Health, 2015. A manual for good social work practice: Supporting adults who have dementia.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Health, Social Work Practice with Carers: Research Practice for Adults.

In light of the fragmentation of services, carers have asked for social workers to communicate effectively between different agencies to save the carer having to explain their story multiple times, and appreciate coordination across borough boundaries so carers living outside of an area are not disadvantaged<sup>18</sup>. This is in line with standards for social work practice in the United States, which contend social workers can play an integral role in “fostering, maintaining, and strengthening such partnerships [between different agencies]” in their work.

#### 4. Empathy and respecting the carer’s expertise

The Department of Health in England and Research in Practice for Adults worked with carers to present five case studies of carers accompanied by guidance for working with carers effectively, as well as tips for social worker practice suggested by carers<sup>19</sup>. One of these tips requested social workers “find out about the situation on a bad day to understand fluctuating needs” as this can change beyond what is immediately apparent to the social worker. Recognising carers as “expert care partners” is one way for a social worker to show they value the knowledge and skills the carer possesses<sup>20</sup>. Carers should be treated “as equal partners in care”<sup>21</sup> and acknowledged as experts in providing care to their loved one, therefore wherever possible their expertise should be utilised in accessing, planning and reviewing support for the person they care for, and for meeting their own support needs.

Social workers should further consider how they would like to be treated if they were in the carers’ situation, and the support they would wish to receive<sup>22</sup>. Past instances where carers may have felt their expertise and role has not been acknowledged can contribute to distrust of “the system”<sup>23</sup>. Several sources emphasised the importance of positive, friendly and professional communication as a way to build trust with the social worker, with one carer saying “I want friendly staff who smile at me; who understand my role as a carer and listen to me”<sup>24</sup>. Carers also reported appreciating when social workers avoided using jargon and communicated clearly<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Making it real for carers (2013).

<sup>19</sup> Department of Health, Social Work Practice with Carers: Research Practice for Adults.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Health 2010, Carers and Personalization: Improving Outcomes.

<sup>21</sup> Skills for Care, The Common Core Principles for Working with Carers.

<sup>22</sup> Mind Australia, 2018. A practical guide for working with carers of people with a mental illness.

<sup>23</sup> Department of Health, 2015. A manual for good social work practice supporting adults who have autism.

<sup>24</sup> Making it real for carers (2013).

<sup>25</sup> Department of Health, Social Work Practice with Carers: Research Practice for Adults.

## **International practice of social workers in local support systems**

In the course of this research, it has become apparent that social workers are integrated in local structures of support for carers in diverse and often innovative ways internationally. Though outside of the scope of this project, some examples have been included here to demonstrate the potential for social workers, local authorities and third sector services to work together in new ways to support the welfare of carers.

The Netherlands incorporates social workers into a preventative counseling and support approach, known as the POM-method. Once enrolled in national care plans, individuals are contacted by trained social workers who carry out home visits and then phone the carers on a three-month basis to monitor their mental health as they provide care, especially during the early stages of caregiving<sup>26</sup>.

In France, Local Centres of Information and Co-ordination provide information services to carers and can also link carers to medical staff to address questions related to the condition of the person being cared for<sup>27</sup>.

Around one in five municipalities in Denmark employ carer guidance counsellors who provide information on carers rights, run courses for carers and provide individual support for the carer<sup>28</sup>.

In the German state of Hessen, the Department of Social Work trains volunteers to qualify as “voluntary senior citizens’ companions, providing a few hours of respite to carers<sup>29</sup>.

A review into carer support in Europe conducted by the OECD in 2011<sup>30</sup> found case (or care) managers can help alleviate administrative burdens on carers and help them to coordinate their needs with those of the person they care for, and it has been argued elsewhere that case managers can provide a useful single reference point for carers<sup>31</sup>. In some countries, these duties have been placed upon physicians though with limited success due to the many services physicians are already responsible for. It is argued enhanced training is needed for social workers to take on such responsibilities<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> OECD, 2011. Policies to Support Family Carers in Europe.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

<sup>28</sup> International Alliance of Caring Organisations, Global State of Caring

<sup>29</sup> Services for Supporting Family Carers of Elderly People in Europe: Characteristics, Coverage and Usage (2005)

<sup>30</sup> OECD, 2011. Policies to Support Family Carers in Europe.

<sup>31</sup> Addressing informal care in Europe: Promoting mental health among providers and recipients of informal care.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*



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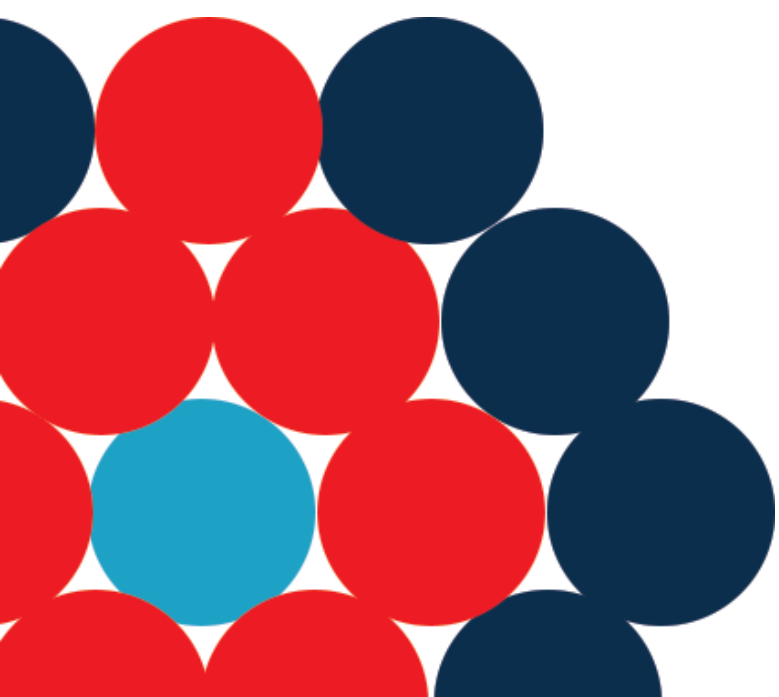
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