

Wales Carers Alliance Manifesto for the 2021 Senedd election

Over a fifth of the population in Wales is looking after someone who requires care because of their age, illness or disability. Unpaid carers in Wales have been close to breaking point for years. Despite legal entitlements to support services, advice and needs assessments, unpaid carers have long struggled to get support to help them care. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic carers have had to care for longer with less support as services have been reduced or closed. This is simply not sustainable.

The Wales Carers Alliance is an alliance of charities that exists to uphold the rights of unpaid carers and champion the voice of carers across Wales. Our work is guided by the carers we support and who volunteer with our organisations. This manifesto sets out our shared vision for a Wales that values and supports its unpaid carers. We have agreed specific, deliverable commitments that we ask of those seeking to form the next Welsh Government.

The pandemic has given us all a new appreciation of the heroic efforts of all those who keep Wales going. This Senedd election must be the time when Wales recognises the debt it owes to its unpaid carers and resolves to use every lever and power to deliver meaningful improvements to the lives of Wales' carers over the next five years.

Six Priorities for Carers

1. Implementation of the Social Services and Well-being Act

Since coming into force in 2016 this legislation has regrettably not lived up to its commendable aims to guarantee carers legal rights and meet their eligible needs due to significant gaps in implementation. The Senedd Health, Social Care and Sport committee's 2019 inquiry into the impact of the Act accordingly called upon the Welsh Government to take greater ownership of the Act's delivery¹.

While we welcome the independent evaluation of the Act that has been commissioned, we share the committee's view that there should be no delay to taking concerted action, especially considering the substantial amount of research and evaluation of the Act already completed by different organisations, including by organisations in this Alliance. Effective and consistent implementation of this legislation is needed to make a real difference to the lives of unpaid carers in Wales.

¹ <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s96075/Report%20-%20Caring%20for%20our%20Future%20An%20inquiry%20into%20the%20impact%20of%20the%20Social%20Services%20and%20Well-being%20Wa.pdf> Key pages that informed the above are P18,19,26,42.

We call upon the next Welsh Government to

- Publish a dedicated action plan to improve implementation of the Act by the end of 2021 with clear timescales. The implementation plan should be informed by the significant amount of existing evidence and research on the Act including the Senedd's inquiry, the Measuring the Mountain project, evaluations by carers organisations such as Track the Act and the ongoing independent evaluation. Beginning in 2022, Ministers should lay before the Senedd an annual report detailing progress towards achieving the implementation action plan.
- Issue guidance to local authorities regarding the use of consistent language and standardised processes in the promotion and delivery of Carers Needs Assessments to support carers to better understand the assessments and their rights in this area.

2. Respite Services and Breaks

Before the COVID-19 pandemic many carers struggled to access regular and appropriate respite, leaving many feeling exhausted and unable to cope. Reductions in services such as day centres during the pandemic have further reduced the ability of carers to access breaks, with a serious toll on their mental wellbeing. Unpaid carers save the Welsh NHS and other services billions of pounds every year. For this to be sustainable and for carers to be able to look after their own wellbeing and provide care safely, access to respite services is essential.

Scotland has developed innovative services to expand access to short breaks, including the Scottish Government funded Short Breaks Fund² and their Respitality³ scheme that mobilizes spare capacity in the hospitality sector to provide free breaks for carers. Unpaid carers need the Welsh Government to ensure they benefit from existing funding for respite while replicating best practice currently benefiting carers elsewhere in the UK.

We call upon the next Welsh Government to

- Create and fund a Respitality scheme and Short Breaks Fund modelled on the Scottish examples to expand access to respite and support Welsh hospitality at the same time.
- Ensure future funding for respite services is in the form of a hypothecated (ring-fenced) grant to local authorities to ensure funding will reach respite services and reduce the current postcode lottery for respite in Wales.

² <https://www.sharedcarescotland.org.uk/shortbreaksfund/>

³ <https://www.sharedcarescotland.org.uk/respitality/business-info/>

3. Sustainable Funding for Carer Services

Sustainable, quality services are central to ensuring carers can care for their loved ones, look after their wellbeing and have a life alongside caring. Statutory services are heavily dependent on the third sector for the delivery of carers services, such as the delivery of statutory needs assessments, and the often-preventative nature of these services reduces pressure on statutory services and the NHS. Short term funding settlements undermine the delivery of these services, leading to disruption for carers as personnel and services change frequently.

The less support there is for unpaid carers, the greater the demand on statutory services. We believe steps can be taken to embed greater certainty and continuity into carers services in Wales.

