



North East Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Carers Service Integration

Research Report

Developed in partnership with:



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Report contributors and delivery partners

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- Age Concern Tyneside South
- Caregivers Connected Gateshead (Carers Federation)
- Carers Northumberland
- Newcastle Carers
- North Tyneside Carers' Centre
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- All carers who took part
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Executive Summary

Unpaid carers play a vital role in society, providing essential care and support to family members and friends who could not otherwise manage, due to illness, disability, mental health problems, frailty, or addiction. Their contribution is significant both socially and economically, yet many carers face substantial barriers to accessing and sustaining paid employment.

This research was commissioned as part of the North East Economic Inactivity Trailblazer programme, exploring how specialist carer support organisations can contribute to addressing the challenges experienced by unpaid carers who want to work.

The study was delivered collaboratively by seven carer support organisations across the North East Combined Authority area, led by Durham County Carers Support. The aim was to develop an evidence-based model, supporting carers to move towards employment, remain at work, or return to work where appropriate.

The research sought to:

- Understand the lived experience and needs of working age carers who are not currently in paid work, or are struggling to sustain employment
- Identify existing good practice both locally and nationally
- Explore the role of specialist carer services within the wider work, health, and skills system
- Co-design a future delivery model that is realistic, flexible, and responsive to the realities of unpaid caring

Scale of the Issue

Across the seven local authorities within the North East Combined Authority area, there are 189,750 unpaid carers, with 135,530 of these being of working age. Census data shows that 53% of unpaid carers in the region are not in employment, and many provide substantial levels of care - over a third deliver more than 50 hours of care per week.

The research highlights that caring responsibilities often lead to prolonged periods out of the labour market. Many carers report leaving employment due to increasing care demands, and some have been out of work for several years. Nationally, it is estimated that around 600 carers leave work every day due to their caring responsibilities.

Caring can also impact carers' own health and wellbeing. Many carers experience financial pressures, social isolation, and deteriorating physical and mental health. Evidence shows carers providing intensive care are significantly more likely to experience poor health outcomes and financial hardship. Despite these challenges, unpaid carers contribute to an estimated £162 billion per year to the UK economy, through the care they provide.



“It’s hard as I work full-time. My wife has had to reduce hours to work part-time to support my son and provide more care. It is really tiring, emotionally and physically, working a full-time job and then coming home and looking after my son.” Carer

Research Approach

The research adopted a mixed-methods approach to ensure carers' voices and lived experiences were central to the findings. Data was gathered through:

- Five focus groups
- An online survey of 307 carers
- 145 in-depth interviews with carers
- A staff survey of 78 carer support workers
- Interviews with 25 employers across the region

In total, over 450 carers contributed directly to the research, alongside professionals working within carer support services, and employers from a range of sectors. This approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the barriers carers face, and the support required to help them access and sustain employment.

Key Findings

Caring responsibilities are the primary barrier to employment

The research shows that caring responsibilities are the single most significant factor preventing carers from entering or sustaining employment. Many carers provide high levels of care and describe their role as equivalent to a full-time job. The unpredictable nature of caring responsibilities, combined with the lack of flexible employment opportunities, makes it extremely difficult for carers to commit to traditional working patterns.

Carers also reported that the language used to describe them as 'economically inactive', fails to reflect the significant contribution they make through unpaid care.

Employment systems are not designed around caring responsibilities

Many carers reported difficulty finding employment that fits around their caring responsibilities. Standard working patterns, rigid shift structures, and limited flexibility, were frequently cited as barriers. In addition, carers expressed concerns about:

- The cost and availability of replacement care
- The financial risks associated with losing or reducing benefits
- Lack of confidence after extended periods out of the labour market
- Limited awareness of employment rights and workplace protections

These factors often combine to create significant practical and psychological barriers to returning to work.

Sustaining employment alongside caring is highly challenging

Even when carers are in employment, balancing work and caring responsibilities can be extremely difficult. Nearly four out of five carers in employment reported they either struggle, or only just manage to balance both roles. Many carers described feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, and often making compromises in their careers, such as reducing hours or accepting lower-paid roles to maintain flexibility.

Employer understanding and workplace flexibility were consistently identified as key factors enabling carers to remain in employment.

Specialist carer support services play a critical role

Carers repeatedly highlighted the importance of trusted support from specialist carer organisations. Carer centres provide holistic support that recognises the complexity of caring roles and the multiple barriers carers face.

These services are often the first point of contact for carers seeking help, and are uniquely positioned to deliver employability support because they:

- Understand the realities of caring responsibilities
- Have established relationships of trust with carers
- Provide holistic support addressing wellbeing, finances, and practical needs
- Maintain strong partnerships with local authorities, health services, and employers

Across the North East, the seven partner organisations already support over 50,000 registered carers, demonstrating their reach and ability to deliver coordinated regional interventions.

Employers recognise the value of carers but need support

Engagement with employers highlighted that many organisations recognise the valuable skills carers bring to the workplace, including resilience, empathy, time management, and problem-solving.

However, employers also reported challenges in balancing flexibility with operational demands, particularly in sectors with rigid working patterns, such as healthcare. Employers expressed strong interest in receiving additional support, guidance, and training, to better understand and support carers in the workplace.



Key Findings

Analysis of the research identified three overarching themes for improving employment outcomes for carers:

1. Employer Practices

Employers must develop more flexible and inclusive employment practices that recognise the realities of caring responsibilities. This includes flexible working arrangements, clear carer policies, and better awareness among managers.

2. System Integration and Support

Employment support for carers must be better coordinated across systems, including employability programmes, adult social care, and specialist carer services.

3. Tailored Employment Support

Carers require personalised support that recognises their individual circumstances and provides realistic pathways into employment. Generic employment programmes are often unsuitable for carers due to the complexity of their caring roles.

Proposed Delivery Model

Based on the evidence gathered, the research proposes a regional model for supporting carers into and within employment. Key components include:

- A digital employer portal and Carer-Friendly Employer Award
- A central referral and coordination system to streamline access to support
- Enhanced employment engagement and training to promote carer-friendly workplaces
- Dedicated carers and employment advisers embedded within local carer support services
- A regional strategic leadership role to drive system change and ensure long-term sustainability

This model builds on existing expertise within carer support organisations and aims to integrate employability support within wider wellbeing and practical support services.

Conclusion

Unpaid carers are essential to the functioning of health and social care systems and make a substantial contribution to society. However, many carers face significant barriers to entering and sustaining employment.

The research clearly demonstrates that specialist carer support organisations are best placed to deliver effective employment support for carers. This is due to their trusted relationships, holistic approaches and strong local partnerships.

By integrating employability support within existing carer services and strengthening collaboration with employers and wider systems, the North East can develop an innovative, coordinated approach. This would support carers to access sustainable employment while maintaining their caring role.

This programme has the potential to position the North East as a national leader in supporting carers to remain in or return to work, delivering benefits for carers, employers, and the regional economy.



Introduction






Seven lead carer support organisations from the North East Combined Authority area formed a partnership to deliver this research. The remit was to scope the role of specialist carer support services in an integrated work, health, and skills sector, working to tackle economic inactivity.

The outcome is an evidence-led approach to provide a long-term, coordinated delivery of innovative support across the North East, to help carers gain or return to paid employment.

The North East Combined Authority has identified three priorities for tackling health related inactivity. These are:

1. Better pathways to employment through local infrastructure, which provides an enabling environment and dedicated resources.
2. New ways of working through market innovation. Investing in new approaches to tackle economic inactivity for targeted groups.
3. Systems reform to establish radical and ambitious ways of working to break down barriers for people.

The research addresses the following:

-  Understanding the current needs of working age carers in the North East who need support from being economically inactive, to gaining and maintaining paid work.
-  Reviewing existing activities and identifying best practice locally and nationally.
-  Exploring why utilising existing specialist carer support services is necessary to maximise the effectiveness of a future programme.
-  Co-designing an innovative and evidence-based costed model to fit into existing work, health, and skills systems.
-  Outlining next steps and timescales to ensure continuity of existing support.

To achieve this, we have carried out the following:

- Reviewed existing support
- Interviewed and held focus groups with over 210 carers
- Reviewed best practice, research, and outcomes on a local, regional, and national scale
- Interviewed and surveyed different size and sector employers. This helped us to understand existing knowledge and support available within organisations, and to scope out employers' needs in relation to recruiting and retaining carers.

Collaborative Approach and Delivery Model

This process has been governed through a collaboration of the seven carer lead organisations across the North East Combined Authority area (below).

- **Durham County Carers Support** (lead)
- **Age Concern Tyneside South**
- **Caregivers Connected Gateshead (Carers Federation)**
- **Carers Northumberland**
- **Newcastle Carers**
- **North Tyneside Carers' Centre**
- **Sunderland Carers Centre**

These organisations are integral to the wider regional collaborative work, giving carers a voice, visibility, and to promote high-quality, consistent services.

We have developed a partnership agreement across the seven organisations to deliver this project and formed a steering group that met regularly throughout the project.

We recruited an advisory group of experts to inform and support the process, including national charities and local universities. A strategic lead was also recruited, and partnership expertise were utilised. We created and followed a project plan that was reviewed within the steering group meetings.

It was agreed to use an independent research company to carry out and report on the interviews, focus groups, and a survey with carers. We recruited Wavehill for this project, as they have expertise regionally and nationally in evaluating employability programmes and carer services. Wavehill also surveyed staff from the partnership organisations, as around 50% are working carers and the remainder have experience of carers' needs and local existing employability services.

Ethical Approach

The partnership group agreed an ethical approach that engaged those with lived experience to share the barriers and challenges they face, while also capturing their needs to shape the design of the services required. By gathering employers' knowledge and drawing on their expertise, we have further shaped our approach across carers' journeys into paid work.

Utilising existing research and best practice has further informed the model and ensures it incorporates learning from other projects, and is an evidenced-based approach with clear outcomes.

Carers have been given a clear, consistent understanding of the need for research, and have been supported to take part through a variety of engagement methods, including face-to-face, online and over the phone. Any expenses have been reimbursed.

Context

Definition of a Carer

A carer is anyone who provides unpaid care to a family member or friend who cannot cope without their support. This is due to illness, disability, mental health problems, frailty, or addiction. This care is not provided as part of a paid job or voluntary work for an organisation.

Data on Carers in and out of Work

Across the seven local authorities in the North East Combined Authority area, the 2021 Census reports 189,750 carers, of which 135,530 are of working age. This is likely to be an underestimation, as this figure relies on individuals identifying as a carer – we know that many do not recognise their own caring role. The data provided by the census reports 53% of carers in the region are not in work.

In the North East Combined Authority region, 60% of carers are female and 96% are White British. The age breakdown is demonstrated in Figure 1. This is based on the 2021 Census on unpaid care, combined with age breakdowns and aggregated to the North East Combined Authority geographical area.

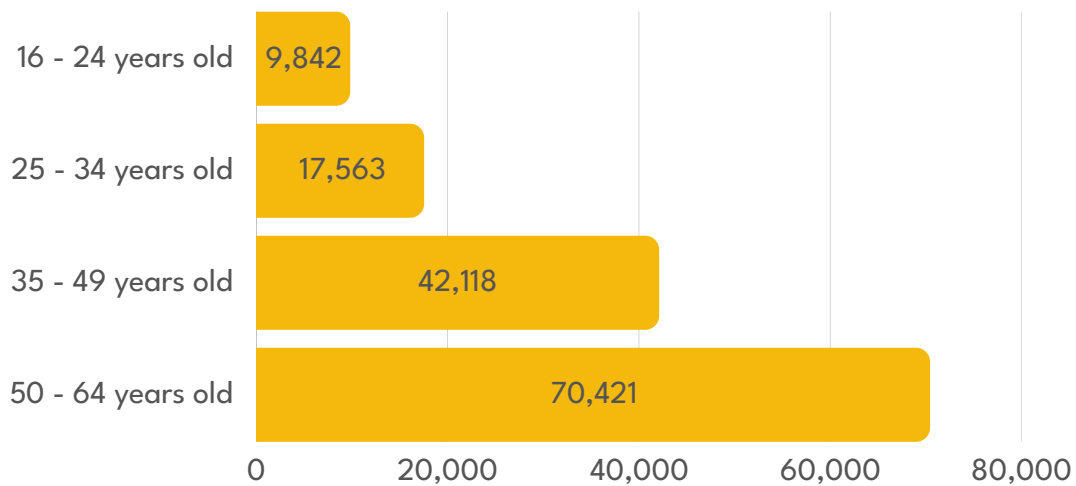


Figure 1. Working age carers in the North East Combined Authority area

32% of carers are also registered as disabled themselves, creating additional barriers to work. The hours of care provided are high in the region:

- 34% of carers provide over 50 hours of care per week
- 23% provide 20 - 49 hours of care per week
- 44% provide 1 - 19 hours of care per week

There is a long-term history of unemployment for unpaid carers in the region, especially for those providing high levels of care, as demonstrated in Figure 2.

