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Consultation response: Improving access to support for unpaid carers

Organisation name: Welsh Parliament - the Health and Social Care Committee

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This document is also available in Welsh.

Overview

We welcome this consultation.

There is no doubt that the role of unpaid carers is crucial in supporting social care in Wales. As an office, we are eager to ensure that carers are recognised and properly informed of their rights. Thus, support services for unpaid carers were the focus of our second wider own initiative investigation, 'Are we caring for our carers?', published in October 2024. Click [here](#) to read the full version of the report, and [here](#) to see the Easy Read version.

We note the Committee's acknowledgement that the lack of carers' assessments being undertaken has already received significant attention and currently of interest is the provision of, and access to, statutory support for unpaid carers, particularly the availability of respite care. Nevertheless, the quality of administration of carers assessments will be an integral factor impacting what support is accessible to carers. We therefore feel that it is still important to reiterate the findings and recommendations of our own initiative investigation, in relation to carers' assessments. We respond to the five main points of interest identified by the Committee, below.

The scope of the investigation

We conduct own initiative investigations where evidence suggests that there may be systemic service failure or maladministration. Wider own initiative investigations are stand-alone investigations that do not relate to a complaint made by an individual.

Our second wider own initiative investigation considered:

- a) whether the local authorities investigated were meeting their statutory duties under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (the SSWB Act) and its Code of Practice and The Care and Support (Assessment) (Wales) Regulations 2015.

- b) whether those entitled to a carer's needs assessment were being made aware of, and understood their right to, request a carer's needs assessment.
- c) where carers' needs assessments are commissioned, whether those assessment services were being delivered appropriately and whether local authorities were appropriately monitoring the contracting arrangements.
- d) whether carers' needs assessments, including those completed by commissioned service providers, were undertaken in accordance with the SSWB Act.

The investigation considered the practices of 4 local authorities ('Investigated Authorities'):

- Caerphilly County Borough Council
- Ceredigion County Council
- Flintshire County Council and
- Neath Port Talbot Council.

Between 10% and 12% of the population (over 5 years old) in the Investigated Authorities identified as carers in the 2021 Census.

The findings

The investigation found that:

- only 2.8% of the carer population in the Investigated Authorities had their needs assessed.
- only 1.5% of the carer population in the Investigated Authorities had an assessment that led to a support plan.
- many carers were not aware of their rights and were unaware of the support that may be available to them. There was evidence of carers not being fully informed of their rights by the Investigated Authorities. In some

instances, carers were signposted to commissioned service providers without being informed of their rights.

- carers' needs assessments were referred to by different names, which caused confusion amongst carers and carers were sometimes unaware that their needs had been assessed.
- there was a lack of clear information about the process of assessment, the role of commissioned service providers (where applicable), what carers may expect from the assessment and how carers may be supported following an assessment.
- there were discrepancies between the Investigated Authorities in the way that support provided to carers was recorded. In the assessments reviewed, Flintshire County Council recorded all support provided following an assessment, including when only providing 'Information, Advice and Assistance', as a Support Plan, whereby the other Investigated Authorities did not record 'Information, Advice and Assistance' as a Support Plan.
- the appropriateness of Direct Payments for carers was variable and 3 of the Investigated Authorities needed to ensure that Direct Payments were something the carer was able to manage, with this being reviewed if circumstances changed.
- the recording of equality data relating to carers was limited and inconsistent at the Investigated Authorities.

Where they were undertaken, we found that carers' needs assessments at the Investigated Authorities were generally being completed appropriately, with the exception of young carers' needs assessments in Ceredigion and Neath Port Talbot.

