POLICY BRIEFING: Unpaid Carers and Local Government

Purpose of the briefing:

Carers Wales has produced this briefing to summarise our keys asks of the newly elected local authorities in Wales on behalf of unpaid carers, building upon our manifesto published ahead of the local elections held on 5th May 2022. This briefing also explores the role of local government in Wales in supporting carers, sets out Carers Wales research into key aspects of relevant local service delivery and considers the financial and policy context around local government as Wales emerges from the pandemic.

Local authorities are of significant importance to unpaid carers across Wales. They are instrumental in upholding the legal rights of carers and deliver a range of services that directly impact and shape the lives of carers.

At the same time, local authorities rely heavily on unpaid carers. As the number of carers increased dramatically at the height of the pandemic, it was estimated that carers were saving local authorities and other statutory services in Wales £33 million a day or £12 billion over a year¹. Local authority social services could not manage without unpaid carers who save every local authority in Wales millions of pounds every year by providing care that social services would otherwise have to provide. However, this over-reliance on an unpaid workforce is unsustainable.

The beginning of the 2022-27 terms of local authorities come at a time of improved local government finance and minimal Covid-19 restrictions. Every local authority can and must urgently prioritise support for carers, particularly by restoring or creating new local authority-provided or funded services for carers and for the people who rely on their care, as well as prioritising carers in their medium and long-term social care planning and resourcing.

We urge all newly elected, or re-elected, councillors to consider how they will deliver positive change for carers in their communities.

Context:

Across Wales, hundreds of thousands of unpaid carers are providing care on an unpaid basis to family or friends who need care and support due to age, illness, disability or because of a mental health condition. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, it was estimated that there were 683,000² unpaid carers in Wales, an increase from 370,000 in 2011.

Unpaid carers are the critical third pillar of the health and care system in Wales, saving Wales over £8 billion³ a year before the Covid-19 pandemic, and as much as £33m a day⁴ during the pandemic, by providing care that the NHS or local government would otherwise have had to provide.

¹ Carers Wales (2020): Unpaid carers in Wales have saved £33 million every day of the pandemic
³ Welsh Government (2018): Minister confirms £15m investment to support carers and adults with care needs
⁴ Carers Wales (2020): Unpaid carers in Wales have saved £33 million every day of the pandemic
There are 22 unitary county and county borough councils, often referred to as ‘local authorities’, in Wales. The 22 local authorities have a range of legal duties and provide services that directly impact the lives of unpaid carers across Wales.

Local Authority Functions:

Local authorities are required by law to provide certain services and functions of significant importance to carers including adult social care, children’s safeguarding and social care, housing and education services. Local authorities also have a critical role in delivering the legal rights for carers contained within the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 which requires local authorities to:

- Meet a carer’s eligible needs following a Carers Needs Assessment
- Provide information, advice and assistance to carers
- Promote the development of not-for-profit organisations to provide care and support for carers as well as preventative services
- Promote the wellbeing of both people ‘in need’ and of their carers.

The performance of local authorities in discharging these duties largely determine whether carers are receiving their rights contained in legislation.

With health, education, social care and housing policy areas being devolved to the Welsh Government, many of the functions of local authorities are shaped by Wales-level strategies and policies, though local authorities have a high degree of autonomy in determining the day-to-day delivery of these services. Other local services of relevance to carers include leisure and recreation services.

While social services encompass a broader range of services than just social care, local authorities spend a significant and growing proportion of their budgets on social services. In 2019-20 local authorities in Wales collectively spent over £2 billion on social services, equating to 25% of their gross revenue spending on services, an increase from 19% in 2010-11.

In addition to their role in delivering the 2014 Act, local authorities are also frequently relied on by the Welsh Government for local delivery related to carers. In November 2021, the Welsh Government published the delivery plan for its Strategy for Unpaid Carers. Many of the actions within the delivery plan are to be undertaken by local authorities, for example:

- Improving guidance for staff undertaking Carers Needs Assessments
- Ensuring respite needs are discussed more consistently
- Exploring new ways of consulting carers in local service design.