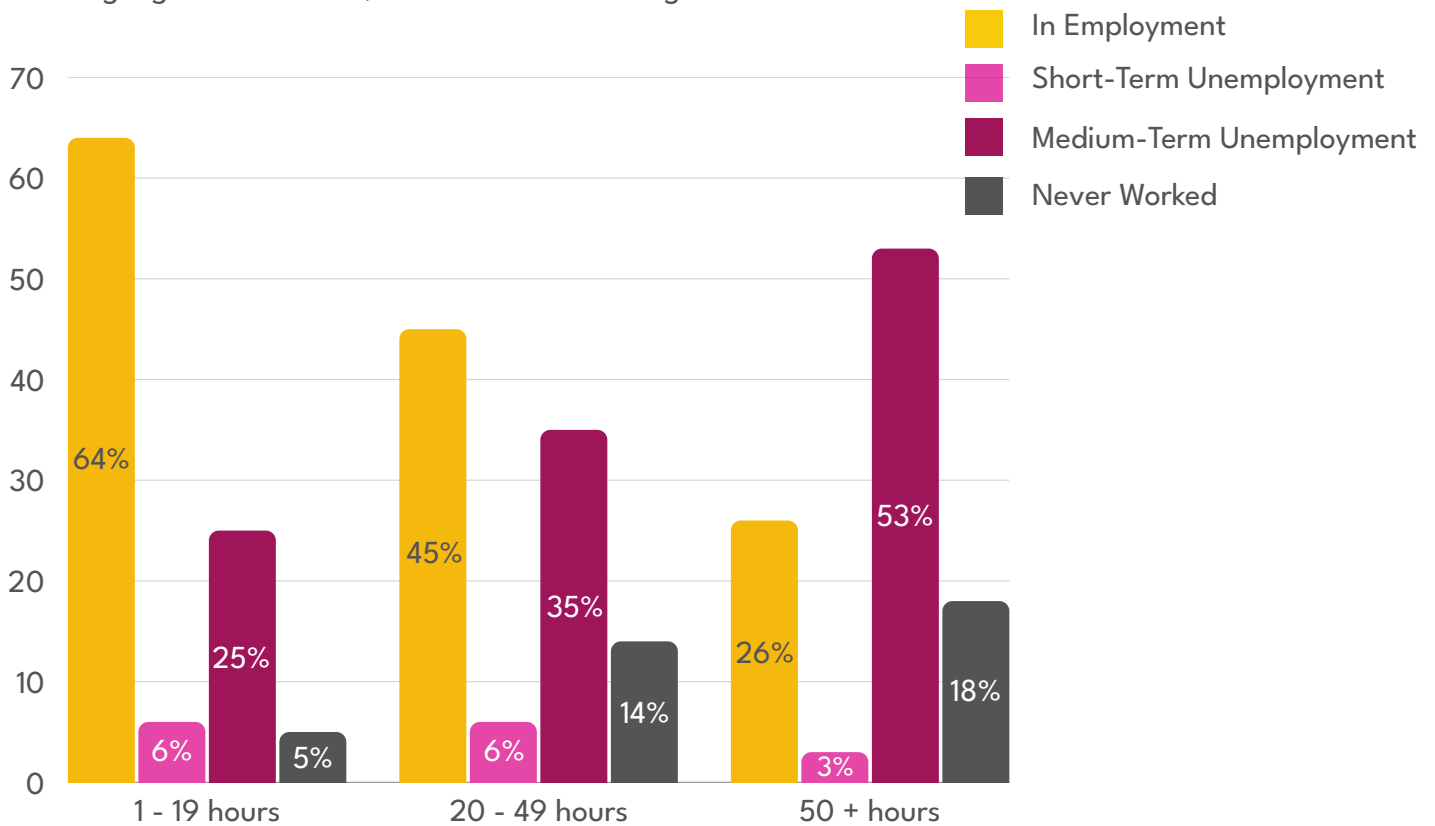


Figure 2. Employment Status of Carers in the North East Combined Authority area, by Hours of Unpaid Care Provided per Week

Note - Hours refer to unpaid care provided per week, based on the 2021 Census.

Overall, 11.7% of carers in the region have never worked, and 18% have no qualifications. The situation has worsened over the last decade. The 2011 Census reported that 48.6% of carers not in work, with 4.5% having never worked, demonstrating a decline over the 10 years between each census. National statistics suggest around 600 carers per day leave work to provide care.

Existing Research in this Area

Carers are the backbone of society and an essential part of our social infrastructure. Yet, the visible gap between those who provide unpaid care, and those who don't, demonstrates the detrimental impact of caring.

A report by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) highlights the significant health inequalities faced by carers. Evidence shows that 36% of carers feel lonely 'often or always', compared with 6% of the general population. Carers providing 50 or more hours of care per week, are twice as likely to report poor health when compared with non-carers. In addition, 1.2 million carers live in poverty, including 400,000 in deep poverty. Caring can also disrupt employment and pension contributions, further compounding health risks.¹

¹ Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, *Unpaid Caring: The Hidden Health Inequality We Can No Longer Ignore* (London: ADASS, 2023), accessed March 23, 2026, <https://www.adass.org.uk/unpaid-caring-the-hidden-health-inequality-we-can-no-longer-ignore-and-why-we-must-intervene-to-prevent-ill-health-in-carers/>. Note - Statistics from the ONS, Brimblecombe et al. (2018), and JRF (2023) are reported within this ADASS publication.

The 'State of Caring Report 2025' highlights a national picture: 52% of carers have reported an increase in the number of hours they spend providing care over the last 12 months. 74% of carers are worried about the impact caring will have on their finances in the future.²

The ageing population and health and social care challenges are preventing carers from engaging in meaningful employment. Supporting carers into work effectively would provide considerable health, social, and economic benefits. Nationally, the opportunity cost of getting non-working carers into paid employment is between £5.4 billion and £16.9 billion.³

This depends on whether we assume carers could earn as much as working carers or working non-carers.

Carers Trust's 'Unpaid Carers and Employment' report highlighted that, from those surveyed, 48% were 'not very confident' or 'not at all confident' about searching for and finding work. Those who have been out of work for a long period (due to providing care), were highlighted as a group needing carer-focused employability support, with one saying 'After 25 years of not being in employment, I don't know what I can do'.⁴

The report highlighted concerns that 'large employment programmes which are outcome/target driven...did not allow enough time to support carers, given the support needs carers presented and their distance from the labour market'.⁵

The impact on carers in employment is equally as stark, with 69% of employed carers stating they haven't been as focused on their career as they would like. 61% state their caring has affected the type of employment they have taken on.⁶

In fact, 21% of employed carers had taken on a lower paid role/more junior role as it was a better fit around their caring responsibilities, demonstrating the need for more carer-friendly workplaces.⁷

A 2022 survey by Carers Trust highlights that only 35% of employed carers feel their employer has good processes and structures in place to support working carers.⁸

2 Carers UK, *State of Caring 2025: The cost of caring – the impact of caring across carers' lives* (London: Carers UK, 2025), accessed 23 March 2026, <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/state-of-caring-2025-the-cost-of-caring-the-impact-of-caring-across-carers-lives/>

3 Carers UK, *The Hidden Cost of Unpaid Care: The Economic Price of Locking Carers Out of Work* (London: Carers UK, 2025), accessed 23 March 2026, <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/the-hidden-cost-of-unpaid-care-the-economic-price-of-locking-carers-out-of-work/>

4 Carers Trust, *Unpaid Carers and Employment* (London: Carers Trust, 2025), accessed 23 March 2026, <https://www.carers.org/working-for-carers-new/learning-from-working-for-carers>

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Carers Trust, *Carers Employment Support Survey* (London: Carers Trust, 2022), accessed 23 March 2026, <https://www.carers.org/working-for-carers-new/learning-from-working-for-carers>

Good Practice Examples

Across national and regional contexts, there are good practice examples of programmes that support individuals into and within work. This research has focused primarily on initiatives that support carers, while also drawing on learning from outstanding employability and employment support programmes serving a range of demographic groups.

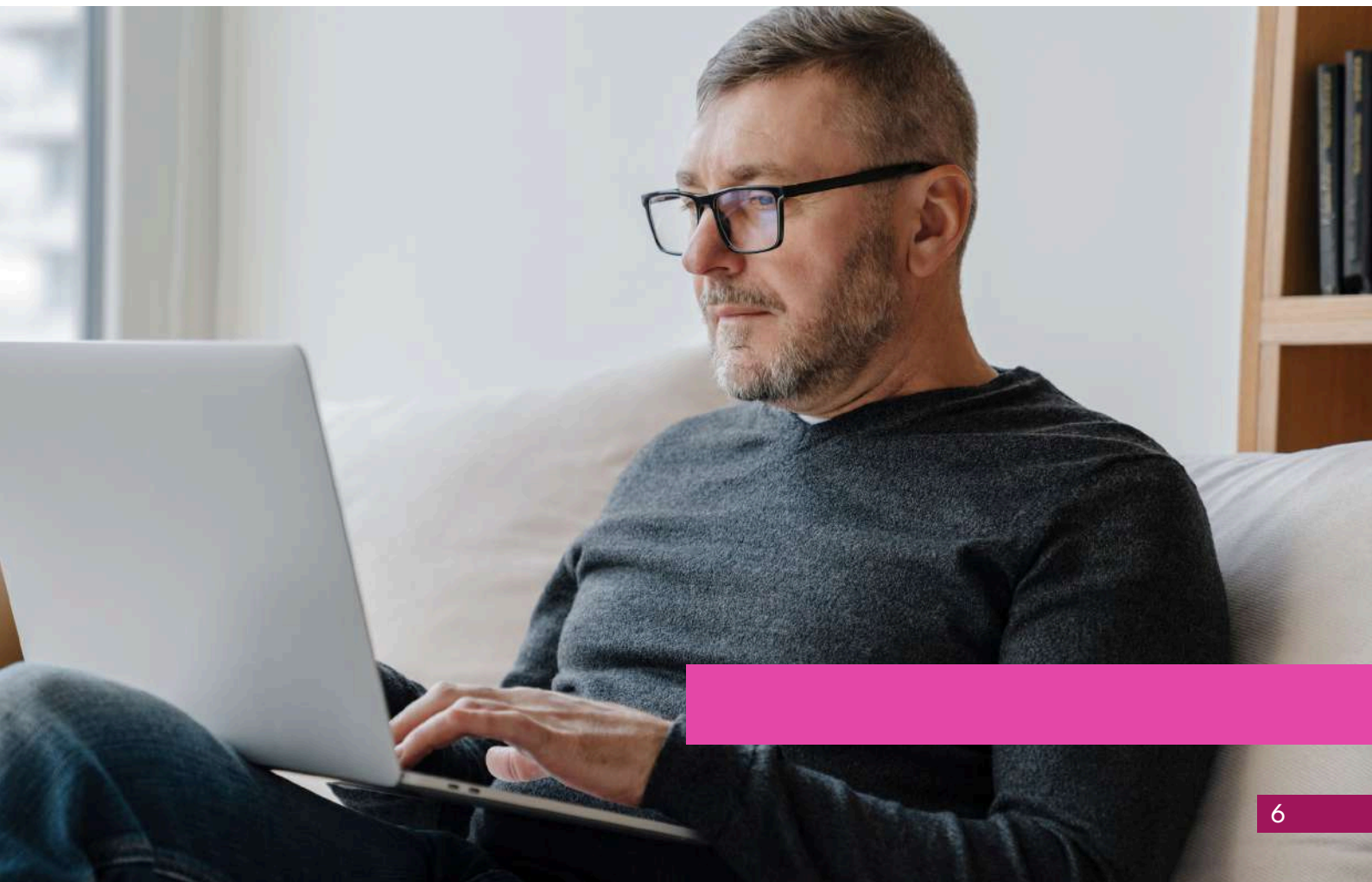
This research was primarily desk-based, with some engagement from the programmes below to ensure a clear understanding and a thorough review of the successes identified within each had been reviewed.

Carer-Specific Programmes

Durham Carer Friendly Employer Award Scheme

Durham County Carers Support (DCCS) operates a digital Carer Friendly Employer Award Scheme. The cost of the digital training tool was funded by Durham County Council. DCCS offers training for employers, delivered through 'LearnDash' (an online training portal), designed to help organisations achieve a Carer Friendly Employer status.

