



## INTRODUCTION

**Greater Manchester** is leading the way with the introduction of its historic **Carers Charter**, aiming to transform the way the region's **estimated 280,000 unpaid carers** are supported in their invaluable role. With the peak age for caring being 50-64, over 2 million people find themselves in this caring bracket in the UK, and our region's number of carers will continue to rise. Caring responsibilities can compound the **barriers** older people face both in remaining in work, as well as finding new employment.

The average person now has a 50:50 chance of caring by aged 50 - long before they reach retirement age (Carers UK, 2019). This means that if we are truly to lead the way in Greater Manchester as an **age-friendly** and **carer-friendly** region, we must address the barriers preventing carers, and former carers, from entering and remaining in employment. Two GMCVO-led projects (Working Potential and Caring, Working, Living) identified a number of such barriers. Those most commonly cited have been explored in this briefing and have been grouped by six themes.

## What is Working Potential?

This Ambition for Ageing scaled programme supported people with caring responsibilities, **over 50**, to explore **employment opportunities**. The programme used a coaching model to provide bespoke, holistic support suiting the differing needs of the cohort. Delivery took place in three boroughs of Greater Manchester between July 2018 - March 2020: Bolton delivered by Bolton at Home, Salford delivered by Upturn Enterprise and Wigan delivered by Making Space. 91 **carers** and **former carers** took part.

## What is Caring, Working, Living?

Caring, Working, Living was funded by the Government Equalities Office and delivered by GMCVO in partnership with the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce between May 2019 - May 2020. The Greater Manchester-wide project supported employers to develop their **recruitment** and **employment practices** to make job opportunities more **accessible** to Returners. Returners were identified as **parents** and/or **carers**, of **any age**, who had taken at least a year out of work to undertake caring responsibilities. 86 Returners, 23 Employment Support Organisations and 56 employers took part.

Ambition for Ageing is a Greater Manchester level programme aimed at creating more age-friendly places and empowering people to live fulfilling lives as they age.

We do this by providing small investments to help develop more age-friendly neighbourhoods in Greater Manchester in addition to funding larger scale work across the city-region. As a research project, we are committed to sharing the learning we gain from the programme to help influence local, regional and national policy. Ambition for Ageing is part of Ageing Better, a programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK.

“ I have a lot of skills from caring for my son, but employers always focus on paid experience. I never get the chance to discuss it during interviews, but these skills could be a lot of value to a workplace. ”

Caring, Working, Living participant

### Respite provision

- Respite care helps carers find the time to volunteer, meet with job coaches, attend interviews and take up employment. However, for some carers engaged in our projects there was a lack of trust in respite services and a reluctance to leave the cared for person in the hands of a stranger.
- Parents often had to rely on relatives or activities for their children to take part in during school holidays. Finding such activities for a young person with behavioural and/or emotional difficulties was reported to be even more of a challenge and prevented parents from working. This is echoed by a Working Families survey (2018) of 1,250 parents of disabled children, in which 86% of parents said it was difficult or impossible to find suitable childcare. Even when found, 82% said it was difficult or impossible to find suitable provision that was affordable and 81% said finding childcare in the hours they needed it was difficult or impossible.

### Health and wellbeing

- Caring, Working, Living participants were asked about the barriers they faced returning to work. The most commonly cited reasons were low confidence and self-esteem, (along with a lack of work experience and a lack of qualifications or skills). Participants also reported their own mental health as a barrier more broadly and supporting carers to access counselling or therapy was common on the Working Potential project. There were issues caused for many transitioning into a caring role that had not been addressed, especially in relation to the sacrifices made and the opportunities lost when taking on the caring role.
- Carers often felt guilty about leaving the cared for person on their own for short periods or leaving them in someone else's care. Having spent years prioritising someone else, carers often found it difficult to put themselves first and this meant their own health and wellbeing was often neglected.
- Carers reported feeling marginalised and excluded from social networks and felt that few social activities and facilities were overtly empowering or aimed at “people like them”. This was particularly highlighted by male participants. It can also become harder to create new friendships and social networks the longer the carer is out of employment.
- A lack of support for former carers was highlighted – especially therapeutic support to help transition into a new role and identity; whether or not this involves returning to employment. The importance of bereavement counselling and access to a former carers' support group was identified, as well as accurate signposting to support immediately after bereavement when the former carer may need it most.

### Employer understanding of carer needs and skills

- Carers who had previously worked felt employers did not always understand the often chaotic and unpredictable demands of caring. There are a number of ways employers can support parents and carers in work, some of which are listed overleaf. Flexible working and supportive line management is crucial.
- The traditional CV is not beneficial in recruiting carers as the gap in employment history can be off-putting for both the job seeker and the employer. Tech Returners (2019) reported that 47% of employers treat CV gaps less favourably. Furthermore, recruitment algorithm software has been found to discriminate against job seekers with gaps in employment, making it harder for those with a career break to return to work.
- Older carers in particular felt that time away from paid work, and their age, was a barrier to returning. Employers should appreciate that time out of paid work does not mean a reduced level of skills or ability. It can, in many instances, mean an increased sense of loyalty, enhanced listening skills, increased levels of resilience and strong advocacy skills, amongst other valuable attributes. Carers should be encouraged to draw upon these transferable skills during the recruitment process.

