

February 2025

Subject: The role of local authorities in supporting hospital discharges consultation

Dear Local Government and Housing Committee,

Carers Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry.

Carers Wales exists to make life better for the more than 310,000 unpaid carers across Wales. We are led by our 5,000 members in Wales, the vast majority of whom are unpaid carers, and together we provide support for and campaign with unpaid carers to secure lasting change. We are part of Carers UK and have been leading the way on carers' rights for 60 years.

A carer is a person of any age who provides unpaid care and support to a family member, friend or neighbour who is disabled, has an illness or long-term condition, or who needs extra help as they grow older.

[Research](#) shows that the care provided by unpaid carers saves the Welsh Government more than £10 billion over a 12-month period. The human impact of unpaid care is immeasurable. Carers hold families together, enabling the people they provide care for to get the most out of life while often making huge sacrifices to do so. Over [107,000](#) people in Wales provide over 50 hours of unpaid care every week.

- [The effectiveness of local authorities in supporting hospital discharge amid the context of delayed transfers of care](#)

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 places a number of duties on local authorities, including to offer all unpaid carers an assessment of their needs in the form of a Carers Needs Assessment. This can lead to support to assist them with their caring tasks and support them to protect their own health and wellbeing alongside. Discharging someone from hospital so they can be looked after at home requires an assessment of the unpaid carers needs so support can be put in place to enable the carer to look after the person being discharged. Unfortunately, there is extensive evidence to suggest that vast majority of unpaid carers are not having their needs assessed. The 2024 [report](#) of the Ombudsman Wales found that in the four investigated local authorities just 2.8% of unpaid carers had undergone a Carers Needs Assessment. The [Track the Act 2024](#) report, published by Carers Wales, suggested that between just 0.3% and 0.8% of unpaid carers across Wales received a Carers Needs Assessment in 2023/24. In addition to the vast majority of carers missing out on assessment of their needs, 63% of carers in the same survey who had tried to obtain support from social care services had experienced long wait times for assessments, reviews or support. The Ombudsman found that just 1.5% of the carer population of the investigated authorities had an assessment that led to a support plan.

This concerning picture demonstrates that serious questions must be asked about the effectiveness of local authorities in facilitating hospital discharge by supporting families to look after patients discharged from hospital.

Unpaid carer testimony – Carers Wales State of Caring in Wales 2024: The impact of caring on health and wellbeing [report](#)

“Applied for carers assessment in January this year (2024), still awaiting reply (August 2024).”

“I managed to access a care and needs assessment - referral from specialist children’s services. The social worker came in January 2024 - I have yet to hear back (August 2024)...completely pointless exercise.”

- The main barriers for local authorities in effectively facilitating the discharge of patients with care and support needs, including:
 - social care capacity and workforce shortages;
 - waits for care assessments (and other assessment related issues),
 - challenges in arranging care home placements or home care packages, and
 - disagreements or legislative barriers affecting discharge decisions;

As detailed above, it is clear that effective and sustainable hospital discharge is inhibited as far too few unpaid carers are having their needs assessed and far too many are experiencing long waits to have an assessment or receive the support they need to carry out care tasks. This undermines the principle that stays in residential care following hospital discharge, if they are needed at all, should only be temporary while support is arranged for the person to be looked after in their home. Without support for carers, patients will stay in residential care longer than they need to.

There are widely acknowledged challenges in procuring sufficient home care packages for patients being discharged from hospital across the UK. In response, local authorities should offer fast-tracked direct payments to enable the patient and their family to quickly purchase the support they need. The 2022 [report](#) of Audit Wales into the use of direct payments in social services found that greater clarity was needed on what direct payments can be used for, and we would urge local authorities to embed flexibility into the use of direct payments so families can use the funds in the ways that meets their own needs and preferences. Local authorities also have an important role to play in providing guidance and support to enable families to use direct payments. As the Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill will extend the option of direct payments to recipients of NHS Continuing Healthcare, we must take this opportunity to improve the direct payments system by co-producing the regulations as well as the information and guidance given to patients, carers and professionals.

Carers and families can feel like their needs and preferences are sidelined during disputes between which part of the public sector is responsible for providing them with support. This is particularly seen when there are disputes between health boards and social services regarding whether the patients’ needs are primarily the responsibility of health or social services. The needs of carers and patients

cannot be sidelined during disputes over different pots of public money. Local authorities and health boards should explore pooled budgets to facilitate smoother transitions between health and social services settings. Regional Partnership Boards have the potential to assist with facilitating this.

- The variations in hospital discharge practices throughout Wales and the impact on local authority delivery. How to improve consistency, including the identification of best practice and innovative approaches that could be adopted more widely;

Under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 unpaid carers have a right to have their needs and preferences meaningfully considered by professionals who must ascertain whether a carer is “able and willing” to provide care, including which caring tasks they are willing and able to undertake. Concerningly, in our State of Caring in Wales 2024 survey, only 27% of carers who care for someone who had been discharged from hospital in the previous 12 months agreed that they had been involved in decisions about discharge and what care and treatment was needed. Additionally, our 2024 Track the Act report found only 12% of people with caring responsibilities were identified as carers within medical settings. The understandable desire on the part of health boards to free up beds risks creating situations where carers feel under pressure to agree to undertake caring tasks they do not actually feel able to carry out. Sustained and meaningful consultation with carers is the only way to accurately understand the level and types of care the carer will be able to provide for the patient. A failure to identify and consult with carers risks an unsustainable hospital discharge with the carer unable to cope under unrealistic expectations.