Employers work through online training videos and information that explains how to identify and support carers in the workplace. This builds understanding and confidence across their teams. Throughout the course, employers are provided with a range of practical resources and examples, including:



- **Carer Policy** – downloadable examples and guidance to help employers develop their own tailored policy.
- **Carer Passport** – templates and best practice examples to support open conversations between employees and managers.
- **Flexible Working Policy** – sample documents and guidance to help create a supportive and adaptable framework for carers.
- **Working Carer Employer Guide** – resources employers can share directly with staff to embed a carer-inclusive culture.
- **Video Resources** – from a carers point of view, and a guide showing how to access the training.
- **Free access to Employers for Carers (from Carers UK)** – funded by Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council.

To achieve Carer Friendly Employer status, organisations must submit their completed versions of the Carer Policy, Carer Passport, and Flexible Working Policy. At the end of the training, employers are encouraged to review these policies regularly and renew the training every two years.

The course is flexible and designed to fit around work commitments; learners can log in, start the training, pause at any time, and return later, without needing to complete it in one sitting.

When participants log in to begin the training, Durham County Carers Support (DCCS) receive automatic notifications. Upon completion, DCCS review their submitted policies and materials. When everything is in place, the employer is issued a Carer Friendly Employer certificate. Over the last two years, 40 employers completed this process, and a previous scheme (running from 2019 – 2023) engaged with another 35 employers.

Employers must be signed up to the scheme to view information about what support is available.

Working for Carers (North of Tyne)

The Working for Carers project commenced in April 2024 as a partnership between North Tyneside Carers' Centre, Carers Northumberland, and Newcastle Carers. This project is funded by the UK government, through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, with the North East Combined Authority as the lead authority. It builds on successes and learning from a previous project, Carers in Employment.

There are three key strands of work:

1. Support for carers who are further away from the labour market and want to return to employment, education, training, or volunteering opportunities.
2. Support for carers in employment who are at risk of this breaking down, due to the impact of their caring responsibilities.
3. Support for employers looking to enhance, or begin to provide, support for unpaid carers.

A range of one-to-one interventions are provided to carers to support their employability journey back into the workplace. Carers value the flexibility of support offered, as well as the specialist advice to help remove barriers arising from their caring responsibilities.

Access to assistive technology and identifying opportunities that provide the flexibility carers need, were key to enabling them to balance sustainable work alongside caring. Additionally, carers benefit from being able to access the broader support offer available through carer support organisations.

Support for carers in work is essential in helping them understand their rights in the workplace and to sustain their employment. Practical and emotional support, access to advice and information, assistance with submitting flexible working requests, and mediation with employers, are all key elements of the support available to carers.



Another vital aspect of the Working for Carers project is collaborating with employers: helping them to understand carers' rights and how to identify and support carers in the workplace. This includes delivering carer-awareness training to HR teams and line managers and supporting the development of carer-friendly policies - including those relating to the Carers Leave Act. In total, 56 employers accessed a range of support to become more 'carer-friendly'. 40 received specific support to implement a Carers Policy or review their existing policies.

Effective governance arrangements are in place, contributing significantly to the success of the project. North Tyneside Carers' Centre is the lead organisation and subcontracts delivery to Newcastle Carers and Carers Northumberland. The Operations Manager at North Tyneside Carers' Centre manages the Project Coordinator, who in turn, line manages all delivery staff.

A governance group meets quarterly, comprising of the CEOs and Operations Managers from the three organisations, along with the Project Coordinator. This group oversees the risk register and approves variations to contract delivery.

The programme has supported 507 carers across the North of Tyne area, of which:

- 233 carers were supported to sustain employment
- 248 carers were supported on their journey to return to work, training or education. Of these:
 - 42% entered work
 - 24% entered education
 - 15% commenced volunteering opportunities

Working for Carers (London Programme)

The Working for Carers (London Programme) was a partnership between Carers Trust and four London-based carer support services - Camden Carers, Carers Lewisham, Harrow Carers, and Redbridge Carers Support Service.

Between 2016 and 2023, Working for Carers helped over 1,200 unpaid carers across all 33 London boroughs move into or closer to employment. Funding was secured from the European Social Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund as part of the Building Better Opportunities programme, to provide long-term interventions.

The programme worked with carers from a range of diverse backgrounds and circumstances, offering tailored, practical, and wellbeing-focused support. Key interventions included:

- **Employment Readiness** - Help with job-searching, applications, CV writing, and interview techniques.
- **Skills Development** - Training in IT skills and access to further training and volunteering opportunities to build confidence and employability.
- **Wellbeing Support** - Guidance and resources to improve carers' mental health and resilience.
- **Confidence building** - Volunteering opportunities and structured support to ease carers back into the workplace gradually.

The programme supported 1,266 carers across London, of which:

- 50% began actively job-searching, 17% exited to job-search independently
- 59% undertook training, 14% accessed volunteering, 13% progressed into education/training
- 22% moved into employment
- 72% sustained employment for at least 26 out of 32 weeks
- Among those progressing, 86% reported increased confidence and 82% improved skills

The Working for Carers Final Evaluation Report highlighted learning for future programmes about the importance of flexible, holistic, and personalised support tailored specifically to the realities of unpaid caring. The report also highlighted:

- Carers require more than generic employment support, including:
 - Help to balance work and caring
 - Guidance on navigating benefits
 - Support with managing stigma and confidence issues
- The dual focus of combining practical skills with wellbeing support is what made the programme stand out and ultimately succeed.
- The effectiveness of a three-tiered model, offering:
 1. Pre-employability – confidence building, addressing complex barriers, and improving wellbeing
 2. Employability – skills development, CV support, training, and job-search support
 3. Employment support – assisting transitions into work and helping employers understand carers' needs

Employers for Carers (Carers UK)

Employers for Carers (EfC) is an employers' membership forum with over 230 member organisations across the public, private, and voluntary sectors. It has a reach of over 2.9 million employees. A paid membership structure is in place, providing access to a dedicated account manager to support employers in creating an inclusive workplace for carers.

Support provided includes:

- Raising awareness of caring and caring issues in the workplace, through lunch-and-learns and e-learning courses.
- Reviewing and 'carer-proofing' current policies and practices.
- Identifying and engaging with carers in the workplace.
- Developing, supporting, and managing staff carer networks.
- Training and supporting line managers to implement carer-friendly policies.
- Signposting employees to sources of workplace and external support.
- Providing opportunities to network with and learn from, other employers at regular member events.



EfC membership provides access to a dedicated member platform offering a comprehensive range of resources and practical guidance for line managers and HR teams. This includes essential guides, toolkits, legislative updates, good practice examples, and template policies.

However, it is noted that the cost of EfC membership can be a barrier for small, medium, and public sector employers.

Carers in Employment (Derbyshire All-Age Carers Support Service)

The Carers in Employment project, ran by Derbyshire All-Age Carers Support Service (DAACSS), works with major employers and SMEs in Derbyshire. The aim is to support these organisations to retain staff who are at risk of leaving the workforce due to their caring responsibilities.

Employers benefit from free training, resources, and ongoing support. DAACSS helps to embed carer support in existing policies and procedures. This enables employers to offer a level of support that is appropriate to their own workplace.

DAACSS offers a Carer Friendly Employer Quality Award for employers to sign up to. As part of this pledge, employers must nominate a Carers Champion to be the main contact for carers, keep staff updated about support available, and set up a peer-support network.

Their website offers a wide range of resources to support employers, Carer Champions, and line managers in carrying out their roles. There is no cost to employers participating in the project.

Carer-Specific Programmes

The Key (Cumbria)

The Key programme provides tailored one-to-one support with employer-led training, directly addressing barriers to work. The focus is on young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The programme was built around real job opportunities in Cumbria. Employers helped shape training, so participants gained the exact vocational skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed locally. This reduced recruitment costs for businesses and gave participants a direct pathway into work.

Many participants faced multiple challenges (confidence, health, transport, childcare). The Key addressed these underlying issues alongside employability training, making it more effective than those schemes focused only on skills.

An independent evaluation praised the programme for engaging a wide range of local employers and delivering tangible benefits. Employers reported easier access to 'work-ready' candidates, while participants gained confidence, skills, and jobs.

Participants consistently described staff as the most important factor in the programme's success. They emphasised that staff were genuinely caring and tailored the programme to each individual, rather than taking a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. This personalised support model helped remove deep-rooted barriers and created trust and sustained engagement.

RISE2THRIVE (Carers Plus - Yorkshire)

RISE2THRIVE (Reducing Inequalities, Supporting Employment) / Trailblazer is a support programme for adults in North Yorkshire and York who are currently out of work and have barriers to engaging with employment and/or training. It is delivered through a partnership of community-based organisations spread across North Yorkshire: Carers Plus Yorkshire deliver the service in Scarborough, Whitby, and Ryedale.

The project uses a keyworker and intervention model. Interested participants meet with a keyworker to discuss the project and check their eligibility and suitability. If the project is suitable, the keyworker signs the participant up and becomes their main project mentor, providing them with tailored one-to-one support and mentoring.

If specific barriers are identified, keyworkers can refer participants to access project interventions. Interventions cover a range of areas including therapy and counselling, debt advice and financial support, housing support, wellbeing activities, basic skills, and vocational training.

Good Practice Examples - Key Themes

The key themes identified from reviewing the aforementioned employment programmes include:

- **The importance of relational engagement** with trusting, person-centred relationships playing a critical role in achieving successful outcomes.
- **Specialist expertise in understanding the needs of carers**, ensuring support is tailored to the unique pressures and complexities of caring roles.
- **Flexibility of approach** and recognising that carers' circumstances can change rapidly and that support must adapt accordingly.
- **The need to combine practical employability skills with wellbeing support**, addressing both the practical and emotional barriers that carers face.
- **The value of integrated services** in ensuring that carers can access coordinated, holistic support to meet their needs.
- **The essential role of employer engagement** in creating carer-inclusive workplaces and improving pathways into sustainable, work-ready employment.



Learning from Carers

Research was delivered in partnership with the seven carer organisations across the North East Combined Authority area, ensuring that carers’ voices were central to the design and delivery of the study. A mixed-methods approach was used, engaging both carers and carer organisation staff, between November 2025 and January 2026. The following research activities took place:

- A brief online survey of 307 carers
- In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 145 carers
- Five follow-up focus groups attended by seven carers that completed interviews
- An online survey of 78 carer organisation staff members, disseminated by organisation leads

Carers attending interviews were recompensed with a £10 Love2Shop voucher.

The distribution of carer responses is provided in Figure 3 below. It is important to consider that sample sizes, whilst varied across all local authority areas, are not fully representative of carers across the North East. Therefore, the views provided in the responses may not represent all of those within the cohort discussed.

| Area | Interview | Online | Total | % of all responses |
|----------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------------|
| Durham | 40 | 48 | 88 | 19% |
| Gateshead | 8 | 1 | 9 | 2% |
| Newcastle | 16 | 0 | 16 | 4% |
| North Tyneside | 32 | 59 | 91 | 20% |
| Northumberland | 24 | 114 | 138 | 31% |
| South Tyneside | 17 | 5 | 22 | 5% |
| Sunderland | 8 | 64 | 72 | 16% |
| Not Specified | 0 | 16 | 16 | 4% |
| Total | 145 | 307 | 452 | |

Figure 3. Distribution of responses

Carer Demographics

The carers responding to this research were predominantly female (85%), reflecting wider national patterns in those providing unpaid care. Across all local authority areas within the North East Combined Authority, female residents are more likely than male residents to be caring for someone. National data shows similar, with 59% of unpaid carers being female.⁹

⁹ Office for National Statistics, “Unpaid Care by Age, Sex and Deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021,” ONS, accessed 23 March 2026, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/socialcare/articles/unpaidcarebyagesexanddeprivationenglandandwales/census2021>



The majority (92%) identified as White, which aligns with the regional population profile, whereby 93% of those in the North East identify as White.¹⁰ Furthermore, the largest proportion (34%) of carers responding were aged 55 - 65, followed by those aged 31 - 45 (27%) and 46 - 55 (22%). This largely follows national patterns, whereby unpaid carers are most commonly aged between 35 and 64.¹¹

Almost half of respondents (48%) identified as having a disability themselves, highlighting the prevalence of carers with their own health conditions or impairments. In terms of health, unpaid carers are more likely than non-carers to have a disability or long-term health condition, with around 28-30% of carers identifying as disabled in census statistics, compared to 24% for non-carers.¹²

Caring roles

Most respondents (96%) reported they were currently caring, with the remainder having cared for someone in the past. Around one fifth (21%) of those currently caring, reported caring for more than one person. Respondents reported caring for a wide range of people, most commonly children and older relatives (see Figure 4). It should be noted that carers were not asked if the child being cared for is under 18 or their adult children.