Furthermore, the Welsh Government has relied on local authorities to deliver national funding for carer initiatives, including for respite opportunities and has more recently announced that local authorities will play an important part in the rollout of the £500 support payment for carers in receipt of Carer’s Allowance.

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7 Welsh Government (2021): New £3m respite fund launched to give unpaid carers a well-earned break
8 Welsh Government (2022): Guidance Unpaid carer financial support scheme
Local Service Provision:

Local authorities directly provide, or commission others to provide, a range of services for people with care and support needs as well as their carers. The purpose of these services is to help people get the care they need and support carers to manage their caring duties alongside maintaining their own health and wellbeing. Without adequate services carers, and those who rely on them, can see their health, finances and wellbeing deteriorate.

Feedback from 740 carers across Wales who responded to our State of Caring survey in autumn 2021 found that over a year and a half on from the start of the pandemic the services carers rely on, many of which are provided by local authorities, were still heavily disrupted or closed entirely. This was despite Wales having lifted lockdown many months previously in early 2021:

- Just 8%\(^9\) of carers said that day services and care homes for short respite breaks were fully operational
- Only 16\% said sitting services had been fully restored
- 40\% said NHS funded care was operating as normal
- 1 in 5 (20\%) said support from paid care workers had fully re-opened.

From summer through to autumn 2021, 6 of the 7 health boards\(^{10,11,12,13,14,15}\) in Wales, and their associated local authorities, announced that they would be asking families to provide care that statutory services would otherwise have provided to speed up hospital discharge.

This situation has meant carers are having to care for longer with less support, with 80\%\(^{16}\) reporting they are providing more care compared to before the pandemic and over 7 in 10\(^{17}\) saying they haven’t had any breaks at all from caring since the pandemic began. 71\%\(^{18}\) of carers said their mental health had deteriorated and 60\%\(^{19}\) said their physical health has worsened over the pandemic. There is a clear and urgent need for local authorities to restore, reopen and create services for carers to help them cope.

In March 2022, the Welsh Government Deputy Minister for Social Services described service restoration for carers as “crucial”, committing to “redoubling [her] efforts to try and encourage local authorities to open those services”\(^{20}\). Continued inadequate provision is a false economy that risks carers reaching crisis point which would then increase pressure on the health and social care systems they prop up.

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9 Carers Wales (2021): State of Caring 2021 Wales Briefing
10 Newport Council (2021): Community care services under pressure due to high demand and staff shortages
11 Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (2021): Joint statement by Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust, Gwynedd Council, Anglesey Council, Conwy Council, Denbighshire Council, Flintshire Council and Wrexham Council
12 BBC News (2021): Social care: Demand pushes unpaid carers ‘to the brink’
13 Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board (2021): A joint letter to the residents of Cwm Taf Morgannwg
14 Hywel Dda University Health Board (2021): Joint statement by Hywel Dda University Health Board, the Welsh Ambulance Service NHS Trust, Pembrokeshire County Council, Carmarthenshire County Council and Ceredigion County Council
15 Swansea Bay University Health Board (2021): Community care services are very stretched due to high demand and staff shortages
16 Carers UK (2020): Caring Behind Closed Doors: Six Months On
17 Carers Week (2021): Carers Week 2021 Research Report
18 Carers Wales (2021): State of Caring 2021 Wales Briefing
19 \(\text{ibid}\)
20 Senedd Cymru (2022): The Record, Plenary 23/03/22, paras 174, 175
The significant disruption to services during the pandemic has compounded a situation where many carers already missed out on critical support, alongside a frustrating postcode lottery of inconsistent provision. Evidence provided by local authorities for our Track the Act 5 report\(^{21}\) found that some local authorities appeared to be much more likely to provide carers with a support plan following an assessment than others. For example, 62% of carers who had undergone an assessment were subsequently provided with a support package in Carmarthenshire, compared to just 4% in Caerphilly.