## Employment opportunities

- Working Potential job coaches reported limited employment opportunities for some carers to choose from, except for care work. Despite clear transferable skills, many carers wanted to avoid care work with it being too similar to what they undertake in their personal lives, which could be exhausting and/or too emotionally familiar.
- Participants on both projects sought opportunities to learn about new employment sectors, often not wanting to return to their previous employment sector. Opportunities to develop these new experiences (such as via work experience) are limited, particularly for those with long career breaks.
- A lack of flexible working opportunities was identified by carers on both projects. The Caring, Working, Living project found that many roles advertised as 'flexible' in fact demand flexibility from the employee, rather than offer flexibility (GMCVO, 2020). In addition to employment itself, employers could offer flexible training opportunities and work experience in order to be more carer-friendly.

## Social capital

- There can be an assumption that some services or activities are free of charge, when there are hidden barriers to accessibility. Financial support to attend interviews, take up training, attend volunteering placements etc. became a key element of both projects. Costs were also spent on interview clothing, transport to attend counselling sessions, to help purchase a mobile phone and to reach a food bank.
- Some carers out of work for long periods have outdated training and/or qualifications and therefore are required to pay if they wish to update their skills and become more employable. Even free courses have costs attached (e.g. travel, equipment, paperwork, exam costs etc.) In one instance, Working Potential paid for a participant's birth certificate which was required to take part in a training course. In another, a college required upfront costs from those not accessing means-tested benefits. As Carer's Allowance is not means-tested this could create problems for carers seeking further education.
- A 'better off' calculation could likely deem employment not financially viable when travel time and costs are considered. The current earnings threshold does not align with the National Living Wage, meaning a carer can only work fewer than 16 hours per week without losing eligibility to Carer's Allowance. Some carers reported the benefits system to be too complicated and raised concerns about the impact of part-time working on their benefits and how to keep this information updated to avoid being accused of fraudulent activity.
- There was a common theme amongst carers over 50 regarding a digital divide. With the majority of job applications and adverts now online, those without access or IT skills are at an immediate disadvantage. This is a barrier to their own independence and can deter individuals from approaching opportunities, either paid or voluntary. Despite digital inclusion courses helping to bridge the digital divide, this is a slow learning process, further delayed without regular access to a computer or smartphone.

## Travel

- Participants reported difficulties using public transport, with many older carers lacking in confidence. There was often an emotional resistance to travel and even fairly accessible activities outside the community might be resisted without the accompaniment of a job coach. Additionally, there was some resistance to employment outside the familial geographic area due to reduced travel horizons.
- The cost of public transport was frequently raised as a barrier, as well as the constraints of travel within Greater Manchester. This can cause increased isolation and a restriction of opportunities. Some participants felt employment opportunities would be even more limited without owning a private vehicle.

“ For so long I'd started to think of myself as my mum's carer and I ceased to exist. Now I've joined U3A, I'm studying again, I'm volunteering walking with dogs. These are things I wouldn't have done if it hadn't been for Working Potential. ”

Working Potential participant

## CONCLUSION

This briefing has highlighted a number of barriers faced by carers, and former carers, when seeking employment. Addressing these barriers is important for a number of reasons, not least when we consider the poverty rate among working-age carers, 25%, which is 4% higher than working-age non-carers (NPI, 2016). If participation in the labour market is a key protection against poverty, then more needs to be done to break down employment barriers for carers.

It is our recommendation that future employment projects of this kind consider health and wellbeing as a catalyst to employment. One of the key successes of the Working Potential project was the identification of carers' physical and mental wellbeing before any progress could be taken forward regarding employment. A number of new social activities and groups were set-up during the project including walking groups, informal carers networks and bereavement support groups. Carers with increased physical activity and social connections had more awareness of services and an improved sense of self. By project completion, 63% of carers reported being more confident in their ability to search for work and 67% more confident there was work available for them.

Employers should also consider carers' health and wellbeing support in the workplace; carers networks, paid or unpaid carers leave and bereavement support are key to this. Employers must look internally at recruitment processes and job design to attract returning talent, whilst also recognising the skills carers have developed outside paid employment. Employers should consider all forms of flexible working, not only part-time roles, and offer this from day one of employment and at all levels of the organisation. The unpredictable nature of care could be a constraint for even the most flexible of employers, therefore supportive line management and relevant training is of increased significance.

Policy makers and local government must take action. Improved access to respite provision, discounted travel, more support to bridge the digital divide, support with costs for training and a raise in the earnings threshold for Carer's Allowance would all be a step forward. Ultimately, however, we must also acknowledge the urgent need for a significant increase in good quality and affordable care services. Carers are estimated to save the UK economy £132 billion per year through their unpaid care work (Carers UK, 2015). If the UK's unpaid carers decided to stop caring, what would happen to the UK's health and social care system? Social care must become a priority for funding, without this, we are not enabling unpaid carers to enter or remain in work.

## What can employers do?

- Assess flexible working options.
- Offer flexible working from day one of employment.
- Ensure line managers understand how to manage and support the use of flexible working.
- Create a staff carers network.
- Introduce a carers policy.
- Introduce paid/unpaid carers leave.
- Check that recruitment processes appeal to carers and Returners.
- Ensure recruiting teams and recruitment software are not biased against gaps in career history.
- Train staff, including line managers, to be "carer aware".
- Introduce Carers Champions.
- Encourage the use of transferable skills during job applications and interviews.
- Include questions about caring in staff surveys and appraisals.
- Offer access to back-up childcare, adult care and eldercare provision.

For references and further reading please visit:  
[www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/barriersfacingcarers](http://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/barriersfacingcarers)

### Led by Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation

St Thomas Centre  
Ardwick Green North  
Manchester M12 6FZ  
[www.ambitionforageing.org.uk](http://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk)

0161 277 1000  
ambition@gmcvo.org.uk  
@afageing



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