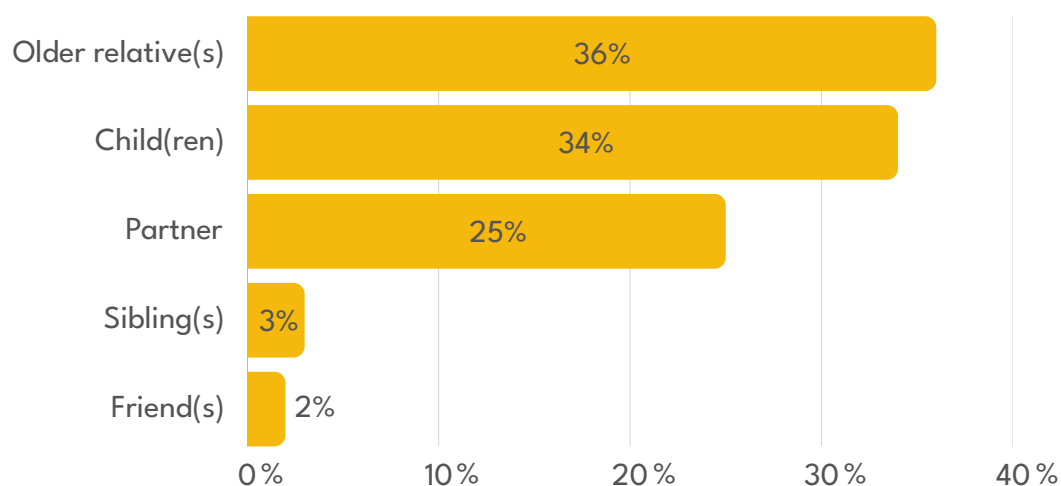


Figure 4. Who carers provide care for

Source: Wavehill Carers Survey (n = 452)

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, *Census 2021* (London: ONS, 2021), accessed 23 March 2026, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census>

¹¹ Centre for Care, *Dashboard (ONS Statistics)* (London: Centre for Care, 2021), accessed 23 March 2026, <https://centreforcure.ac.uk/uuc-dashboard>

¹² Ibid.

The majority of carers (75%) reported providing more than 35 hours of care per week, demonstrating that for many, caring constitutes a full-time role (see Figure 5). This substantial, ongoing support provides important context for understanding the challenges carers face in accessing, sustaining, or balancing paid work.

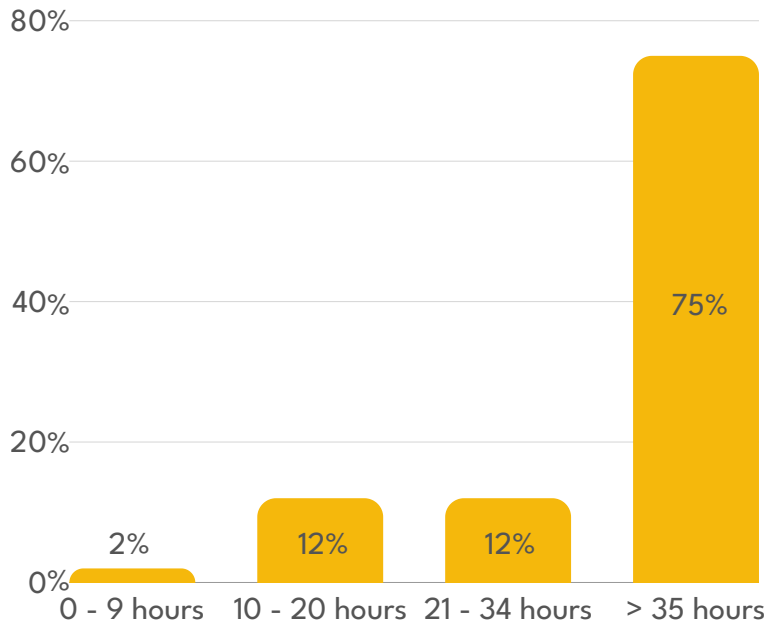


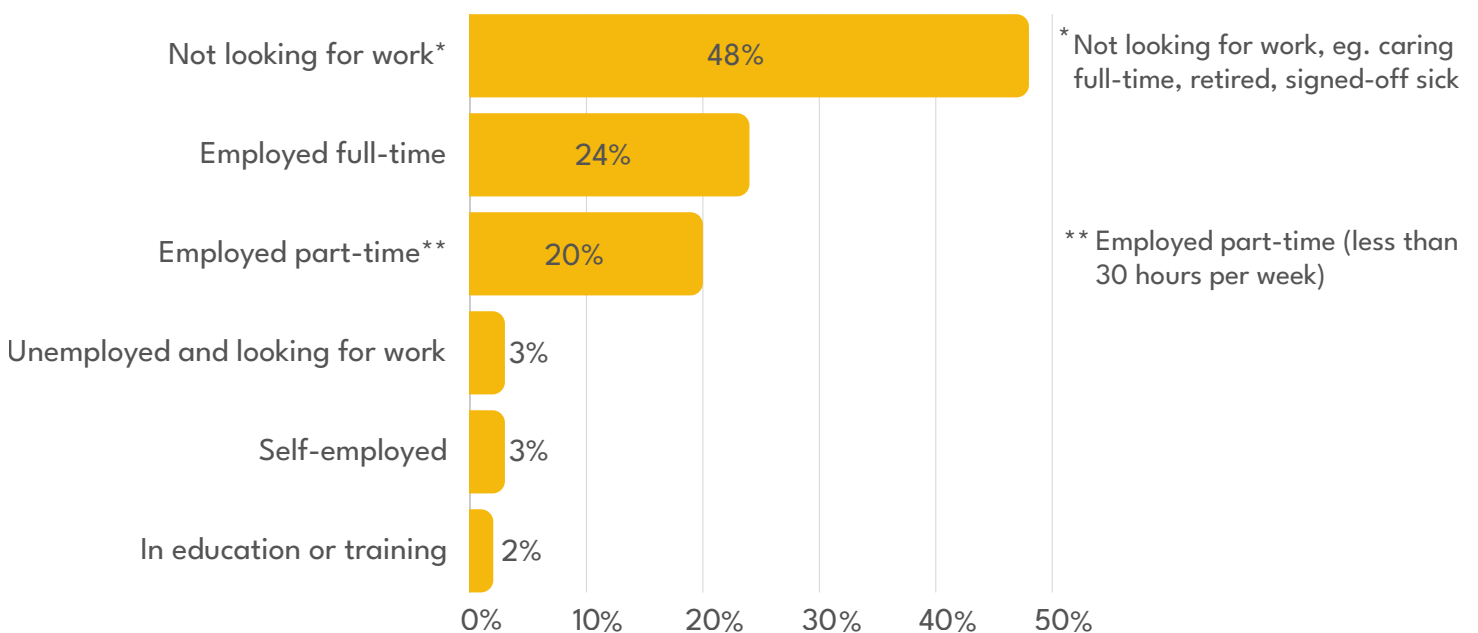
Figure 5. Caring hours

Source: Wavehill Carers Survey (n = 428)

The high number of hours spent caring is reflected in respondents' employment circumstances. As shown in Figure 6 (below), the largest proportion (48%) of carers reported that they are not currently in work or looking for work ('economically inactive'), of which 83% were providing over 35 hours of care per week.

Almost half (44%) of respondents in total were in employment, of which 23% were working part-time or self-employed, suggesting increased flexibility around their caring role. The small prevalence of responses from unemployed carers further suggests that for many, employment is not something they are currently considering.

Alongside employment, around half (45%) of respondents reported receiving Carer's Allowance, with the majority of those currently economically inactive. Taken together, this data shows that employment patterns among carers are closely shaped by the scale of care they provide.



* Not looking for work, eg. caring full-time, retired, signed-off sick

** Employed part-time (less than 30 hours per week)

Figure 6. Carers Employment Status

Source: Wavehill Carers Survey (n = 444)



Carers who were economically inactive and engaged in interviews, were asked when they were last in work - of which almost half (44%) had not been in paid-work for five years or more.

Furthermore, all carers that were currently economically inactive (48% of the overall sample) were asked if employment was something they would consider in the future, of which over half (53%) said no, and a further 11% were unsure. This indicates that for many carers, time out of the labour market is not short-term but long-term, often reflecting sustained caring responsibilities.

Online survey responses show resistance to the way carers who are out of paid work are labelled, with 79% of respondents reporting they do not like being referred to as 'economically inactive'. This indicates that for most carers, the language used to describe their labour market status does not reflect how they see their role or contribution to society.

Many described caring as full-time and demanding work, with several comparing caring directly to paid jobs. The term 'economically inactive' is therefore seen as misleading as it ignores the real labour involved in caring.

Carers emphasised their economic and social contribution, pointing out that unpaid care saves the NHS and social care services substantial amounts of money. This links to research from the Centre for Care, which found the economic value of unpaid care contributions to be £162 billion a year in England.¹³

Many carers felt the label of 'economically inactive' makes them sound 'lazy' or 'unmotivated', when in reality they had often worked for many years and would still be working if their circumstances allowed.

Some described the term as discriminatory or hurtful, particularly because caring is not a lifestyle choice, but a responsibility they cannot step away from. A small minority accepted the term, usually framing it as a technical description of not having earned income rather than a judgement.

However, even among these responses, there was recognition that caring is work and that better language could reflect effort and contribution more fairly. These findings suggest that the language used in any employability support will be important in encouraging engagement from carers.

¹³ Centre for Care and Carers UK, *The Economic Value of Unpaid Care in England*, 2024.

Staff caring roles

The 78 staff members at carer support organisations who responded deliver a wide variety of roles, including support officers, wellbeing coordinators, employability advisers, and young carer workers.

Around half (52%) of the staff responding were currently caring, of which 35% were providing over 35 hours of care a week. A further 29% of respondents had provided care for someone in the past.

This indicates that many staff have a first-hand understanding of carer roles, and the barriers carers may face when considering or maintaining employment. Thus, they are well-suited to advise carers that are seeking work or considering employment, with realistic understanding from their own lived experience.

Caring and Employment

Reported barriers to entering employment

Staff survey evidence highlights that carers are widely seen as facing additional challenges in accessing work. Almost nine in ten staff (88%) believed that carers experience greater difficulty securing employment than non-carers. Furthermore, staff reported that carers supported by their organisation report employment-related needs either very often (15%) or often (39%). This reflects a strong consensus that caring responsibilities create practical and structural barriers to entering employment.

Interviewed carers that were economically inactive were asked what their key reasons were for this, with the largest proportion (74%) citing their caring role. Around one third (37%) of carers cited their own person health reasons, reflecting the cumulative impact that caring can have on wellbeing and capacity to engage with work. In contrast, relatively few carers reported factors relating to a preference of not wanting to work, suggesting that most carers economic inactivity is shaped by constraint rather than choice.

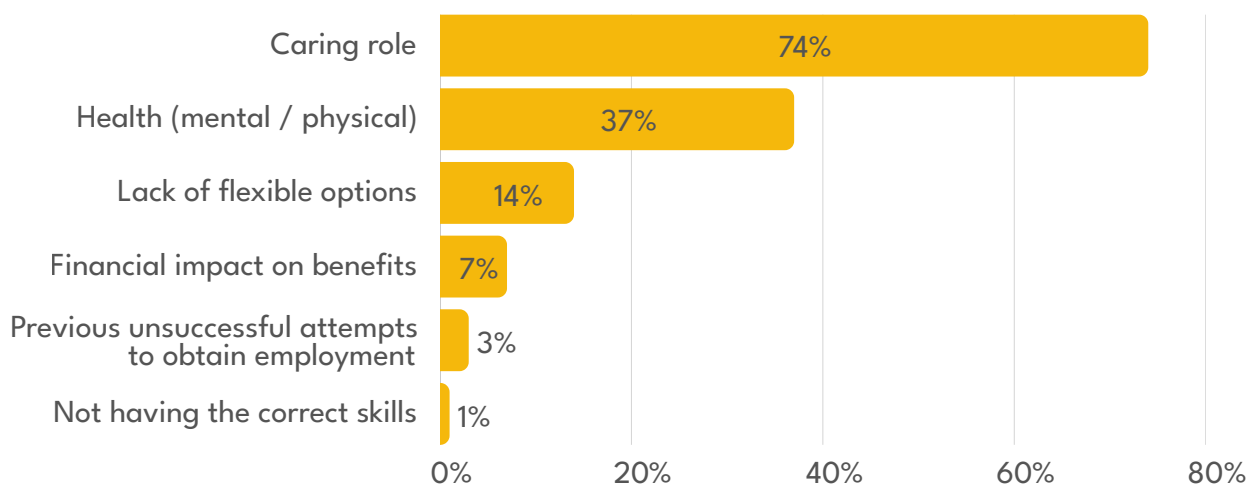


Figure 7. Economically inactive carers reported reasons for not wanting to enter employment

Source: Wavehill Carers Interviews (n = 73)

Barriers to employment that have been identified through the research are varied. They are not only widely experienced by carers themselves, but also clearly recognised by professionals working with them.

