

Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Adults
16 September 2025

Carer Support Service

Report by Director of Adult Social Care

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to:**
 - a) **Approve the proposal for Adult Social Care to commission an unpaid carer support service through a procurement exercise and transition to a new ten-year contract from 1 April 2026 (pooled budget £1,071,631 for contract per year plus £625,250 for carer payments per year as set out in paragraph 23 of the report); and**
 - b) **Delegate to the Director for Adult Social Care authority to manage the service design and approve the award of contract in consultation with the Head of Legal and Governance Services and the Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer.**

Executive Summary

2. This paper provides details on the proposal to commission an unpaid carer support service with contributory funding from Buckinghamshire Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB) to meet future needs. It emphasises the importance of providing tailored support to unpaid carers, highlighting the increasing demand for such services. It also sets the stage for a new service model that aims to enhance the quality of life and to empower and support unpaid carers.
3. The conclusion advocates for a strategic approach to service delivery that is responsive to the increasing needs of the community, ensuring that unpaid carers can live well and support the people they care for while receiving the necessary support. The proposed changes and funding adjustments aim to enhance the capacity, capability and effectiveness and reach of the carer support service in Oxfordshire.
4. It is recommended that the new carer support service is commissioned by the Council with contributory funding from BOB ICB at the increased funding level. It is proposed the new service will go out to tender and will be commissioned for ten years (with 6 months' break clause included), with a proposed start date of 1 April 2026.

Decision table

Board	Date	Decision
Commercial Board	14 August 2025	Agreed
Adult Social Care Directorate Leadership Team	18 August 2025	Agreed
ICB Turnaround Board	8 September 2025	Agreed
Joint Commissioning Executive	11 September 2025	
Key decision at Cabinet	16 September 2025	

Proposed commissioning

Introduction

5. An unpaid carer is a child, young person or adult who cares for a family member or friend who could not cope without that support, due to ill-health, frailty, disability, a mental health condition or addiction. Many who provide unpaid care to a family member or friend do not identify themselves as an 'unpaid carer' but rather as a spouse/partner, son/daughter or friend. Sometimes the person being cared for does not wish to recognise that they are being cared for, which is difficult and frustrating for the carer who in turn may not be recognised as an unpaid carer. The term 'unpaid carer' is not about labelling people but describing what they do to help them access help and support.
6. The 2021 Census data shows:
 - 52,700 or 8% of residents of Oxfordshire provide some level of unpaid care
 - 22,800 provide 20 or more hours of unpaid care per week

Of those 52,700 carers, the highest number were in the 50-64 age bracket (38%) followed by carers aged 65+ (24%).
7. Research¹ from the Centre for Care, published in partnership with Carers UK, found that the economic value of contributions made by unpaid carers in the UK is now £184 billion a year. This is a 29% increase, up by £64.9 billion since 2011. Investing in carers services has long been seen as a preventative approach with impacts across all health and social care systems.

Background

8. Under the Care Act 2014, the Council and NHS have a statutory duty to ensure that needs of unpaid carers are assessed, and sustainable, high-quality care and support services are available for adults and their unpaid carers who are in need of and are eligible for meaningful care and support.
9. The current carer support service is branded as Carers Oxfordshire, and the contract is with Action for Carers Oxfordshire. This is delivered in partnership with Rethink Mental Illness. The contract expires on 31 March 2026. This service is funded from the Age Well pooled budget by the Council and the BOB ICB and totals £937,302pa.

¹ [Valuing Carers 2021/22: the value of unpaid care in the UK](#)

10. The Council and the BOB ICB also funds carer payments. Following a carer assessment, carers can be awarded up to £300 in any 12-month period. This payment is to enable the carer to meet a specific identified need that can't be met in another way, and to make a difference to a carer's wellbeing, help to avoid crisis and enable them to continue in their caring role. For example, a payment of up to £300 could be made for a sports season ticket, an electronic device such as 'Alexa' to play music, audio books and give reminders, an electronic tablet, a new washing machine, or an overnight hotel break etc. The budget for carer payments is £525,250 split equally between the Council and BOB ICB.
11. The carer support service has a big impact on unpaid carers. The service helps to reduce carer stress and carer breakdown and relieves some of the pressure on the Council by preventing, reducing or delaying the need for unpaid carers approaching the Council for support. By the service supporting unpaid carers to continue in their caring role, supporting people to remain at home, there will be a delay in people requiring home care or care home placements.
12. The service has seen consistent growth in the number of people being supported which demonstrates the high and increasing level of demand by the service. There is further potential demand on the service with people that have identified themselves as a carer in the Census and those carers who have yet to be identified.
13. The table below shows how the numbers of people being supported have risen since the first year of the contract in 2021.