Unpaid carer testimony – Carers Wales State of Caring in Wales 2024: The impact of caring on health and wellbeing report

“I was ignored by most staff during my mother's stay in hospital, despite me raising concerns. No help was offered at all on her return home, I was just expected to “get on with it!””

“Stress, guilt and anger - if I had a pound for the number of times I've heard a phrase like ‘can't your daughter do that for you’ I'd be able to afford a decent care home!”

“My dad was discharged from hospital on a Saturday afternoon with 1 hrs notice. He was doubly incontinent at that time and was discharged wearing a pad, but with no others given to take home. He was also extremely confused and could not do much for himself (e.g couldn't get washed or dressed, manage the toilet, make a bowl of cereal) I was given no advice or support, and no information about who to contact if there were any problems. No services were open until Monday morning for any help. He had not previously required care so nothing was in place at home.”

There must be clear expectations on staff in hospital settings to identify and meaningfully consult with carers. Staff training also plays a role, such as the training provided through the Carer Aware project delivered by Carers Trust Wales and Carers Wales. Local authorities must also substantially improve their delivery of Carers Needs Assessments so the needs and preferences of carers can be effectively understood. In 2021/22 and 2022/23, £1m was allocated to health boards by the Welsh Government to

improve engagement with carers during hospital discharge. Consideration should be given to allocating similar funding potentially shared between local authorities and health boards to facilitate smoother and more sustainable hospital discharge.

Unpaid carer testimony – Carers Wales State of Caring in Wales 2024: The impact of caring on health and wellbeing report

“They keep passing us to other services who keep passing us back to them. Still don’t have the support we need.”

“I am being passed between adult social care, learning disabilities social care, home from hospital care. No one can actually help.”

The Ministerial Advisory Group on Carers has discussed good practice at length and, while it is valuable to identify good practice, we must ensure we prioritise translating that good practice into tangible delivery at pace, accompanied by additional funding and resource.

- An assessment of current discharge processes and procedures at a local government and national level, including partnership working between the NHS and local authorities, strategies for increasing community capacity, and the effectiveness of Welsh Government support.

Around [140,000](#) people in Wales combine unpaid caring responsibilities with some form of paid work. In the State of Caring survey 49% of carers who had experienced challenges with social care services said it negatively impacted their ability to work. Carers are already [more likely to live in poverty](#) as a result of caring and this situation risks more carers falling into poverty as they are forced to reduce their hours or give up work entirely and also undermines wider policy aspirations for economic growth.

As far back as 2019 the Senedd Health and Social Care committee’s [report into carers rights under the 2014 Act](#), said “Given the lack of impact of the legislation to date and the scale of the future challenge, we believe that the Welsh Government needs to demonstrate stronger national leadership in support for carers” with the committee recommending that the Welsh Government “must prepare, within 6 months, a clear action plan for addressing the failings of implementation highlighted in the evidence we received”. The Social Services and Well-being Act was a forward-thinking piece of legislation that provides a valuable, comprehensive framework for how unpaid carers should be supported. Unfortunately, as demonstrated by the 2024 Ombudsman report, the 2024 Track the Act report, the 2024 State of Caring in Wales report as well as the findings of the Welsh Government-commissioned independent [evaluation of the Act](#) published in March 2023, sufficient action has not been taken in the years since the 2019 inquiry to address the implementation issues. Welsh Government must demonstrate stronger national leadership in relation to the Act and should set clear expectations of health boards and local authorities to ensure carers rights are more consistently upheld.

Unpaid carers save Wales billions of pounds every year and play an integral role in the health and social care system. Their role in hospital discharge is immense, so it was regrettable that the Welsh Government’s [initial](#) and [subsequent statements](#) regarding their recent 50-day challenge to improve hospital discharge and community care did not mention the vital role of unpaid carers. Health boards,

local authorities and the Welsh Government must ensure all initiatives and policies relating to hospital discharge recognise the central role of the hundreds of thousands of unpaid carers across Wales who can, when adequately supported, enable people to be discharged from hospital. With much-needed additional funding for health and social care announced in the Welsh Government's budget for 2025/26, we must ensure that additional funding is allocated by decision makers at all levels to increase support for unpaid carers before, during and after the person they look after is being discharged from hospital. Doing so would be an investment in sustainable and effective hospital discharge.

There is additionally a pressing need to support the health not just of the person being discharged but of the unpaid carer themselves. Providing unpaid care sadly comes at great cost to the health of many carers. Public Health Wales has found that unpaid carers have [higher rates of 36 long term health conditions](#) compared to the population without caring responsibilities. In our 2023 State of Caring [survey](#), half of carers said they had put off their own health treatments because of the pressures of their caring role and this year 82% of carers said the impact of caring on their physical and mental health would be a challenge over the coming year. Insufficient support for unpaid carers risks their ability to look after their loved ones discharged from hospital but it also raises the prospect of the carer requiring medical intervention in their own right and potentially being hospitalised themselves due to the health impacts of caring.

Unpaid carer testimony – Carers Wales State of Caring in Wales 2024: The impact of caring on health and wellbeing report

“I struggle to maintain my own health. I also have trouble picking up medications from the GP and there doesn't seem to be any help with this. I also think GP practices don't understand how hard it can be for carers to make an appointment at all and wish this was recognised and we could be more supported in this - for example I can only make appointments on the 1 day a week that I'm not with my child.”

“My physical health is declining due to lifting my 8 year old daughter all the time. Occ Therapy team/social services are too slow to provide support.”

Yours faithfully,

Jake Smith

Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer

Carers Wales