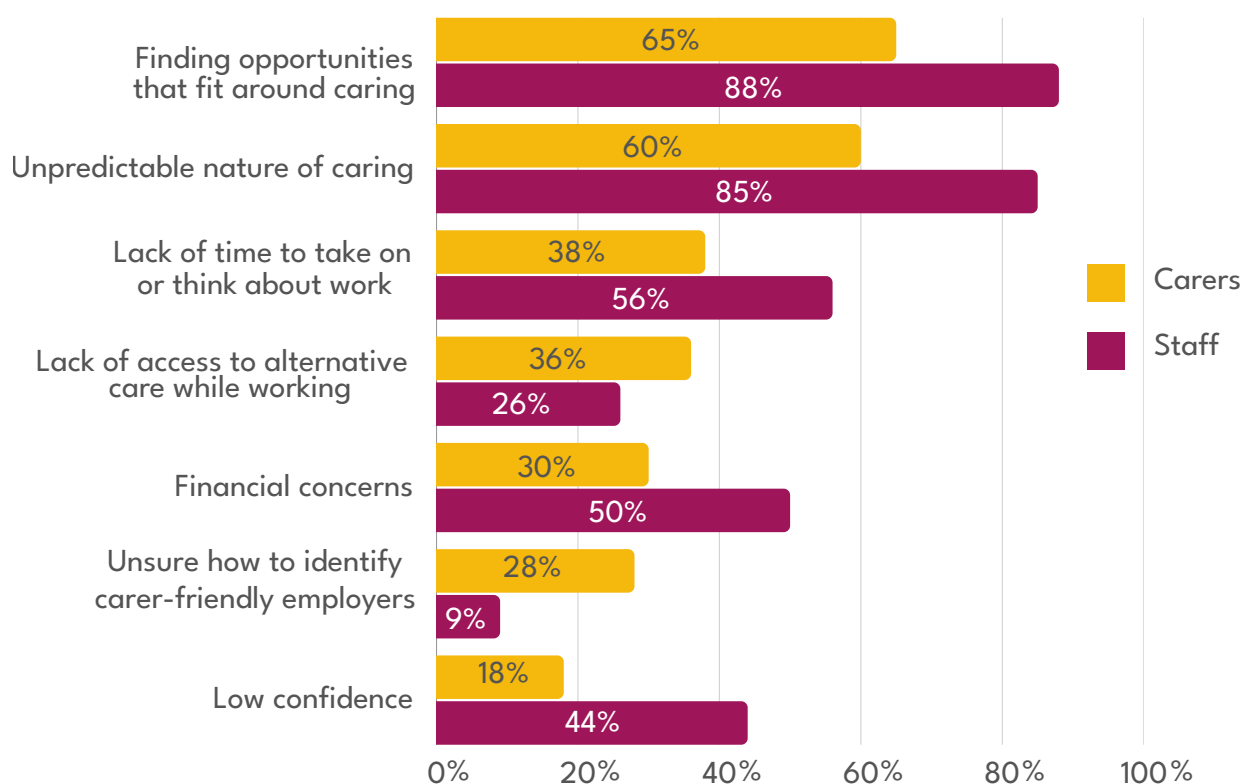


Figure 8. Key barriers to employment, as reported by staff and economically inactive carers

Source: Wavehill Carers Survey (n = 184), Wavehill Staff Survey (n = 78)

The most significant barrier reported by economically inactive carers (cited by 65% of respondents) relates to finding job opportunities that fit around caring responsibilities. This was also the most cited reason by staff, indicating a strong agreement that standard employment patterns often do not align with the realities of caring. Closely linked to this is the unpredictable nature of caring. Discussions in focus groups indicated that caring responsibilities could change day-to-day, making it difficult for carers to commit to fixed hours or guarantee availability.

Several highlighted the emotional burden of knowing they might need to leave work at short notice, and the fear of being penalised or viewed as unreliable by employers as a result. From a practical perspective, and likely linked to the unpredictable nature of caring, both staff and carers recognised the lack of time to take on or think about paid-work, impacting not only their ability to job search, but their ability to sustain employment.

In terms of accessing alternative care, discussions in focus groups explained limited availability of suitable care packages, particularly where specialist support is needed, and noted that paid care is often too expensive to make employment financially worthwhile. In some cases, carers calculated that working would leave them worse off once replacement care costs were considered.

“

“The uncertainty of how much you're needed and the hours around your caring role can stop you getting back into work.”

~ Carer

“

“The need to upskill and getting qualifications after being out of work for a long time [is the main barrier]. [We need] help getting funding for training.”

~ Carer

“

“The cost of replacing the care with someone else [is the main barrier]. It would cost more than working full-time.”

~ Carer

Linked to this, financial concerns were also an important consideration cited by both staff and carers, namely concerns around Carer's Allowance. Carers in focus groups and interviews described the system as inflexible and poorly suited to fluctuating caring and working patterns. The restriction on hours and earnings was seen as discouraging attempts to return to work, particularly given fears about making mistakes and facing sanctions.

Smaller proportions of carers reported concerns about stigma in the workplace and lack of relevant skills (15% and 12%, respectively), reinforcing the finding that economic inactivity is more of an imposition than a choice.



Barriers to sustaining employment

For carers in employment, research findings indicate a high level of openness about caring responsibilities within the workplace. Almost all (94%) employed carers reported that their employer was aware of their caring role. This provides important context when considering how carers experience support, flexibility and understanding at work, and how organisational practices shape their ability to remain in employment alongside caring.

Managing caring and employment

Figure 9 (below) shows that balancing paid work alongside caring responsibilities is challenging for most carers. Amongst employed carers responding to the research, 79% report struggling or only just managing to combine work and care, with very few feeling fully comfortable in doing so. Many also describe their ability to manage as fluctuating, reflecting the changing and often unpredictable nature of caring responsibilities.

“It is challenging. I need my phone on me in case I get a call from the care home and need to take leave to attend appointments. It can be emotionally and physically draining.” ~ Carer

This indicates that many staff have a first-hand understanding of carer roles, and the barriers carers may face when considering or maintaining employment. Thus, they are well-suited to advise carers that are seeking work or considering employment, with realistic understanding from their own lived experience.

Amongst responding staff, whilst around one third (34%) reported being comfortable managing both work and care, almost half (49%) report that their ability to manage fluctuates. This suggests that even carers working within carer support organisations experience ongoing uncertainty in balancing employment with caring roles. The findings highlight that managing caring and employment is rarely stable, reinforcing the need for flexible, responsive employment arrangements that can adapt to changing caring demands.

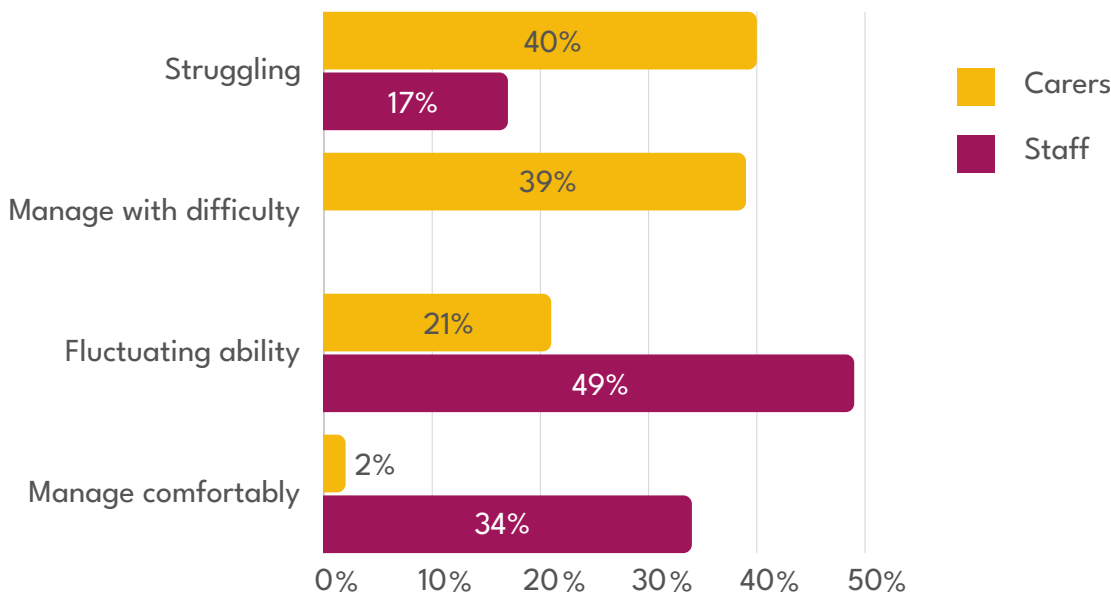


Figure 9. Carers ability to manage caring responsibilities and employment

Source: Wavehill Carers Survey (n = 201), Wavehill Staff Survey (n = 35)

When asked about the key aspects impacting carers' ability to sustain employment, staff most commonly identified inflexible working conditions (90%) and the unpredictable nature of caring responsibilities (70%), further highlighting how rigid hours, limited scope to adjust working patterns, and sudden changes in caring needs undermine carers' ability to stay in work.

Many also pointed to a lack of employer support (62%) and health and wellbeing pressures (38%), reinforcing that the challenge is less about ambition and more about whether work can adapt to caring realities. For example, they noted that employers often lack understanding around caring roles, and the support that is subsequently required, as well as reluctance to provide flexibility.

Carers qualitative responses also provide important context. A consistent theme relating to sustaining employment was the mental and emotional load of managing both roles. Many described feeling physically exhausted, emotionally drained, or close to burnout, particularly where caring involved complex needs, dementia, or frequent hospital appointments. Several spoke about stress-related sickness absence, declining mental health, and the sense of juggling two full-time jobs.



To remain in work, many carers described making significant compromises, such as working very limited hours, reducing work responsibilities, or turning down progression opportunities. For some, employment still offered structure, social contact, a sense of identity, and financial security, but this often came at the cost of personal time and energy. Such compromises were in part echoed in staff responses, whereby around two thirds (39%) of staff with caring roles said they had considered reducing their hours or leaving work because of caring responsibilities.

These patterns reflect wider national evidence on the impact of caring on employment. According to the State of Caring 2025 report by Carers UK, around 69% of carers in employment reported they haven't focused on their career as much as they would like, and 61% said their caring responsibilities have shaped the type of work they have taken on. In some cases, carers take on lower-paid or more junior roles that fit better around their caring duties, with roughly one in five reporting this adjustment to maintain a balance between paid work and care.¹⁴

¹⁴ Carers UK, State of Caring 2025: The cost of caring – the impact of caring across carers' lives (London: Carers UK, 2025), accessed 23 March 2026, <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/state-of-caring-2025-the-cost-of-caring-the-impact-of-caring-across-carers-lives/>



“It’s a real struggle. I’ve had to take a little step back as things were starting to slip at home. I’m trying to split myself between my mam, dad, my daughter, and work.”

~ Carer

Experiences varied depending on employer flexibility and support. Where carers had understanding managers, flexible hours, home working, carer passports,¹⁵ or paid carers leave on top of government requirements for unpaid carers leave,¹⁶ balancing roles felt more manageable.

These arrangements enabled carers to adjust working patterns and respond to changing

demands. By contrast, a lack of flexibility or understanding in previous roles had pushed some to reduce hours, take career breaks, or leave employment altogether.

Across responses, carers consistently highlighted that there is rarely a healthy balance.

Instead, sustaining employment involves constant trade-offs, with caring usually taking priority and personal time being the first thing that is lost. Even when carers felt they were coping, this was framed as the result of ongoing adjustment, rather than systems being designed to support carers sustainably in work.

Carer Support Needs to Enter Employment

Understanding and realistic pathways

Carers responding to the online survey were asked what support, advice, or policies they felt would help them in employment alongside their caring role. Many reported that a key barrier to finding work is the lack of clarity about what work is realistic alongside caring.