Additionally, though eligibility criteria will mean some carers are not eligible for funded support, our Track the Act surveys have found a consistent majority of carers say they are caring alone without support, with 64% describing their situation this way in 2017-18\(^{22}\), 57% in the following year\(^{23}\) and 62% in 2019-20\(^{24}\).

Local authorities have a democratic mandate to propose budgets for local services, and the Welsh Government has said the local government settlements they provide offer “considerable flexibility for authorities to prioritise their services in line with the needs of their communities”\(^{25}\).

However, the longstanding variation in service levels across Wales undermines the uniform legal rights all carers have under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. Carers Wales has consistently called for greater “consistency in what support carers can access in each local authority area”\(^{26}\), and the inquiry by the then-Welsh Assembly Health, Social Care and Sport committee into the operation of the Act for carers in 2019 similarly called for “a baseline range of support services for carers, based on eligibility criteria” to be provided by “all local authorities”\(^{27}\). The Welsh Government must explore how greater consistency can be achieved in service levels for carers across Wales, but local authorities can and should choose to prioritise the restoration and creation of new services for carers in their spending plans without delay.

**Information, Advice and Assistance:**

The 2014 legislation requires local authorities to provide an information, advice and assistance service for carers. Information about caring can help people to identify themselves as a carer, understand their entitlements and access local support. Information, advice and assistance services can also prevent the needs of many carers from escalating and requiring more complex support.

According to the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)\(^ {28}\) which represents the 22 local authorities, all local authorities have established a central advice and information point for carers. An example of this is Rhondda Cynon Taf Borough Council’s Carers Support Project which signposts to assessments and direct payments and produces a carers newsletter. For local authorities serving more rural areas, the WLGA has suggested issues of identification are

\(^{21}\) Carers Wales (2020): Track the Act Briefing 5

\(^{22}\) Carers Wales (2018): Track the Act Briefing 3

\(^{23}\) Carers Wales (2019): Track the Act Briefing 4

\(^{24}\) Carers Wales (2020): Track the Act Briefing 5

\(^{25}\) Senedd Cymru (2021): Written Question WQ83950

\(^{26}\) Carers Wales (2019): Track the Act Briefing 4

\(^{27}\) National Assembly for Wales (2019): Caring for our future: An inquiry into the impact of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 in relation to carers

\(^{28}\) WLGA (2018): WLGA and ADSS Cymru evidence to the Health, Social Care & Sport committee’s Inquiry Into the Impact of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 in relation to carers
compounded by those of accessibility with social isolation, poor transport and long travel distances presenting additional challenges in accessing health and care services.

Despite the duty on local authorities to offer carers information, research by Carers Wales over consecutive years has found that most carers in Wales do not receive information on caring. In 2017-18, 53% of carers surveyed\(^{29}\) said they had been given information on caring, falling to 45% the following year\(^{30}\) and declining further to just 38% in 2019-20\(^{31}\).

Turning to the quality of information provided, 75% of carers in 2018-19\(^{32}\) said information provided by their local authority on caring was useful, and 76% said the same in 2019-20\(^{33}\). Local authority provided information was viewed as being more useful than NHS provided information on caring, though less useful than information given by carers and disability charities, suggesting local authorities should work with charities and service users to improve their information provision.

In their 2018 evidence to a Senedd inquiry, the WLGA suggested\(^{34}\) health and care professionals have an important role in identifying carers to provide them with the right information. We have previously called for local authorities to ensure relevant staff are trained in carer awareness to improve the reach and quality of the information and advice they provide. It is also important that front line social care staff are knowledgeable about the legal rights of carers and good practice in supporting them.

Carers Wales is currently delivering training to social workers across Wales on good practice principles for working with carers. This training has been co-produced with social workers and carers as part of our Welsh Government funded Carer Aware project in partnership with Carers Trust Wales.

