

PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

15 January 2026

Supporting Unpaid Carers in Oxfordshire

Report by Corporate Director of Adult Social Care

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - i. Note the role carers play as a key part of health and care system in Oxfordshire and their key role in delivering the Health & Wellbeing Strategy, and
 - ii. Consider the support provided jointly by the Council and the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (ICB) for carers in Oxfordshire and next steps.

Executive Summary

2. The Council and the ICB have a statutory duty to support unpaid carers, and this support is a key part of delivering the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and our Oxfordshire Way vision.
3. In Adult Social Care the Council supports carers in a variety of ways including commissioning Carers Oxfordshire.
4. This paper gives an overview of commissioned services, other forms of support and ongoing work to support Oxfordshire's carers more effectively.

Background

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.
6. 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 therefore be recognised as an unpaid carer. The term 'unpaid carer' is not about labelling people but describing what they do so that the Council can help them access help and support.

7. Although it is not easy to quantify the support carers provide, recent estimations show that unpaid carers contribute the equivalent of 4 million paid care workers (7.9 billion hours) to the social care system nationally and without them, 'the system would collapse'¹. Carers UK estimated that the economic value created by unpaid carers is now £184 billion a year - the equivalent of a second NHS². Investing in carers services is a preventative approach with impacts across all health and social care systems.
8. Caring can be a big commitment and carers themselves need support with their own health and wellbeing. Yet, research and evidence show carers are not always able to access the support they need.
9. According to the Census 2021 data, the number of people who identify themselves as carers is decreasing, though the average number of hours they provide is increasing. The number of unpaid carers that provide more than 50 hours of care per week is higher than in the 2011 Census.
10. According to Care Act 2014, local authorities have a duty to
 - (a) assess any carer who appears to have needs for support, regardless of financial status, and provide support to meet eligible needs
 - (b) ensure carers can access clear, comprehensive, and accessible information about care and support services
 - (c) consider the carer's physical and mental health, personal dignity, and control over daily life in all decisions
 - (d) take steps to prevent, reduce or delay the development of care and support needs.
11. The [Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2030](#) refers to the importance of carers across the life courses- supporting children, working age adults and older people. In particular, the Strategy highlights our commitment to supporting older people and their carers by stating that *"We want to enable older people and carers to continue to do activities they love for longer, adopting a strengths-based approach that recognises and supports their existing hobbies and interests"*.
12. The Strategy also highlights the large number of unpaid carers providing support for people with dementia and importance of services like Dementia Oxfordshire that provide valuable support to carers and families as well as people living with dementia.
13. Oxfordshire County Council's [Strategic Plan 2025 to 2028](#) states that 'we will continue to support unpaid carers to improve their wellbeing and make sure they get the help they need'.
14. Oxfordshire County Council's strategic vision for Adult Social Care, the Oxfordshire Way, is based on helping people live independent and healthy

¹ [Social Care 360: Workforce And Carers | The King's Fund | The King's Fund](#)

² [Valuing Carers 2021/22: the value of unpaid care in the UK](#)

lives for as long as possible. We work with people, their families and communities focusing on their strengths and assets, concentrating on what people can do, not what they cannot. We work together to help them find solutions that work for them, avoiding the need for formal home care or residential care home support. Carers play a key part in achieving this.

15. We know that carers encounter barriers when seeking support for themselves, and they tell us that this is often related to poor communication in the health and social care sectors. Carers play a vital role in coordinating the care the person they care for receives, so improving this connection among professionals would reduce the burden on them.

Carers in Oxfordshire

16. According to 2021 Census, 52,674 residents of Oxfordshire said they are providing unpaid care; 983 of those carers were younger than 15.
17. The Department of Health and Social Care runs a national survey every other year and this is the main source of data we have for carers in Oxfordshire. The survey is sent to carers receiving support in the year, which could be in the form of an assessment, payment, information and advice or respite. Using the methodology provided by DHSC, a sample is selected, and surveys are sent out by post.
18. According to the findings of the last national carers' survey (2024), Oxfordshire's carers are typically a white (95%) woman (67%) who lives with (80%) the person they care for. A third of them care for a second person and 55% are living with health conditions of their own.
19. In terms of the care they provide, 72% provide personal care as well as providing emotional, practical care and support with all aspects of life. Half of our carers who responded to the survey provide over 50 hours of care per week.
20. In terms of the support they receive, 85% have had an assessment or review from Adult Social Care, around half received a direct payment, and one third attended a support group. 80% found the information they were provided helpful and 61% who looked for information found it easy to find.
21. What we hear from our carers in Oxfordshire is in line with what literature and national surveys show. Carers are often tired, stressed and feel the physical and emotional strain of caring as well as financial difficulties they experience. However, carers consistently have relatively low asks of the health and care system. What they want is to be:
 - heard, seen and valued
 - able to access information and support easily
 - able to access support for the person they care for and for themselves
 - To have organisations working better and being more connected..