Carers highlighted the need for support that recognises the realities of caring from the outset. Rather than being pushed towards standard full-time roles, they wanted advice that helps to identify opportunities that genuinely fit around fluctuating caring responsibilities. This included interest in self-employment, entering volunteering as a pathway towards employment, phased returns, and flexible or part-time roles.



Possible employer actions

Employers can support entry to work by offering flexible and part-time roles, phased starts, job sharing, and realistic expectations about availability from the outset.

Clear job descriptions and open conversations at recruitment and onboarding stages help carers assess whether roles genuinely fit alongside fluctuating caring responsibilities. Employers can also work with carer organisations to improve signposting and ensure carers are not automatically channelled into standard full-time roles that may be difficult to sustain.

¹⁵ A document enabling a carers and their manager to discuss and record the flexibilities needed to balance caring and work.

¹⁶ Carers are entitled to seven days unpaid leave to arrange or give care for a dependent, every 12 months.

Skills support and returning to employment

With many carers being out of the labour market for extended periods, they described uncertainty about how the nature of work has changed, particularly in relation to technology, recruitment processes, and employer expectations. While not reported as a key barrier, carers often described a lack of confidence about their own skills and what types of roles might realistically fit alongside ongoing caring responsibilities.

Many carers reported feeling overwhelmed by information and unsure where to begin, particularly where time, energy, and emotional capacity were limited by caring demands. Focus group evidence emphasised the importance of trusted organisations, especially carer centres, in providing clear signposting, practical advice, and encouragement. Support that is paced, personalised, and sensitive to caring pressures, was seen as key to helping carers move towards employment in a way that feels achievable.



“We need updated training for people who have been out of work for a prolonged period of time. Also, mentoring to help with job searching and preparing for interviews.” ~ Carer

“I’d like to see a mentor to help us look at what jobs to apply for, and support us with interviews and job searching.” ~ Carer

➔ Possible employer actions

Employers can help by offering training, mentoring, and gradual re-entry options, such as reduced hours at the start, shadowing, or trial periods.

Flexibility in recruitment processes, including alternatives to standard interviews, recognition of transferable skills from caring, and openness to non-linear work histories, can make roles more accessible. Employers can also provide time and encouragement for learning new technologies or systems rather than assuming immediate readiness.

Practical and financial considerations

Practical and financial pressures shape whether carers can realistically enter work. Financial concerns act as a barrier to entering employment. Focus group evidence highlighted how access to the right financial support, such as Attendance Allowance or help navigating the benefits system, could significantly reduce pressure and make work or training more feasible. However, carers consistently described the system as complex and fragmented, often requiring tailored support to navigate effectively.

→ Possible employer actions

Employers can help by being transparent about pay, hours, and how work may interact with benefits. Offering paid induction or training periods can reduce uncertainty.

Where possible, paid Carers Leave, paid appointments time, or travel support, can ease financial pressure. Employers can also signpost carers to specialist advice on benefits and allowances, helping them make informed decisions about returning to work without risking essential income.

Carer Support Needs to Sustain Employment

Understanding and flexibility in the workplace

Carers explained that once in work, sustaining employment depends heavily on understanding and flexibility. Rigid systems, such as minimal sickness policies, advance notice requirements, or inflexible shift patterns, were seen as making employment unsustainable. Importantly, carers stressed that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach does not work, as caring situations vary widely and change over time.



“Caring responsibilities can impose on the working day, so having flexibility and a manager who understands is vital.” ~ Carer

→ Possible employer actions

Employers can support flexibility by allowing carers to leave at short notice, adjust start and finish times, condense hours, swap shifts, and work from home where roles allow. Employers should offer paid Carers Leave on top of the statutory requirement to offer unpaid Carers Leave.

However, carers stressed that flexibility must be applied consistently and compassionately by managers, not just written into policy. This could involve: training line managers to have open conversations, review arrangements regularly, and respond quickly when caring needs change. This helps prevent crises that lead to absence or exit from work.



“Each company or service can be very different in their approach to carers, Carers Leave, and general support needs. I feel a lot more training and knowledge is needed for employers to understand the complexities and barriers carers face.” ~ Staff member

Emotional support and wellbeing

Alongside practical adjustments, carers identified emotional support as central to sustaining work. As discussed earlier, many experience burnout and stress, particularly during periods of crisis such as new diagnoses, hospitalisation, or changing care needs.

Carers emphasised the importance of employers recognising them as a person, not just as an employee. Peer support from other carers, access to someone who understands caring, and feeling listened to were seen as critical. For some, emotional support was described as more important than financial help, particularly where pressures had built up over time.

➔ Possible employer actions

Employers can support wellbeing by acknowledging the cumulative impact of caring. For example, checking in regularly, offering access to peer networks, employee assistance programmes, and adjusting expectations during crisis periods.

Creating space for honest conversations without fear of penalty makes carers more likely to remain in work during difficult periods. This could be further supported through including caring considerations within procedures, such as appraisals and reviews, to help formalise the recognition.



“Employers’ understanding is the main thing. Yes, we want to work, but we need support and flexibility.” ~ Carer



Clearer carers' rights and protection

Confidence in rights and protections plays a major role in whether employment feels sustainable. Many carers expressed confusion and, in some cases, mistrust around employment rights and legal protections. They felt that legislation is often unclear, applied inconsistently, or reliant on employer goodwill rather than enforceable entitlement.

As a result, carers were often unsure what they are entitled to, when and how to request adjustments, and whether doing so might have negative consequences on their job.

This poses an opportunity for carer organisations to ensure employability support includes discussions around carers' rights and methods in which to discuss these with employers confidently.

While most carers in employment stated that their employer is aware of their caring role, uncertainty made disclosure feel risky and reduced carers' willingness to challenge decisions or negotiate changes.

Whilst 65% of carers stated their employers offered some policies relating to their caring role, there was strong support for clearer, better enforced rights by employers, particularly around paid Carers Leave and protection from disciplinary action linked to caring-related absences.

Similarly, only 5% of staff responding felt that current government policies are effective in supporting carers to remain in employment, while 52% described them as ineffective, and a further 43% expressed uncertainty about how policies translate into real workplace practice.

This suggests that existing policies and protections are not widely perceived as offering carers secure, practical protection.



“A carer-friendly employer is one that has clear, written policies so staff know exactly what support exists and how it works.

It makes a big difference when there is a mutual understanding between the employer and the carer, especially when it comes to needing time-off at short notice, or rearranging hours.”

~ Carer

Carers explained that rights are often implemented inconsistently, varying by employer, sector and even by individual manager. This inconsistency reinforced carers reluctance to disclose caring responsibilities or challenge decisions. Many highlighted the need for advocacy or mediation support, especially where conversations with employers felt confrontational, emotionally draining, or dismissive of caring needs. Trusted third-party support was seen as particularly important in helping carers remain in work and negotiate adjustments on a more equal footing.



Possible employer actions

Employers can help by clearly communicating carers' rights, carers' leave arrangements, and flexible working entitlements at application and induction, and through ongoing communication. Employers can also ensure carers are not penalised for caring-related absences, and have access to HR or mediation support when difficulties arise.

Partnerships with carer organisations and regular policy reviews can ensure protections are understood, used, and trusted in practice.

Employers could apply for Carer Friendly Commitment¹⁷ or other quality marks (such as Employers for Carers and the North East SHINE award), to clearly show their support for carers and help identification of carer-friendly employers. However, this should include clear expectations around carer support in practice.

Awareness and Experience of Current Support

Awareness of support

Survey findings indicate that awareness of employability support among economically inactive carers is relatively low. Just over a third of carers not currently in employment (34%) said they were aware of support that could help them with their employability journey, while a further 12% said they were unsure whether support was available.

It should be noted, however, that if carers are not in a position to look for work, it is likely they're not seeking out support offers. Findings from the staff survey reinforce this picture, with only 13% feeling that carers they work with are aware of relevant employability and support schemes, whilst 38% felt that carers did not have this knowledge. Taken together, this indicates a clear gap in awareness and subsequent access to support.

Where carers were aware of employability support, this most commonly related to a mix of Jobcentre provision, carer centre support, and local projects. Several carers referred to Jobcentre Plus as a point of contact, particularly for advice on flexible roles, home working, and access to work coaches who could help identify shifts or opportunities that fit around caring responsibilities.

¹⁷ A public validation of an organisation's support for carers in their workplace, offered to those that hold up the carer-friendly employer commitments.

Alongside this, carers frequently mentioned local carer centres and carer organisations as key sources of practical help. This included support with CV writing, interview preparation, access to training, employability events, and having a named worker focused on employment.

Experience of support

Staff highlighted several forms of workplace support that they have found useful when balancing work and caring responsibilities. Linked to identified barriers and support needs, Figure 10 shows that flexibility offers from employers and supportive colleagues have been the most helpful for staff also in caring roles.

Linked to this, while just over half of staff reported using Carers Leave, fewer staff reported a carer policy being helpful. This reinforces the importance of support in practice over policy provision. This feedback suggests that alongside formal policies and understanding from management, a supportive environment at work is important in maintaining and managing employment.

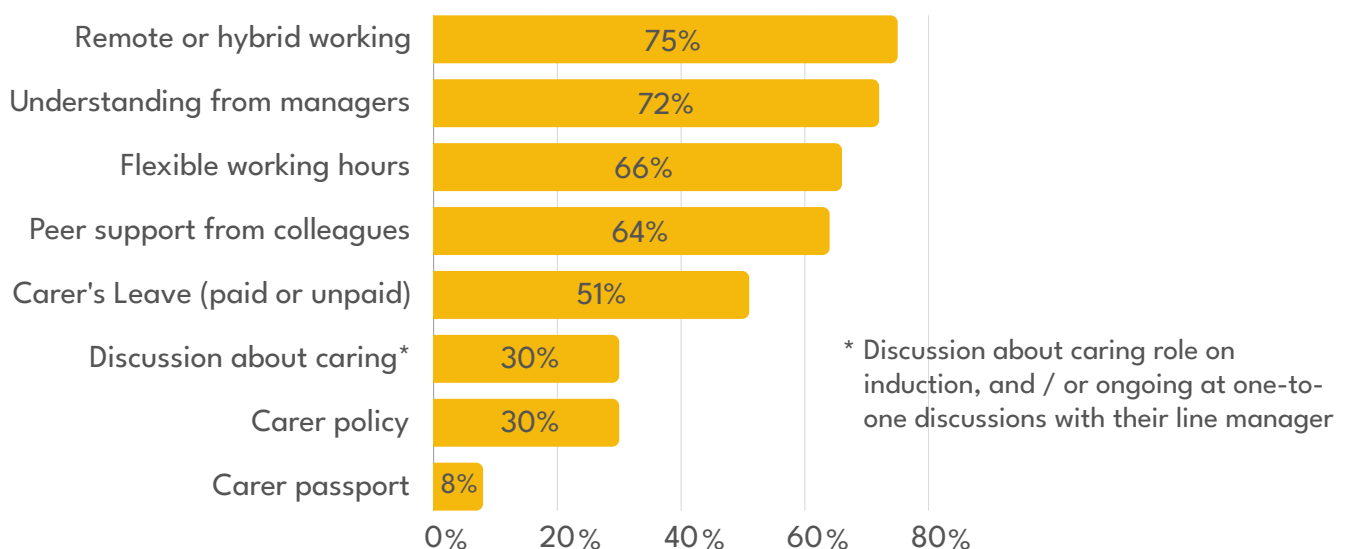


Figure 10. Reported types of support that staff have found helpful at work

Source: Wavehill Staff Survey (n = 61)



“Support in paid employment should focus on managers’ understanding and flexibility (such as hybrid working and flexible hours). Also, a clear understanding about what financial support is available (if necessary).”

~ Staff member

Perceived Employer Understanding of Carer Needs

As discussed, there is clear evidence that understanding and adaptation from employers to offer supportive workforce practices, plays a key role in both accessing and maintaining employment for carers. The largest proportion of carers responding to the research (42%) felt that employers understood the needs of carers to some extent, while a further 28% felt they did not understand their needs at all.

In slight contrast, the majority (94%) of staff feel that employers understand carers needs to some extent. It is possible that this understanding is shaped by the carer organisations as employers, rather than wider employers.

For carers that did feel there was some understanding, the most visible sign of this was flexibility around working arrangements, which aligns with identified barriers and needs. In some cases, linked to the previously mentioned lack of consistency, this flexibility was informal and dependent on individual managers; in others, it was supported through flexible working agreements or Carers Leave.

Relating to the need for understanding colleagues, employers or managers with lived experience of caring, or backgrounds in health and social care, were consistently seen as more understanding.