	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	Change (from 2021 to 2024)
Referrals	2212	2636	3310	3548	+60%
Number of self-referrals	Not recorded	1497	2379	2517	+68%
Carersline	3739	2981	2955	2837	-24%
Website	6500	18638	22288	19766	+204%
Contacted and engaged by email (sending surveys, information etc.)	2200	3070	12260	15270	+594%
Care Matters publication (sent out to all carers on service database 6- monthly)	8600	18123	19616	24099	+180%
Number of carer assessments completed	1709	2644	2957	2557	+49%

The proposed new service

14. The Council explored national and local models, and looked at the performance and the impact the current service is having on unpaid carers. With all this

information and feedback, the Council and BOB ICB have co-produced a **new model of service**.

15. The overall aim of the new model of carer support service required is to empower and support unpaid carers. It will be visible and community facing with a focus on promoting carer identification, providing a proactive, personalised response, and signposting people to appropriate support within their local communities. The service will be extended in the new model to include funding for increased demand. This increases the capacity and capability of the service and the opportunities to improve the wellbeing of unpaid carers so that they can continue in their caring role. The service will also provide carer payments following carer assessments.
16. The intention is to go out to tender and the new service will start on 1 April 2026. The contract will be for ten years to allow more sustainability and stability in the sector. The length of the contract will maximise the opportunity for innovation and costs savings and partnership working. Included in the contract will be a break clause giving the Council the right to terminate the contract at any time by giving not less than 6 months' notice. The carer support service works alongside Primary Care Networks, and there is scope to improve pathways and response to better support our population and deliver efficiencies.

Options analysis

17. **Option 1:** Do nothing and allow the carer support service contract to end on 31 March 2026.
This would leave the Council at risk of challenge in not meeting statutory obligations under the Care Act 2014.
18. **Option 2:** Retender. The Council commissions a co-produced (with BOB ICB) carer support service through a procurement exercise and transition to a new ten-year contract with a proposed commencement date from 1 April 2026 (including funding for an increase in demand capacity and continuing carer short breaks and carer payments).
19. **Option 3:** Retender. The Council commissions a co-produced (with BOB ICB) carer support service through a procurement exercise and transition to a new ten-year contract from 1 July 2026. This option will require a new 3-month carer support service contract with the current provider from 1 April to 30 June 2026 to allow sufficient timescales for procurement.
20. **Option 4:** Allocate a grant to the current provider and transition to a new ten-year arrangement from 1 April 2026.

Preferred option

21. The preferred option is **Option 2: Retender**. The Council commissions a co-produced (with BOB ICB) carer support service through a procurement exercise and transition to a new ten-year contract with a proposed commencement date from 1 April 2026 (including funding for an increase in demand capacity and continuing carer short breaks and carer payments).

22. This option would allow the Council to complete a fair exercise to commission a service which will deliver value for money and meet the specification.

Contract value

23. The current budget for 2025-26 from the Age Well pooled budget is £937,302 for the contract and £525,250 for the carer payments. Consideration has been given to inflationary pressures experienced by providers and it is proposed to increase the budget by £34,329 which equates to 4.1%. It is recommended that the new contract has a price review clause where inflation uplift is considered on an annual basis. Consideration has also been given to the increased demand on the service and it is proposed to increase the budget accordingly by £100,000. Consideration has been given to the impact that short breaks have on the wellbeing of carers and it is proposed to continue to fund £100,000 for this annually (included in £937,302). In order to meet the rising demand, it is further proposed that the carer payments be increased to £625,250 as part of the new service.