Supporting Oxfordshire's Carers

22. The Council's offer to carers has been developed jointly with the ICB and is a standalone support service combining financial and non-financial support. The Council and the ICB have jointly commissioned **Carers Oxfordshire** as our main partner for supporting Oxfordshire's adult carers. Carers Oxfordshire is a partnership between Action for Carers Oxfordshire and Rethink Mental Illness. The commissioning of the current contract was co-produced with carers and is in place until 31st March 2026. Procurement of the successor service is ongoing and will be in place from April 2026.
23. Carers Oxfordshire provides an all-round support service for adult carers to improve their health and wellbeing including;
- Raising awareness and understanding of carers in society and helping people identify themselves as a carer
 - Providing information, advice and support - online, over the phone and face-to-face
 - Carrying out carers' assessments and reviews
 - Providing peer support, training and befriending services
 - Running or supporting other partners to run carers groups
 - Care Matters - a quarterly newsletter for carers
 - A wide range of support services for carers, please see [Services Handbook](#)

Support provided by Carers Oxfordshire:

Support type	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	% change
Referrals	2,212	2,636	3,310	3,548	60%
Self-referrals	n/a	1,497	2,379	2,517	68%
Web clicks	6,500	18,638	22,288	19,766	204%
Sent surveys, info, advice)	2,200	3,070	12,260	15,720	594%
Care Matters sent	8,600	18,123	19,616	24,099	180%
Carers Assessments	1,709	2,644	2,957	2,557	49%

24. To date in 2025-2026, 2,229 carers were assessed and 492 received a carers payment (up to £300) to support their wellbeing.

25. Carers Oxfordshire works closely with health partners in Oxfordshire to ensure they identify carers and support/signpost them effectively. A recent example of this is the new hospital initiative with Oxford Health that started in October 2025, with the pilot running monthly at Witney and Wallingford community hospitals. As part of this, Carer Advisers host monthly drop-in sessions in the community room next to wards and chat to carers, share information and give carers the chance to connect with one another.
26. **Rethink Mental Illness**, partners with Action for Carers Oxfordshire to form Carers Oxfordshire and provides specialist support to carers supporting their family members with a mental illness. The support includes 1:1 support sessions, information and advice, signposting, referrals to short breaks service, support groups and courses for carers at the Recovery College.
27. This is a highly rated service and in the recent survey, 98% of 45 respondents said the support made an improvement in their quality of life and 100% recommended the service. Many describe the service as a "lifeline" and call for increased awareness and visibility.
28. Carers feedback about the courses highlights the importance of supporting carers in their role by providing information about services, meeting each other and sharing experiences, feeling valued, heard and supported, and feeling more equipped to support their loved ones.
29. Taking a break from caring is one of the ways to support carers. This can be arranged by carers requesting respite provision for those they care for. Additionally, Carers Oxfordshire provides short break opportunities as set out on its [website](#). Based on the feedback we received from carers; the range and appropriateness of respite provision is currently under review. The review aims to improve the respite offer and developing a tool to assist us to prioritise those who appear to be most in need – the *Carer Strain Index*. This project is described in Appendix 1 and will be adopted in the new carer support contract.
30. In addition to the statutory service provided by Carers Oxfordshire under contract for the Council, the Council and ICB jointly fund a discretionary carers payment scheme under which carers can be awarded up to £300 in any 12-month period. 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 the ICB.

Oxfordshire's Strategy for Carers

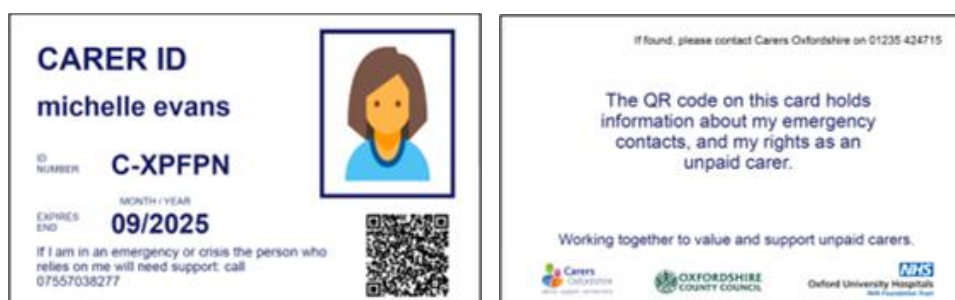
31. The Council and the ICB co-produced an all-age carers strategy in 2023. Carers set out the overall vision of the Strategy as 'to ensure unpaid carers of all ages in Oxfordshire are valued and supported in living their lives to the fullest'.
32. Three strategic priorities were identified to achieve this:

Priority 1: To **identify carers and effectively support them**, improving their health and wellbeing and providing opportunities for a break from their caring role.