The recommendations

We made several recommendations following this investigation. These concerned:

- improvements to the carers' needs assessment recording and forms. There needed to be consistency in the language used. There was also a need for guidance on what constituted Information, Advice and Assistance and what constituted a Support Plan, to ensure all work to support carers was recorded and to improve consistency of recording. Other recording improvements could include the involvement of the cared for person (where feasible), the extent the carer was able and willing to provide care and the carer's wishes in terms of work, education, training and leisure.
- revision of a carers' needs assessment factsheet, to include an outline of the process, the role of commissioned service providers, what to expect from an assessment and real-life examples of how carers have been supported. This would enable carers to make an informed decision about whether to have their needs assessed.
- a cover letter to accompany completed carers' needs assessments to outline the outcomes of the assessment and an explanation of what the review arrangements were (or were not) and how carers could make contact to request a review or a re-assessment.
- improvements to quality assurance processes for completed carers' needs assessments through the implementation of regular audits.
- training for staff to refresh knowledge of carers' rights and to reinforce the role they play in identifying and promoting carers' rights. Carers must be offered advocacy – the decision on whether an advocate is needed is not one for the staff completing assessments to make, nor was it appropriate for the staff member to consider themselves to be the advocate.
- action to improve the recording of equality information relating to carers. Improved, consistent and comparable data collection could enable better analysis to drive improvement, monitor progress and identify areas in which further improvements were necessary.
- action to improve collaboration and joint working between local authorities and health services, including GPs, hospitals, and pharmacies.

In view of the potential for wider learning, we invited the other 18 local authorities in Wales to:

- consider our recommendations made to the 4 Investigated Authorities and to take forward any learning points that would improve their own service provision.
- review the findings of this report at an all-Wales level, for example, at the All Wales Carers Learning and Improvement Network (COLIN), to discuss and plan for the improvement of carers' needs assessments across Wales.

At the time of the report's publication, we were pleased to note the Welsh Government was already taking action through its Task and Finish Group of the Ministerial Advisory Group for Carers.

The consultation questions

- **The main barriers faced by unpaid carers in accessing the support they need; including any specific challenges for carers based on factors such as age, ethnicity or where they live.**

The findings of our investigation suggest that one of the main barriers relates to insufficient level of awareness of the right to assessment and the assessment process. There was evidence of carers not being fully informed of their rights by the Investigated Authorities, as well as of a lack of clear information about the process of assessment, the role of commissioned service providers (where applicable), what carers may expect from the assessment and how carers may be supported, following an assessment. We also found evidence of inconsistency in the way in which carers' needs assessments were referred to, which would likely exacerbate the service users' confusion.

We also found shortcomings in how the Investigated Authorities monitored which communities accessed support. The Investigated Authorities need to be mindful of their public sector equality duty and there is a need to improve equality data collection. Improved recording of equality data could assist local authorities to identify groups of carers that are not currently

being reached and ensure that the diverse groups of people who provide care to loved ones are visible and not disadvantaged.

- **The current availability of respite care across Wales, including levels of variation across regions.**

Our investigation did not consider respite care. However, we are aware that completing a carer's needs assessment is a pre-condition for applying for respite care. In light of the shortcomings in the process of administration of carers' needs assessments identified in our investigation, as well as the very low proportion of the carer population in the Investigated Authorities that had their needs assessed, the evidence suggests that respite care is currently available to very few of the unpaid carers that actually need it.

- **The extent to which the demand for carers' support services is being assessed and addressed, and current levels of unmet needs**

We refer the Committee to the findings of our investigation, outlined [above](#).

- **The role of Regional Partnership Boards in the provision of support for unpaid carers, and the effectiveness of current commissioning practices for services;**

Our investigation did not specifically consider the role of the Regional Partnership Boards. However, we did underline that the SSWB Act places a duty on both local authorities and health services in respect of carers.

There is a need to improve the identification of carers to

- support them through early intervention and prevention
- support them in their caring role and
- avoid carers reaching crisis point before seeking assistance from the local authority.

The early identification of carers is not only the role of local authorities. Collaboration and joint working between health services and local

authorities in relation to carers and their rights is essential and should be strengthened.

Thus, one of our recommendations was an action to improve collaboration and joint working between local authorities and health services, including GPs, hospitals and pharmacies.

- **The actions required to improve the implementation of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 provisions for unpaid carers (including Carers Assessments and support plans).**

We refer the Committee to our recommendations, summarised [above](#) and available in full in the '[Are we caring for our carers?](#)' report.

Closing remarks

We trust that the learning and recommendations highlighted in our, 'Are we caring for our carers?' report will be helpful, not only to the 4 Investigated Authorities, but to all local authorities in Wales. We are actively monitoring the compliance with our recommendations.



Michelle Morris

Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

September 2025