Current service	Cost per year	Activity
Current annual ASC budget	£429,050	Referrals over 6,000pa Carer assessments 2,700pa av., calls to careline 3,000pa av.
Current annual ICB budget	£408,252	
Plus Carer short breaks £100,000pa		Funding provided for short breaks for unpaid carers
OCC	£51,000	
ICB	£49,000	
Total	£937,302	
New service	Cost per year	Activity
Increase ASC budget as per 2025- 26 inflation rate at 4.1%	£17,508	Funding identified in OCC Prevention budget. Subject to ICB agreement re £34,329 uplift. Increase in above figures. Cost uplift applied pro-rata to the current allocation of costs within the contract
Increase ICB budget as per 2025- 26 inflation rate at 4.1%	£16,821	
Total	£971,631	Council increase to be met from SKE701
PLUS:		
Increase in demand payment £100,000		Proposal to split 51:49 with ICB Increase in above figures by 650 referrals to 6,715pa
Increase ASC budget	£51,000	Funding identified in OCC Prevention budget.

Increase ICB budget	£49,000	Proposal to be considered at ICB Turnaround Committee
Total	£1,071,631	
OCC total	£548,558	
ICB total	£523,073	
Total	£1,071,631	
Current Carer payments budget		
ASC Carer payments budget	£262,625	
ICB Carer payments budget	£262,625	
Total	£525,250	
PLUS:		
Increase to Carer payments £100,000		Proposal to split 50:50 between OCC and ICB
Increase ASC budget	£50,000	
Increase ICB budget	£50,000	Proposal to be considered at ICB Turnaround Committee
Total	£625,250	
Grand total	£1,696,881	
OCC	£861,183	
ICB	£835,698	

24. The total cost for a contract up to ten years with the increase in budget to meet inflationary pressures, increase in demand, continuing to fund short breaks for carers and increase in carer payments would be £16,968,810. The total cost to the council for this would be £8,611,830. This is an increase of £118,508pa from the council.
25. The ICB confirmed the commitment of funding to support this procurement at its Executive Expenditure review group on 8 September 2025.

Impact

26. The Service will work closely with primary care and hospitals, and Adult Social Care Teams and deliver the following outcomes:
- Provide individuals with local information by maintaining an up-to-date website and social media platforms for the carer support service and other forms of communication including attendance at events to enhance knowledge and help to avoid duplication. The Service both extends and aligns to the *Oxfordshire Way*.
 - Carer identification – helping the person see themselves as a Carer and access appropriate support, including accessing a Carer ID/passport card, and facilitating the Carer to register as a Carer with their GP to allow appropriate support;
 - Operating through a strengths-based approach, encouraging Carers to recognise their strengths and identifying the support their family, friends and the local community can give them;

- Provision of easy to access, clear, up to date guidance on Carers' rights, benefits and local services through multiple formats;
- Supporting GP practices and Primary Care Networks to promote awareness and information to provide a coordinated pathway of care;
- Resolving Carer's issues or difficulties and enabling them to get appropriate support for their health needs and therefore slowing down or reducing Carer strain, further deterioration or preventing other needs forming;
- Supporting Carers to help reduce crisis demand for the Carer and the Cared for person;
- Seamless, holistic support providing continuity of care by working in a joined-up way and aligning workplans across social care and health services;
- Reduce the use of statutory services such as primary and secondary healthcare, hospitals and Adult Social Care;
- Increase identification and support of Carers from seldom heard groups and families in Oxfordshire's most deprived wards and those experiencing health inequalities;
- Increasing support for Carers to reduce the number of Cared for People being admitted into hospital and residential or nursing care;
- Improving the health and wellbeing of the Carer;
- Enabling Carers to enjoy a life of their own alongside their caring role and reducing social isolation;
- Enabling Carers to continue to care for the Cared for Person for as long as they wish;
- Providing peace of mind.

27. The specification of the contract will include a requirement for the Service Provider to work with commissioners to design a Customer Relationship Management system which will evaluate and track actual impact on spend in other parts of the system e.g. reduction of care home days or length of stay in hospitals as a result of the specific service interventions. Until this work is completed, it is not possible to be specific about actual savings over the lifetime of the contract. Areas in the system where savings would be expected are the following.