Priority 2: To **safeguard adult and young carers at risk** who need more support to look after themselves, particularly during times of change and transition.

Priority 3: To encourage and enable **carers to have an active life outside their caring role**, including fulfilling their education, employment, and training potential.

33. The Strategy is the first system strategy supporting carers acknowledging carers may need support from different parts of the health and care system for themselves as well as for the person they care for. We have been approached by other local authorities that aim to achieve this.
34. The implementation of the Strategy has had tangible results including
- Carers Oxfordshire and Oxford University Hospitals NHSFT (OUH) developed a Carers ID and Passport to improve identification of carers, especially at health settings.



- Improving emergency planning to ensure emergency services can access information easily in emergencies
- Supporting Oxfordshire County Council's 'Carers Champions'
- A new e-learning for Adult Social Care operational teams to ensure they identify carers while carrying out the assessment of the person they care for
- Identified gaps in data and have a workplan to improve this, for example, joining the carer records held by GPs and the Council
- Improved working with Children Educations & Families concerning young carers
- Carers Oxfordshire refreshed the handbook <https://www.carersoxfordshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Services-Handbook-website.pdf>
- Refreshed website for carers facilitates better direct access to specialist carers services, regularly has over 1,000 visits each month.
- Improvements to Live Well Oxfordshire directory of services

- Increased leaflet distribution across GP surgeries, libraries and other settings

Feedback from Carers

35. In partnership with Carers Oxfordshire, we asked carers what the most helpful aspect of the support they received. They said

- Being listened to
- Knowing that it is there in the first place and I can call if I need to
- Someone on the end of the phone on a bad day
- Empathy and support
- Speaking with someone who knows what caring means and involves even on a sensitive level. Helping with forms that are so daunting carers tend to put them to one side as too much involved.
- Feeling less pressured to keep going without looking after my own needs
- It allowed me to get help and support which I wasn't aware was there, the level of understanding and support from your team, it was also nice to talk to someone who understands.

36. A carer supported by Rethink Mental Illness said:

"I honestly cannot think of a way to improve the support - I have found the service to be literally a lifesaver to have someone that I can speak with regularly, providing support, advice, and listening/being there for me whenever I've needed them."

37. We work closely with carers in all we do, both in operations and commissioning. Carers are also the members of the Carers Strategy Oversight Group to ensure the strategy and the implementation are overseen by them and changes are made during the implementation.

Next steps

38. By working together across health and social care and beyond, we can improve the health and wellbeing of carers. For example, the Council has provided exemptions from the congestion charge for carers and we continue to seek opportunities to support unpaid carers in different ways.

39. Adult Social Care teams have 'Carers Champions' who work to raise the profile of carers in addition to their jobs. We are committed to supporting them to ensure we 'think carers' in all we do.

40. One of the priorities of the Adult Social Care Improvement Plan is to ensure carers are included in assessments and reviews of those they care for. To this end, case file audits have been carried out, and appropriate actions are being followed up.

41. In 2025, Adult Social Care staff have been trained to improve recording of carers in adult social care systems. Following the training, the carers lead and team managers are working to ensure carers are recorded accurately in the system and signposted to Carers Oxfordshire while their teams are assessing or reviewing the person they care for.
42. Carers told us that they want to be more involved in the conversations while we are working with the person they care for, including hospital discharges. Following this feedback, we produced an information leaflet for carers (please see Appendix 2).
43. Supporting carers effectively involves aligning approaches to supporting unpaid carers at a system level, both by health and social care, at the place level. This is why we developed a system strategy, and we know that more is needed to join up the support with health partners.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

44. Adult Social Care's priorities are shaped by our corporate vision and priorities, with particular focus on
 - Tackling inequalities - working with partners to address inequalities focussing support on those in greatest need, embedding and implementing our digital inclusion strategy
 - Prioritising the health and wellbeing of our residents: working with partners to implement our health and wellbeing strategy prioritising preventative initiatives, and
 - Supporting carers and the social care system: deliver seamless services, explore new ways to provide services promoting self-directed support and increasing choice.