### Carers Assessments:

Under the 2014 legislation, local authorities must offer an assessment to any carer who it appears may have a need for support, regardless of their expected eligibility, and any carer can request an assessment. Local authorities must meet the eligible needs of a carer following an assessment. This could lead to interventions including support from care workers to direct payments and respite opportunities.

Concerningly, our Track the Act series suggests the majority of carers are not having their needs assessed by local authorities. In 2017-18\(^{35}\), 73% of carers said they had not had or been offered an assessment since 2016. 69% said the same in 2018-19\(^{36}\) and in 2019-20\(^{37}\) over 7 in 10 carers (72%) said they had not had an assessment in any of the years since 2016. Figures provided to us by 21 of the 22 local authorities in 2019-20 reported that 14,646 carers needs assessments or ‘what matters conversations’ were delivered that year, representing just 4% of the carer population in

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\(^{29}\) Carers Wales (2018): Track the Act Briefing 3  
\(^{30}\) Carers Wales (2019): Track the Act Briefing 4  
\(^{31}\) Carers Wales (2020): Track the Act Briefing 5  
\(^{32}\) Carers Wales (2019): Track the Act Briefing 4  
\(^{33}\) Carers Wales (2020): Track the Act Briefing 5  
\(^{34}\) WLGA (2018): WLGA and ADSS Cymru evidence to the Health, Social Care & Sport committee’s Inquiry Into the Impact of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 in relation to carers  
\(^{35}\) Carers Wales (2018): Track the Act Briefing 3  
\(^{36}\) Carers Wales (2019): Track the Act Briefing 4  
\(^{37}\) Carers Wales (2020): Track the Act Briefing 5
With local authorities also seemingly providing only a minority of carers with information (discussed previously), our Track the Act series and the findings of the 2019 Senedd inquiry suggest more robust scrutiny and national performance management is needed if carers are to see their rights under the 2014 Act delivered consistently regardless of which county they live in.

In many local authorities the status of a ‘what matters’ conversation is ambiguous, with some using it in place of an assessment, whereas in other counties it is a precursor to an assessment, presenting a confusing picture for carers. Evidence provided by local authorities suggests the apparent significant variation between counties in the proportion of carers receiving a support package following an assessment may be because those authorities who undertake more ‘what matters conversations’ being less likely to offer a support plan than those who predominantly undertake carers needs assessments.

**Carer Co-production in Decision-making:**

Local authorities will generally have a cabinet member with a portfolio that includes social services or social care, and this councillor will work closely with local authority officials who oversee and implement the local authority’s strategic social services priorities. Cross-party scrutiny committees, such as the Health and Care Scrutiny committee in Powys and the Social Care committee in Pembrokeshire, scrutinise their respective local authorities on social care. Residents can read cabinet and scrutiny reports on their local authority’s website, and the expanded use of virtual meetings during the pandemic has made council meetings more accessible for many carers.

The 2014 Act says that local authorities should co-produce services with carers, giving them a meaningful say from the early stages in service design and strategy formulation. Carers Wales whole-heartedly supports this approach as being beneficial for local authorities and carers in effective service planning and delivery.

Each local authority approaches this duty differently. Some have established Carers Forums or Panels which the local authority will consult with. Others reserve places on committees or working groups for carers who put themselves forward to be Carer Representatives, and local authorities may consult with carers through focus groups, surveys or engagement events, sometimes in collaboration with local carers organisations. However, feedback we have received from Carer Representatives suggests that in many cases these arrangements need to be improved to provide carers with the meaningful say they are entitled to.

Carers Wales offers Carer Representative training to support carers to engage with local decision making. In light of mixed feedback from carers involved in co-production, Carers Wales will also be undertaking an exercise to map the situation around local co-production with carers in 2022.