As mentioned, the practical application of formal policies and offers were seen as paramount. This is reflected in carers that feel supported, whereby when policies such as Carers Leave and flexible working were actively used, carers felt more confident that their needs were recognised beyond individual goodwill.

However, staff noted that awareness and implementation of such policies (particularly statutory unpaid Carers Leave) varied widely across organisations and between departments within the same employer, further linking to the perception that support is not consistent.

“

“Having an employer who understands how hard it is to balance work and caring makes a massive difference.”

~ Staff member



In terms of the role carers can play with employers, some carers highlighted the importance of recognising transferable skills developed through caring. For example, carers were confident that their caring roles had afforded them with resilience, compassion, and effective time management. They referred to their ability to apply this compassion, patience, and understanding of others' needs, to their employment.

Carers felt this translates into strong people skills at work, including being supportive of colleagues and working under pressure to problem solve.

Good practice may be for employers to encourage candidates to use their caring role as examples of strong skills in interviews, as well as employability support in encouraging carers to consider the role their caring experiences play within their skillset.



“When I went off sick due to burnout, my employer was really supportive; they put me in touch with a counsellor and have offered me a phased return.”

~ Carer



“My employer gives me some flexibility in terms of where I work, and they’ve allowed me to reduce my workload too. I also get Carer’s Leave.”

~ Carer

The Role of Carer Centres

Those responding to the online survey and focus groups were asked what role they feel carer centres can play in supporting their employability needs. When asked who is best placed to deliver employment support for carers, whilst one quarter of respondents were unsure, over half of respondents identified carer centres either on their own (26%) or as part of a combined approach with other services (27%).

In contrast, fewer respondents selected government services such as DWP alone (14%). This suggests that carers place strong value on specialist, carer-focused provision rather than relying solely on mainstream employment services.

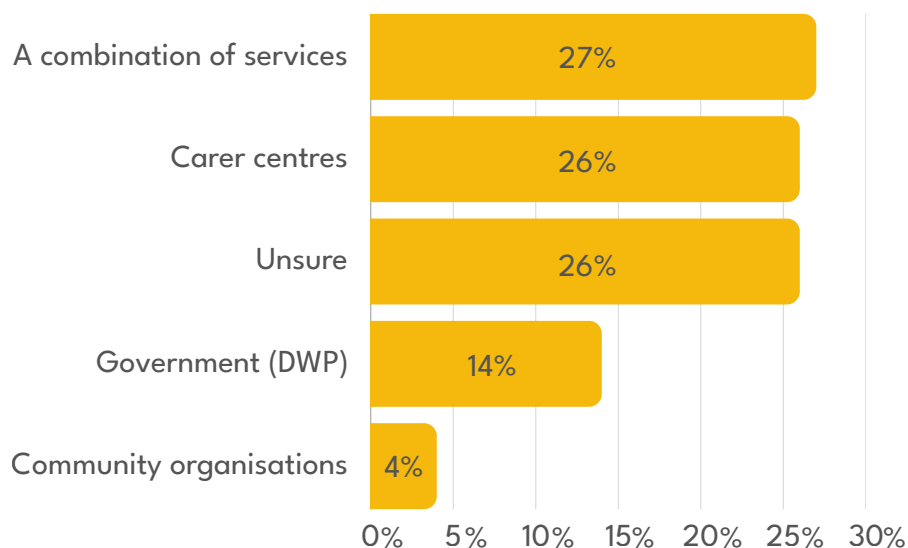


Figure 11. Carer views on who should provide employability support to carers

Source: Wavehill Carer Survey (n = 97)

As carer centres offer lived experience staff and a working knowledge of carers' needs and rights, carers responding to the research felt they may be best placed to advocate for them with employers. This is alongside identifying carer-friendly employers and appropriate roles; aspects identified as important to accessing employment.

Some respondents also suggested proactive engagement with employers and Jobcentres, including developing directories of carer-friendly employers or accreditation schemes that recognise supportive practice. This indicates that carers see carer centres as well placed to influence workplace culture.

Additionally, this demonstrates that carers value independent advocacy and want carer centres to help reduce any imbalance between carers and employers, especially in conversations about flexibility, rights, and realistic expectations.

Carers stressed that while they do require practical support (such as CV help and interview techniques), they are a unique group and need respectful, tailored support rather than generic job-centre style interventions.

This shows that carer centres are trusted because they start from an understanding of caring responsibilities. This allows employability support to be framed around real-life constraints rather than idealised labour market participation.

Beyond technical employability support, carers repeatedly highlighted the emotional and social value of carer centres. Several described the centres as a lifeline, offering peer connection, safe spaces, and encouragement.

For some carers, simply having regular contact with a centre helped rebuild confidence and reduce isolation, which in turn made employment feel more achievable. This demonstrates that employability for carers is closely linked to wellbeing. Carer centres support emotional readiness for work, not just practical job-search activity.



The Key Barriers to Employment

The evidence shows a consistent view that carers face significant additional barriers to accessing and sustaining employment. Most carers not currently seeking work cite their caring role as the main reason for this. Very few identify a lack of motivation or skills, indicating that economic inactivity among carers is driven by constraint rather than choice. Linked to this, carers broadly disagreed with being referred to as 'economically inactive', noting the important contributions they make to society through their unpaid caring role.

Research indicates that significant barriers to employment are centred around the difficulty of finding work that fits around caring responsibilities. The perception of rigid employment patterns limits the ability to sustain employment, coupled with financial concerns around changes to benefit entitlements, and the high cost of alternative care provision. This is compounded by the difficulty in finding appropriate replacement care.

Confidence in employment rights remains low, with carers expressing confusion, fear of negative consequences, and a lack of trust in existing protections. It was also felt that employers have a lack of understanding or policies in place to support carers. This uncertainty often feeds into a lack of confidence in employment, or confidence to advocate for required adjustments, consequently impacting the ability to sustain employment.

Key Support Needs

The evidence highlights that carers require highly tailored, realistic support to both enter and sustain employment, reflecting the complexity and unpredictability of caring roles. A central issue for carers seeking work is uncertainty about what employment is genuinely achievable alongside caring responsibilities.

Many carers feel existing employment advice pushes them towards standard full-time roles that are unlikely to be sustainable. Instead, carers value support that helps them identify realistic pathways.

Carers consistently emphasised the importance of personalised support that considers their role as a carer. Trusted organisations, especially carer centres, were seen as vital in providing relevant and appropriate support, helping carers feel less overwhelmed and more able to take gradual steps towards employment.

Once in work, sustaining employment depends heavily on understanding, flexibility, and emotional support. Carers reported that flexibility must be applied compassionately and consistently, with managers trained to respond quickly as caring needs change.







Whilst formal methods such as carer specific policies were seen as helpful, the key to sustaining employment was felt to be in the practical application of these policies. For example, flexible working arrangements and supportive management.

Carer centres are widely viewed as uniquely placed to deliver both practical employability support and emotional readiness for work, as well as to advocate with employers, promote carer-friendly practices, and potentially deliver training and guidance to employers to best support carers in work.

Learning from Employers

We engaged with 25 employers from across the region through semi-structured interviews. These included a mix of small, medium, and large organisations from a range of sectors, collectively reaching 64,697 employees. Employers engaged in the programme included hospital trusts, local authorities, fire and rescue services, Nexus, Northumbrian Water, and VONNE.

Employers highlighted several key advantages in employing staff with caring responsibilities, including their:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  Lived experience as a carer |  Transferable skills |
|  Empathy and compassion |  Problem solving |
|  Strong ability to multitask |  Flexibility and adaptability |

Several employers also emphasised the positive impact on their organisational reputation, noting that employing carers demonstrated their commitment to being a caring and socially responsible employer.

Employers also identified several perceived disadvantages in employing staff with caring responsibilities, including:

- An increased risk of sickness absence.
- The need to provide additional flexibility for carers.
- Work-life balance pressures leading to stress or burnout.
- Challenges associated with unsociable hours and adaptable working arrangements.
- No disadvantages, as supporting carers was viewed as comparable to supporting other staff.

The main challenge employers reported in supporting carers in the workplace was balancing business needs with the flexibility required by carers. This issue was consistent across small, medium, and large organisations, all of which highlighted the impact on service delivery.

One hospital trust noted that in clinical settings it is sometimes impossible to provide the flexibility carers need due to the demands of patient care. This reinforces the importance of matching carers with appropriate job opportunities that provide the flexibility they need within the workplace, from the outset.

Another challenge identified was the perception among staff without caring responsibilities that the support offered to carers was unfair. This highlights the need for more general awareness raising with all employees, helping them to understand the impact of caring and the challenges carers face when juggling work and caring.

Small employers reported that, although they would like to offer paid Carers Leave, their funding and income levels do not make this feasible.

24 out of 25 employers identified that they had implemented support specifically for carers in the workplace. Support included:

- Dedicated Carers Policy
- Carer Passport
- Wellbeing events
- Carers Champion
- Carer networks or forums for staff
- A range of resources for carers and managers on their intranet
- Carer-friendly policies, including flexible working arrangements

Out of 25 employers, 12 had accessed support from a specific employability programme, including 'Working for Carers' and the 'Durham Carer Friendly Employer Award Scheme'. A further seven employers had engaged with their local carer support service, while six employers had not accessed any form of support. Notably, those organisations that had not engaged with any support had the least provision in place.

Employers reported accessing a range of support, including:

- ✔ Training for managers and HR teams
- ℹ Information sessions for carers
- 📄 Carer policy templates
- 👍 Regular meetings with other employers to share good practice
- 🤝 Direct assistance for individual staff struggling to manage their caring responsibilities



Employers reported that the support accessed through carers employability and in-employment programmes had been very beneficial. None of the support provided was identified as unhelpful. In particular, employers highlighted:

- Support for staying up-to-date with relevant legislation
- Opportunities to share best practice with other organisations
- An improved understanding of the number of employees with caring responsibilities in the workplace

Employers identified several areas of support they would like to access in the future, including:

- Ongoing training for managers and teams
- Access to external networks or forums to share experiences
- Access to additional resources, including wellbeing resources
- Information and advice sessions for staff carers within the workplace
- A continuation of the current offer from specialist carers employability programmes
- A direct link to carer support services to better understand their offer and provide assistance for staff who are struggling



Employers indicated that moving forward, they would prefer to access a blend of in-person and digital support. This reflects the need for flexibility and accessibility across a diverse range of employers. In-person support was valued for strengthening relationships with carer support services, while digital support was seen as essential for convenience and ensuring that information could be accessed by staff at different times and locations.

Two large employers highlighted the need for more joined-up thinking across the region, rather than individual organisations working in isolation. They emphasised that greater regional coordination could reduce duplication of effort and strengthen the overall impact of carer support initiatives.

Learning from Carer Centres

Across the North East Combined Authority, each of the seven local authorities commission out their adult carer support services. The current commissioned providers of these contracts are:

- Durham - **Durham County Carers Support**
- Gateshead - **Carers Federation**
- Newcastle - **Newcastle Carers**
- North Tyneside - **North Tyneside Carers' Centre**
- Northumberland - **Carers Northumberland**
- South Tyneside - **Age Concern Tyneside South**
- Sunderland - **Sunderland Carers Centre**

These carer lead organisations are central in delivering services across the region, providing a range of support interventions shaped by carers' lived experience. This ensures authenticity and both identifying and advising carers to prevent them from reaching crisis.

This enables carers to thrive within their caring role and as individuals. Carer centres are trusted services that engage with many vulnerable carers dealing with complex and challenging situations. In turn, carers perceive these support organisations as a lifeline who walk alongside them in a non-judgemental way.

A caring role affects multiple aspects of carers' lives: health, wellbeing, housing, finance, relationships, self-esteem, and social connections. Carers often need multiple interventions across some or all of these areas, particularly if the end goal is getting into or returning to work.

These carer support organisations are embedded within communities, amplifying the identification of carers across health, social care, and the VCSE sectors. They all work collaboratively to develop a consistent offer for carers in the region.

Across the seven organisations, there are a total of over 50,000 carers registered. This ensures that access to any collaborative intervention will be felt by those most in need of these services.

There is a range of innovative and varied support offerings to carers and organisations engaging in the following core activities:

One-to-One Support

Face-to-face, online, and over the phone

All carer support services offer one-to-one support and free access to information, advice, and guidance. Across organisations, this model varies slightly, however, the spirit of free support at the point of access is the core commonality across services. Many of the carer lead organisations incorporate the statutory Carer's Assessment as part of their initial engagement with carers, and those that don't have clear and robust assessment processes.

One-to-one support responds directly to the needs of carers, taking individuals on a journey to ensure they are accessing the support needed. It also establishes a support path to navigate through the complex (and often confusing) maze of health and social care services. Interventions are generally based around action plans that enable carers to make informed decisions and take control of their current circumstances.