Financial Implications

45. This is a report for information only. There are no direct financial implications in the body of this paper.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

46. The Care Act 2014 introduced a national eligibility threshold for support for carers, which is based on determining the impact a carer's need for support, as a consequence of providing necessary care for an adult, has on their wellbeing. The eligibility criteria for carers is set out in the Care and Support (Eligibility Criteria) Regulations 2015 (reg. 3).

47. Once an individual has been found to have needs that meet the eligibility criteria, the authority is required to meet those needs, although it has considerable discretion in how it does so. This report sets out the ways in which Oxfordshire County Council meets its statutory responsibilities towards carers.
48. This report is for information only. There are no additional specific legal implications.

Comments checked by: Janice White, Principal Solicitor, Adult Social Care, Education and SEND.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

49. Equity in experiences and outcomes is a key priority for Adult Social Care arising from our statutory duties under Care Act 2014 and CQC Assurance Framework.
50. Equality and inclusion are key pillars of our preventative approach and are supported by activities covered in this report.

Risk Management

51. Adult Social Care Directorate Leadership Team has oversight of the risks and maintains a risk register and reports to Senior Leadership Team and Informal Cabinet through monthly updates.

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Background papers: Nil

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Appendix 1

Project introducing Carer Strain Index into Oxfordshire

What carers do...

Unpaid carers provide vital daily support, reducing Local Authority pressure by lowering demand for costly formal social care services. Their contribution carries economic value: unpaid carers effectively subsidise social care. They are key to early intervention and prevention. Carers are first responders, who often prevent hospital admissions by stepping in quickly when the person they care for deteriorates or faces a crisis. In their communities, carers strengthen social ties: unpaid carers reduce social isolation and enable independence, allowing the cared- for people to remain connected, active, and in their own homes.

How do carers feel about their role...

Fatigue is common, caring involves physical, emotional, and mental strain that accumulates over time. Many carers feel overwhelmed: 57% report feeling overwhelmed and 65% attribute this to a lack of respite. Stress is a constant pressure: 35% report poor mental health; limited support and long hours which can lead to isolation and stress. Deprivation compounds these pressures: nearly half of carers face at least one of two levels of deprivation, making coping harder and support needs more acute.

"I am needing to give my husband more support as his health declines. I don't have enough time to do the housework tasks as most of my time is spent caring for my husband."

Another carer said: *"I need a break from my caring role. I feel overwhelmed. I am struggling to provide the amount of care my Mum needs. I am trying to juggle this with working full time. My mental health has also declined due to my caring role."*

What is the problem?

There are four linked challenges:

1. Fatigue and stress from prolonged, unpaid caregiving.
2. Limited access to respite and social services.
3. Support for carers is reactive, rather than proactive.
4. Services are not targeted at carers with the highest care burden or vulnerability.

Solving the problem...

The objective is to identify carers at risk of breakdown. This is achieved by developing carer profiles to understand carer strain and circumstances. There is a need to identify high- risk groups that is carers who are under strain, unsupported, or isolated and then proactively offer support to them.

So what!

We transform the insights into practical solutions:

1. Add the Modified Caregiver Strain Index to all carer assessments and reviews.
2. Operationalise carer clustering to automatically flag carers at risk of breakdown.
3. Engage carers by listening to their concerns and co- designing support services.
4. Reorient current practice to prioritise carers with the greatest strain for respite, direct payments, and support, based on clustering insights

Recommendations and Action Plan

1. Integrate the Modified Caregiver Strain Index into carer assessments and reviews by April 2026 to ensure fair, consistent, and transparent assessment of carers' wellbeing and support needs.
2. Operationalise carer clustering to flag carers at risk of breakdown so that preventative support can be offered to reduce fatigue.
3. Work with carers in a person- centred way by listening to their concerns and creating support services that improve wellbeing.
4. Update resource allocation so carers with the highest strain index are prioritised for respite, direct payments, and support services.

Conclusion

Unpaid carers reduce Local Authority pressure, subsidise social care, and hold communities together. Yet many face fatigue, stress, deprivation, and lack of respite. A data- led approach, integrated clustering across numerical and categorical features, expanded into strategic groups through hierarchical clustering—lets us identify high- risk carers early, listen to their voices, and act. With the Modified Caregiver Strain Index embedded in assessments, automated risk flagging, person- centred co- design, and targeted resource allocation, we can reduce care fatigue and strengthen both carer wellbeing and the social care system.

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