**The Pandemic:**

The initial months of the Covid-19 pandemic presented enormous challenges to local authorities. Local authorities across Wales worked with local and national NHS partners to deliver the Test,
Trace and Protect service, supported volunteer led-mutual aid groups and ensured compliance with Covid-19 regulations.

Local authorities had to adapt to new ways of working, and many teams were re-deployed to new areas to support the pandemic response. Despite the vital role of unpaid carers in supporting people vulnerable to Covid-19, many local authorities redeployed staff from their carers teams to other areas, making it more difficult for many carers to speak to someone about their caring role\(^\text{40}\).

In a very short space of time service delivery had to be transformed against a backdrop of social distancing laws and self-isolation among local authority staff. Many carers saw their local authority funded support packages reduced with a Carers Wales survey published in October 2020\(^\text{41}\) finding that 80% of carers were having to care for longer with less support, with a carer telling us “My support plan has been reduced by 10 hours. I’m expected to do the rest”. From April 2020 to March 2021, the Welsh Government allowed local authorities to suspend certain statutory requirements around conducting assessments stemming from the Social Services Act 2014. No local authority has said that they suspended these requirements during the period when they could have\(^\text{42}\), though carers have told Carers Wales their experiences suggest otherwise.

Periods of lockdown and strict social distancing required local authorities to shift many services to a remote delivery model, using telephone, email or video calls in place of in-person interactions. In many cases ‘What Matters’ conversations and carers needs assessments were delivered through these methods. Many carers concerned with limiting in-person interactions welcomed these innovations, though there are risks digital services can reduce access for the digitally excluded. The shift towards digital services accelerated a trend that had been embraced by many local authorities before the pandemic and had been actively encouraged by the Welsh Government who established a Local Government Digital Transformation Fund to maximise “opportunities to progress the digital transformation of local government in Wales” and launched a Digital Strategy for Wales in March 2021\(^\text{43}\).

Local authorities played an important role in targeted initiatives for unpaid carers during the height of the pandemic. Carers were able to access free Personal Protective Equipment through their local authority. Many took targeted action including Gwynedd Council who funded the Carers Outreach Service to provide goods to carers including laptops and gardening equipment, Newport Council who distributed hundreds of Emergency Carer Packs in the initial months of the pandemic and Conwy Council who provided £5,000 worth of food parcels to carers in the county\(^\text{44}\).

### Local Authority Funding and Policy Context:

Reduced funding coupled with increasing costs for local authorities in the 2010s meant many local authority services had to be scaled back or delivered in different ways. In contrast to most other service areas, local authority spending on social services actually increased by 18% between 2010-11 and 2019-20 in real terms\(^\text{45}\).

Local authorities in Wales spent around £2 billion in 2019-20 on social services, equivalent to £645 per head of the population in Wales, with 37% being spent on older people, 32% on services for

\(^{40}\) Carers Wales (2020): Covid-19 briefing
\(^{41}\) Carers Wales (2020): Caring Behind Closed Doors Six Months On
\(^{42}\) Audit Wales (2021): A Picture of Social Care Report of the Auditor General for Wales
\(^{43}\) Audit Wales (2021): A Picture of Local Government Report of the Auditor General for Wales
\(^{44}\) Carers Wales (2020): Covid-19 briefing
\(^{45}\) Audit Wales (2021): A Picture of Social Care Report of the Auditor General for Wales
adults under 65 and 31% on provision for children and families\(^{46}\). In 2020-21, social services spending increased to £2.3 billion\(^{47}\). Though social services spending has increased over the last decade, it is generally accepted that this has not been sufficient to meet the rising demand for social services, while workforce challenges have added to problems in service delivery. With an ageing population meaning more people will live for longer with complex care needs, it is expected there will be increasing financial pressures on local authority provided social services into the future.

