

Many carers are invisible to councils, but their lives could improve if services were in touch

Our research shows that being able to find information and to access services easily are among the key factors associated with a better quality of life for carers.

Carers sometimes say that they have less control over their lives even than users. Indeed, in some places, their quality of life may be poorer than those who are being cared for. Yet outcomes for carers are rarely measured, even though most social care is currently provided by informal or unpaid carers. So, if carers are in poor shape, there is a risk to the hundreds of thousands of people for whom they care. Furthermore, if they lose their capacity to care, the cost to tax payers could be huge.

That's why a team, led by Professor Ann Netten from the University of Kent, has undertaken an SSCR project analysing a number of surveys of unpaid carers. It explores how far carers are being identified by councils. Who is being missed and is the help making a difference to carers that receive it?

It emerges that councils are not spotting a large number of carers who may have a great deal of responsibility. Some of the least visible tend to be those who are providing substantial hours of care but not caring full-time and those who are in jobs. 'This is worrying,' says Professor Netten, 'because combining employment and caring can be a particularly big strain. As a result, many people in this largely invisible group are at risk of a very poor quality of life.'

'Many people may be vulnerably employed while doing a lot of caring,' says Professor Netten. 'They risk reaching a tipping point and losing their jobs. There may be hundreds of thousands of people at risk in this way, who are getting little or no support from their councils. So our work raises important questions not only for policy makers involved with social care but also those whose goal is to maximise employment.'

It's not a simple problem to resolve, argues Professor Netten. 'Councils tend to be responsive rather than pro-active about carers. There is no obvious incentive for them to search for carers who need support, when resources are already over-stretched helping those carers whom they have identified.'

The research has examined which council services make most difference to those carers who do access support. The findings show that no service in particular is transformative for carers, but easy access to information and services (whatever they might be) is key. 'This finding,' explains Professor Netten, 'justifies the current direction of government policy which focuses on providing good information and advice services so people know how to access the services.'



“We need to focus not just on outcomes for the cared-for person but also for the carer. We need to value carer outcomes in their own right.”

Professor Ann Netten

when councils are assessing needs. So, getting the emphasis right and making a difference might involve a considerable rethink at a council level as to how they identify carers and then go on to address their needs.

‘Another potential policy prescription is for councils to focus on creating greater service flexibility, which is much valued. For example, often carers do not take respite breaks because they are worried about the person they care for. Some would prefer, instead, to receive money allowing both to take a break together. Likewise, more flexible use of personal budgets – to help the carer – may be important to both parties,’ explains Professor Netten.

‘We will be talking to carers and to councils about our findings, so that this work will help councils to develop their carers’ strategies and provide effective support for carers.’

Where does all this leave policy in terms of supporting carers? ‘One possible policy prescription,’ says Professor Netten, ‘is that councils should target its services at features of carers’ lives that are particularly associated with poor quality of life. That might mean, for example, focusing on carers who are in full employment, who often have a poor quality of life. But these are the very people whom, it seems, are often missed

Project: Recent survey evidence about unpaid carers: Implications for social care practice in England

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