Costs attributable to:

- Delayed use of home care or care home and complex nursing beds by people that are currently being cared for at home by unpaid carers
- reduced ambulance call-out and fewer conveyances to the Emergency Department
- when people are admitted to hospital, increased ability to deploy Home First D2A reducing bed day consumption and higher cost care packages
- Fewer carer breakdowns
- community support (including unpaid carers) versus institutional support
- prevention support (delaying carer strain by allocating resources such as respite accordingly)

28. The Key Performance Indicators in the new model will include the following:

KPI	Detail	Impact
Increase in capacity	Increase identification of Carers and support them to continue to care for the Cared for person so they can remain living in their own homes	Provides support to people in the community who may not be receiving any.
Reduction in hospital admissions	Support Carers to manage effectively at home, reducing the frequency of hospital admissions	Reduction in hospital admissions leading to significant cost savings for the healthcare system.
Reduction in readmissions to hospital	Informing and including carers and ensuring they are part of the discharge and reablement plan	Reduction in hospital admissions leading to significant cost savings for the healthcare system.
Shorter hospital stays	Identifies the Carer so staff should consider them in their caring role i.e. being able to stay outside of visiting hours, assistance with parking, included in conversations around treatment and discharge	Less distress for Cared for person. Staff can concentrate on clinical focus and Carer can assist with day-to-day care. Cost savings for healthcare system.
Delayed admission to care home	By supporting unpaid Carers and providing expert support advice, the need for residential care can be delayed.	Long-term savings for ASC.
Support for unpaid carers	By reducing Carer stress and breakdown, the Service can help maintain the health and wellbeing of unpaid Carers and family members.	Prevention of additional healthcare costs related to unpaid Carer health issues.
Addressing health inequalities	Targeted interventions and developing initiatives with communities that experience health inequalities	Promotion of Carer IDs

Corporate Policies and

Priorities

29. The recommissioning of the carer support service for a further ten years aligns with the council's **Strategic Plan 2023-2025**:
 - Commitment to tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire
 - Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents
 - Support carers and the social care system.
30. The delivery of stronger, more resilient communities will address a portion of the demand on health and social care services as identified in the Council's strategic Plan 2023-2025 priority of supporting carers and the social care system. The proposed interventions make a significant contribution to prevention work which seeks to strengthen health outcomes and build on individuals' strengths.
31. The Carer Support Service also aligns with the **Oxfordshire All-Age Unpaid Carers Strategy 2023–2026**, through supporting carers to stay well and independent, enjoying a quality of life which should not be lost because they are carers.

Financial Implications

32. The funding required for the ten-year contract from 1 April 2026 has been identified by Oxfordshire County Council. Funding has been approved by the BOB Integrated Care Board on 8 September 2025.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

33. The decision to commission carer support services is an executive function.
34. Under the Care Act 2014, the Council and the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board ("the ICB") have a statutory duty to ensure that needs are assessed, and sustainable, high-quality care and support services are available for adults and their unpaid carers who are in need of and are eligible for meaningful care and support.
35. The budget for this procurement is jointly funded by the Council and the ICB under the S.75 National Health Service Act 2006 Partnership Agreement between the Council and ICB dated 1/4/2023 ("S.75 Agreement"). Under the

S.75 Agreement the Council is the lead commissioner for these types of services.

36. The Council has a duty to procure services in accordance with the Procurement Act 2023 ("PA 2023"). The intended procurement process will be carried out as a Competitive Flexible Procedure under the Procurement Act 2023 and the resulting service contract will be a light touch contract as defined in the PA 2023.

Comments checked by:

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Staff Implications

37. TUPE information has been requested from the existing provider and will be reviewed for any Council pensions or other financial risks. The information will be provided to bidders. Bidders will be required to separate out TUPE costs as part of their bids should these costs not materialise.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

38. Issues of inequality leading to poor health outcomes and additional financial pressures are a daily experience of unpaid carers. Caring has been announced by Public Health England as a social determinant of health². The provision of the carer support service allows the Council to better meet its obligations under the Equality Act 2010 as many unpaid carers support people with protected characteristics.
39. With equality and diversity issues at the forefront, the service model has been designed and co-produced with unpaid carers. Feedback has been sought about what is working and what isn't and this has helped shape the design of the strategy which has informed the new model. The impact of the future service will be monitored and evaluated to ensure that it is making a positive difference to unpaid carers and helping them to continue living their lives in the community.

Risk Management

40. **Critical success factors summary table**

Critical success criteria	Option 1	Option 2 [preferred]	Option 3	Option 4
Savings achieved	3	1	1	1
Least reputational risk	1	3	2	2
Least user risk	1	3	2	3
Strategic aims achieved	1	3	3	3

² [Caring as a social determinant of health](#)

Feasibility of implementing within acceptable timescales (i.e. no break in service)	1	3	2	3
Opportunity to maintain stability and support the existing carer provision	1	3	2	3
Total	8	16	12	15

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Background papers: Nil

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