The Welsh Government allocates funding to local authorities mainly through the annual Local Government Settlement which councils can spend as they wish, as well as through grants which must be spent on specific purposes. In December 2021 the Welsh Government announced\(^{48}\) the Local Government Settlements for 2022-23 will give all local authorities an increase of at least 8.4% to their core funding, with the average increase being 9.4%. They also gave local authorities indicative allocations for 2023-24 and 2024-25 which will see smaller increases to their funding of 3.5% and 2.4% respectively. These settlements, particularly those for 2022-23, are expected to give local authorities more room for manoeuvre than previously expected. The WLGA welcomed\(^{49}\) the announcement, describing it as “one of the best financial settlements since the beginning of devolution”. Rising inflation will however increase costs for local authorities in the near future.

Council tax is a key source of income for local authorities, though Welsh Government funding makes up a larger share of their income. Council tax is likely to re-emerge onto the political agenda in coming years as the Welsh Government-Plaid Cymru Co-operation Agreement\(^{50}\), which is set to run for 3 years from December 2021, contains a pledge to reform this “regressive” tax “to make it fairer”. The WLGA has welcomed this opportunity to reform local taxation to bring it “more up to date”\(^{51}\) and make it more progressive. At present, some carers and people they care for are eligible for council tax exemptions or reductions.

The Co-operation Agreement also contains an ambition to create a National Care Service to reform the social care system in Wales. In September 2021 the UK Government announced additional funding for health and social care generated through increased taxation, and estimates suggest this could result in around £700 million extra annual funding for Wales by 2024-25\(^{52}\). Carers need to see substantial investment in social care to reduce the numbers of families missing out on high quality care and support and the WLGA has said this additional funding could be a significant opportunity to reform social care. Any reform to local delivery or national coordination of social care must prioritise the needs and voices of unpaid carers.

### Key Policy Asks

As the national campaigning charity for unpaid carers in Wales, Carers Wales calls for the following:

**A Recovery for Carers**

- Local authorities should set out how they will increase capacity to deal with the backlog of increased needs created by the pandemic.

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\(^{46}\) Audit Wales (2021): A Picture of Social Care Report of the Auditor General for Wales  
\(^{47}\) Welsh Government (2021): Local authority revenue and capital outturn expenditure, April 2020 to March 2021  
\(^{48}\) Welsh Government (2021): 9.4% rise in local government funding  
\(^{49}\) WLGA (2021): Best settlement in decades a boost for communities and vital local services, says WLGA  
\(^{50}\) Welsh Government (2021): The Co-operation Agreement  
\(^{51}\) WLGA (2021): WLGA welcomes Welsh Government Council Tax plans  
\(^{52}\) Audit Wales (2021): A Picture of Social Care Report of the Auditor General for Wales
• Local authorities must restore or create new services for unpaid carers and people requiring care

Reinforce the foundations of social services
• Local authorities must reduce the number of families reaching crisis point by increasing spending on services for carers in every year of the 2022-2027 local authority term.
• Local authorities should set out how they will increase the number of carers receiving information, advice, Carers Needs Assessments or What Matters Conversations and Support in every year of the next local authority term.

Reach out to local carers
• Local Authorities should investigate drawing together all existing records of local carers into a database to increase their ability to proactively reach carers with information and support. Councils should explore information sharing with their local health board for carers e.g. those who were identified through the Covid vaccine rollout, applications made by carers to their local authority for PPE, Covid tests and the £500 recognition payment.

Help with the costs of caring
• Local authorities should provide dedicated local grants schemes for carers, such as for more energy efficient white goods.
• Local authorities should support carers to maximise their income through targeted financial advice including on welfare entitlements and what schemes exist to support carers with their living costs.
• Local authorities should provide carers with free or discounted access to council funded facilities such as swimming pools and gyms.

Ensure access to Covid tests
• Local authorities must provide urgent clarity around carer access to free Covid tests in the coming months and organise targeted messaging to local carers around accessing tests.
• Local authorities should ensure the process to apply for free tests is as quick and accessible as possible.

For more information

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