We call upon the next Welsh Government to

- Commit to introducing long-term, sustainable funding arrangements for third sector organisations delivering carers support and services by working towards three-year settlements as a minimum.
- Ensure that by 2022 all regions are using at least 20% of their Integrated Care Fund funds on third sector projects.
- Commission research to examine whether funding for carers services has been sufficient to deliver the provisions of the Social Services and Well-being Act and project what funding will be necessary to fulfil the Act's objectives moving forward.

4. Identification and Awareness

Research has shown that many unpaid carers in Wales are unaware of their legal rights as carers. There is low public awareness of carers rights and carers are frequently not identified by public facing health and social care staff. As a result, carers are often unaware of support that could make a real difference to their lives, from needs assessments through to bereavement support and even help to continue in employment or education alongside caring.

Poor identification of carers to date has even caused challenges during the COVID-19 vaccine rollout as while carers have been prioritised for the vaccine, GPs and other services have struggled to know who to contact as their records are often limited.

We call upon the next Welsh Government to

- Evaluate the effectiveness of its current public awareness campaign on carers rights and launch a refreshed and expanded awareness campaign in 2022. In acknowledgement of the significant annual financial contribution of the carer population, this awareness campaign should be repeated at regular intervals.

- Ensure that all public facing staff in health and social care receive a level of carer awareness training appropriate to their role by 2023.
- Create a national register of unpaid carers in Wales by 2023 to ensure health services understand who their local carers are.
- Introduce baseline standards for schools regarding identifying and support young carers, including through establishing links with local carers services, and support the creation of specific guidance for further and higher education institutions.
- Introduce an element within the carers needs assessment that focuses on support for end of life including bereavement, for any carer who requests it, to discuss needs and the support on offer for when a caring role ends.

5. Working in Partnership with Carers

The Welsh Government must ensure carers are empowered to meaningfully co-produce national policies and local/regional services. Despite assurances that they are valued partners, RPB Carer Representatives feel side-lined in decision making, resulting in missed opportunities for co-production in the design of services for carers. The Ministerial Advisory Group on Carers needs to be empowered to take a more strategic role in the design and delivery of carers policies to reflect the Welsh Government's commitment to social partnership. The pandemic has exacerbated significant challenges facing carers in Wales. These issues require a cross-party, multi-stakeholder focus in order to be tackled.

We call upon the next Welsh Government to

- Enhance co-production with carers through strengthened expectations of Regional Partnership Boards and Local Authorities regarding carer involvement in decision making.
- Empower the Ministerial Advisory Group to take strategic decisions on carers policy including delivery and support transparency by laying an annual report before the Senedd on the Group's work.
- Support the organisation of an annual Carers Convention to bring together carers, statutory services, carer representative organisations and cross-party figures to enable targeted examination of the challenges facing carers.

6. Financial Support for Carers

Unpaid carers have saved the Welsh NHS and other statutory and social care services billions of pounds since the start of the pandemic. As services have been withdrawn, carers have been pushed further into financial distress and poverty as the cost of caring has increased. Carers

Allowance is the lowest benefit of its kind and, due to its many eligibility conditions, many unpaid carers are not even eligible to claim it.

In Scotland unpaid carers benefit from a Carers Allowance Supplement and received an additional further payment to recognise the contribution of carers during the pandemic. An evaluation of the supplement⁴ in Scotland demonstrates it has had a positive impact on the finances and quality of life of carers and led to them feeling more valued by their government.

We call on the next Welsh Government to

- Seek to increase awareness of and take up of benefits by unpaid carers including Carers Allowance, Personal Independence Payment, Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance.
- Lobby the UK Government to uprate Carers Allowance in England and Wales to match its now effective rate in Scotland. If this is not possible the Welsh Government should explore giving an additional payment to unpaid carers to recognise the substantial contribution they make to Wales.
- Review opportunities to provide financial support for unpaid carers through COVID-19 recovery plans.

END

The member organisations of the Wales Carers Alliance stand ready to work with the Welsh Government and other partners to support the implementation of these proposals.

The members of the Wales Carers Alliance:

Age Cymru

All Wales Forum of Parent Carers

Alzheimer's Society

Care and Repair Cymru

Carers Trust Wales

Carers Wales

Hafal

Learning Disability Wales

Learning Disability Wales

Macmillan Cancer Support

Marie Curie

MND Association

MS Society Cymru

Parkinson's UK Cymru

SNAP Cymru

Stroke Association

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-carers-allowance-supplement/>