Carers are supported to access what they need to thrive as individuals to have a life outside their caring role.

Referrals in and out of the carer services includes:

- Access to adult social care, health care, and links into community-based services.
- Support around relevant areas (such as finance, housing, carers rights, and entitlements and welfare).
- Specific support dependant on the conditions of the cared-for (such as dementia support, mental health support, and ageing).

Groups, Events, Training, and Activities

There are a range of groups, events, training, and activities that are delivered across the region. These allow carers the opportunity to create their own sense of identity, learn new skills, find time for themselves, have opportunities for self-care, and to connect with other carers.

Carer lead organisations tend to have a range of peer support services (such as specific support for young adult carers, parent carers, male carers, and dementia support), as well as time-bound specific groups, such as participation groups and end-of-life care.

Carers often seek activities and key points through the year which provide opportunities for them to meet others and understand the plethora of services available. Two key annual opportunities are Carers Week and Carers Rights Day - whereby carers can engage with decision makers and support workers to understand carers' rights and enhance their support.

Carer Awareness

Through training, events, and publicity, all carer lead organisations have strategic goals to identify and support unpaid carers from across the region. Training is a significant part of awareness raising and is delivered by all seven centres.






It is offered to other professionals across the wider social systems to amplify awareness of carers both within the organisation and their stakeholders.

Training is delivered in different formats and to different levels, but the common goal is to work in partnership with professionals to identify hidden carers and ensure they get the right support.



Wellbeing Support

Across the seven carer organisations, there are a range of wellbeing interventions on offer for carers, including:

-  Counselling
-  Topic-specific groups
-  Peer-support groups
-  Wellbeing workshops
-  Complementary Therapy

The impact of these services are measured in varying ways, but all have a focus on providing self-care opportunities and time to recharge. All wellbeing interventions on offer also focus on developing coping strategies to ensure carers can maintain their caring responsibilities whilst balancing their own health and wellbeing needs.

Wellbeing Grants

A number of local providers (including Working for Carers - see page seven) offer wellbeing grants to carers. These include practical support such as white goods, furniture, and garden equipment that enhance the ability for a carer to sustain their caring role.

Many of these grants focus on giving carers time for themselves and can contribute to hobbies, holidays, and day breaks, allowing carers to rest and revitalise, ensuring they have energy and head space to continue in their caring capacity.

Employability and Employer Support

As identified in the section 'Learning from Employers' (see page 33), there are several employability programmes and employer support initiatives already embedded within carer support services. Building on these, recommendations have been made at the end of this report (see page 44).

The overriding emphasis is the integration of employer support through existing carer services to maximise the chances of genuine, effective, and sustainable employability outcomes.

Established Trust and Long-Term Relationships with Carers

Local carer centres have built trusted relationships with carers over many years. Carers often disclose their caring role gradually; engagement with services is usually based on trust rather than one-off interventions.

As a result, carer centres are uniquely placed to support carers into employment or education when the time is right. Introducing employability support through trusted existing services increases the likelihood of engagement and sustained outcomes.

Without this trusted relationship, carers may be reluctant to access employment support or may disengage early if they feel their broader caring responsibilities are not understood.

Strong Local Partnerships and Community Reach

Each carer centre already has well-established partnerships with:

- Local employers
- Local authorities
- NHS and health services
- Family hubs and education settings
- Community and voluntary sector organisations

These partnerships are vital in identifying carers, referring them to support and creating employment opportunities. The focus on collaboration within the system is critical to the longevity of support for carers, both in seeking and remaining in employment.

Local Insight

Each organisation understands the unique needs of carers in their local area, while the regional partnership allows for coordinated approaches to employment support, employer engagement and policy development.

Conclusion

The seven lead carer support organisations are embedded in local communities, well respected, and already engaging with thousands of vulnerable carers. They are shaped by carers' lived experiences, giving the organisations a unique access to understand the needs of carers moving towards or staying in employment.

The wraparound support needs of many carers are best provided by services that can take a holistic view and respond quickly, with a high level of understanding and knowledge across multiple areas of carers' lives.

There is a clear appetite for the seven carer lead organisations to work together in integrating a delivery model that supports carers into employment. The common emphasis is the importance of providing holistic care to unpaid carers.

It is through linking the wider support for carers into an employability programme that is critical for efficient and effective support, something which can be provided by this collaboration.

Carer lead organisations are already engaging with employers across the North East. Building on these relationships, there is a recognition of the ability the current commissioned organisations have; to embed both advice and awareness raising, with practical support for HR teams and staff who have a caring role.

The common belief is clear: by integrating employability support within carer centres, it is more efficient, timely, and ensures carers are not in a position whereby they must repeat their story multiple times to different organisations.



Key Themes

A range of core themes have been recognised while compiling and analysing the evidence base. Three core themes have emerged when identifying where change was needed to best support carers into and in employment across the region: employer practices, systemic support, and employment programme priorities.

Employer Practices

Developing carer-centred employment pathways

Carers are often drowning with meeting the needs of their cared for, and the complex access to employment adds further stress and demands on carers. Creating an easy and sustainable route into flexible and accessible employment is vital in combatting the employment challenges faced by carers.

Improving employer practices and wellbeing strategies

Employers play a critical role in the outcome of carers sustaining work or not. Organisations should embed flexibility as standard and include wellbeing support. Line managers need training to apply carer policies consistently and compassionately, and to support carers to feel their work is manageable alongside caring responsibilities. There is scope for large employers to drive this practice, offering positive examples of leadership.

Clarifying and strengthening carers' rights, protections, and communication within organisations

There is a need for clearer communication and stronger, more consistent application of carers' entitlements and rights. Employers and support services should actively promote these rights, ensuring carers understand what they can ask for and how to raise issues safely. In turn, this naturally builds a sense of trust between carers and their employer.

Flexibility of support

Employment practices must be reflected in policy as well as practice. Flexible working should be reflected in policies as this is critical in any long-term solution. Flexible working must not take away from the realities of employment demands, but rather allow carers to flex their skills and knowledge to be outstanding employees and carers.

Systematic Support

Increase awareness, coordination, and integration through carer services

Better signposting and coordination is needed so carers can access employment advice, benefits guidance, and training without duplication or confusion. Investment into local carer centres is particularly important, as they are trusted spaces to deliver specialist support and advocacy.

The role of adult social care in creating opportunities

To create a system that fully supports carers into work, there must be effective collaboration with local adult social care support. This enables carers who are able and willing to work, to be rest assured that the needs of their cared for are being met through the wider social care system.

Language

Terminology used within the support should be considered, acknowledging that being referred to as ‘economically inactive’ is not appropriate. This is owing to the significant contributions made to the economy in unpaid care, and the fact that carers are often out of work due to system constraints, rather than a preference to not work (see page 16).

Employment Programme Priorities

Strengthen tailored skills, confidence, and re-entry support

Targeted employability support should include mentoring, CV development, interview preparation, funded training, and work-trial opportunities. Support should also help carers to recognise and champion their transferable skills developed through caring.

Programmes should also provide safe, supportive means to test employment without risking income or stability in turn, helping carers rebuild confidence over time.



Digital engagement

With the advances in digital technology, innovative programmes must embrace the opportunity for carers to receive ongoing support utilising such digital technologies. This can make streamline programmes, as well as making them more efficient, easier to access, and at the fingertips of carers.



Clarify and strengthen carers' rights, protections, and communication across the wider system

Employment support should start from the realities of caring rather than standard models. Support providers should offer personalised guidance that explores what is realistic alongside caring, as well as carers' rights, and methods in which to discuss these confidently with employers.

Relational support

Based on the evidence in this report, it's clear there is a specific need to build consistent and secure relationships with employment and employability practitioners. Carers are often navigating a complex system, which only adds a burden on their day-to-day lives.

Seeking and maintaining employment must be straight forward, with key individuals in place, who can continue to support carers through long-term relationships. This minimises the need for carers to experience potential traumas in retelling their story multiple times.

Specialist expertise in carer needs and wellbeing

To ensure a programme is responding to specific issues and challenges that arise as a consequence of unpaid care, it is imperative that employability and in-work support comes from a knowledge base, appreciation, and empathy for the realities of care.

Specialist support services must be involved in ongoing programmes to ensure an integrated approach and a high level of holistic support for carers. While carers have specific challenges when entering or maintaining employment, there is also a clear raft of additional needs that carers specifically have, in order to maintain employment.

Recommendations

Concluding the evidence gathered through this research programme, the following priorities must be met in a long-term, sustainable employability and employment programme.

Highlighted throughout this report is the importance of long-term, sustained funding to support a world-class employment programme for carers. These carers require consistency and understanding as they continue to contribute significantly to society.

1. Dedicated Carers and Employment Advisers

Dedicated Carers and Employment Advisers will work one-to-one with carers in each local authority area, embedded within local carer support services. Referrals will primarily come from within these services following a Carer's Assessment (or initial assessment) that identifies employment or employability as a need

Advisers will provide tailored support to help carers overcome barriers to employment. This may include:

- Identifying training and skills development opportunities
- Volunteering opportunities as a pathway into employment
- Confidence building and preparation for returning to work
- Exploring the potential of self-employment and the flexibility it offers
- Practical support, such as CV writing, job searching, and interview preparation
- Advice on the financial implications of working, including benefits and income changes
- Identifying practical solutions, such as replacement care to enable participation in work or training

Support will be flexible and responsive to carers' changing circumstances. Advisers will work at the carer's pace and may pause or adjust activities when caring responsibilities intensify.

Advisers will also provide in-work support to help carers sustain employment. This may include advice on employment rights, financial guidance, advocacy, and support during workplace meetings where appropriate.

Advisers will be embedded within local carer support providers and have strong relationships with local adult social care providers, employability forums and networks, and local employers.

As well as direct face-to-face work, advisers will be able to utilise both a digital tool which ensures ongoing support and engagement, and regional and national tools that are designed specifically for carer support.

2. Employer Engagement and Support

Dedicated employer engagement roles will operate across the region to increase understanding of working carers and ensure carer-friendly employment practices.

These roles will work with employers to:

- Raise awareness of the challenges faced by working carers
- Deliver workplace information sessions and awareness events
- Support the development of peer learning networks between employers
- Demonstrate the business benefits of supporting carers in the workforce
- Provide training and guidance on supporting employees with caring responsibilities

Engagement will take place across all levels of organisations, from senior leadership, to line managers and staff teams, ensuring that practical support for carers is embedded throughout the workplace.

These roles will also act as a link between employers and local carer services, ensuring employers feel confident referring employees for specialist support, and that working carers receive wraparound assistance.

3. Central Referral and Coordination System

A central referral portal will ensure carers are directed to the most appropriate support quickly and efficiently.

The system will be overseen by a Team Leader responsible for:

- Monitoring outcomes and service delivery
- Ensuring consistency and quality of support
- Allocating referrals to advisers across the region
- Providing supervision and professional guidance to staff

This structure will help maintain a high-quality, coordinated service across all participating areas.

4. Carer-Friendly Employer Portal and Recognition Award

A digital employer portal will support organisations to become more carer-friendly workplaces.

Through the portal, employers will be able to:

- Access guidance on supporting working carers
- Review and improve HR policies and workplace practices
- Equip managers with tools to identify and support employees with caring responsibilities from recruitment and induction onwards

Employers who complete the programme will be recognised through a Carer-Friendly Employer Award.

Participating employers will also be able to advertise job opportunities directly to carers engaged in the project. This helps carers identify workplaces where common barriers to employment have already been addressed, while enabling employers to access a wider and often underutilised talent pool.

This creates a streamlined route for unemployed carers into employment, highlighting to carers new opportunities that are specifically catered to enable them to balance employment and caring.

Building on national good practice, this job seeking solution for carers removes the administrative and time challenges they face when looking for employment that considers new or existing caring roles.



5. Regional Strategic Leadership

A dedicated Carers and Employment Strategic Lead will oversee the project and represent the programme at a regional level. This role will focus on:

- Connecting with relevant strategic forums and partnerships
- Ensuring that insights from the project inform wider system change
- Shifting the narrative so carers are not labelled as ‘economically inactive’
- Influencing regional policy and decision-making around carers and employment
- Linking with other employability programmes to share learning and best practice
- Building a stronger evidence base on carer employment support through research programmes in collaboration with local universities

By coordinating activity across the region, this role will help ensure the project delivers lasting impact and supports a shift in how carers are supported to access and remain in employment.

This approach is unique within the UK and has the potential to position the North East as a leading region in supporting carers to stay in work, return to employment, or enter the workforce for the first time.



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