

WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

9TH JULY 2024

CABINET MEMBER FOR ADULT CARE, PUBLIC HEALTH AND REGULATORY SERVICES: COUNCILLOR MATT GOLBY

Report Title	Report of the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee – scrutiny review of support for unpaid carers in West Northamptonshire
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List of Approvers

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Appendix A – Report of the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutiny review of support for unpaid carers in West Northamptonshire

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The report presents to the Cabinet for consideration the report and recommendations of the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutiny review of support for unpaid carers in West Northamptonshire.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a task and finish panel to scrutinise how West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) seeks to support unpaid carers in the authority. The Task and Finish Panel considered the following key lines of enquiry:
- WNC's preparedness to meet the requirements relating to support for employees with caring responsibilities introduced by the Carer's Leave Act 2023 due to take effect on 1 April 2024.
 - The effectiveness of the support provided to unpaid carers as part of WNC's statutory responsibilities for adult social care, including respite care.
 - The aims of the new WNC Carer Strategy to be developed during 2023/24.
- 2.2 The Task and Finish Panel carried out its work across seven meetings during January – June 2024. The Panel took information and views from internal and external expert advisors, in addition to considering written information and data, to inform its conclusions and resulting recommendations.
- 2.3 The Task and Finish Panel presented its report to the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 24 June 2024. The report is set out at Appendix A.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet:
- a) Agrees to consider the report and recommendations of the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutiny review of support for unpaid carers in West Northamptonshire
 - b) Agrees to give its formal response to the report and recommendations of the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutiny review of support for unpaid carers in West Northamptonshire at a subsequent Cabinet meeting.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1 The recommendations are intended to enable the report and recommendations agreed by the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be presented to the Cabinet for consideration and a response, in accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules in the WNC Constitution.

5. Report Background

- 5.1 The purpose of the scrutiny review was to consider and provided constructive challenge on how WNC seeks to support unpaid carers (also referred to as 'informal carers'). NHS England describes an unpaid carer as "...anyone, including children and adults who looks after a family member, partner or friend who needs help because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their support. The care they give is unpaid." The scope of the scrutiny review included both adult and young carers, reflecting that WNC has a common strategy and contract for the support provided to both age groups.

- 5.2 The scrutiny review links to WNC's corporate priority to make West Northamptonshire a place where people are supported to live independent, self-sufficient lives and where everyone has the best life chances. This includes the following specific aims:
- to support adults to live independent and self-sufficient lives for as long as possible
 - to provide support needed by people who are vulnerable or lack a support network
 - to work with the health sector in more integrated ways, ensuring our residents can "chase well, stay well and live well."
- 5.3 The scrutiny review originated in a motion on support for unpaid carers that was presented to the Council meeting on 29 June 2023. Upon a vote the Council agreed to refer the motion to the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Committee considered the matter at its next meeting on 14 September 2023 and agreed to include in its 2023/24 work programme a scrutiny review to look at how WNC supports carers and to assist with the development of a new WNC Carer Strategy.
- 5.4 The scrutiny review was carried out by a Task and Finish Panel across seven meetings from January – June 2024. The Task and Finish Panel considered the following key lines of enquiry:
- WNC's preparedness to meet the requirements relating to support for employees with caring responsibilities introduced by the Carer's Leave Act 2023 due to take effect on 1 April 2024.
 - The effectiveness of the support provided to unpaid carers as part of WNC's statutory responsibilities for adult social care, including respite care.
 - The aims of the new WNC Carer Strategy to be developed during 2023/24.
- 5.5 The intended outcome of the scrutiny review was to make practical, timely recommendations intended to enhance the support provided to unpaid carers, including young carers, in West Northamptonshire.

6. Issues and Choices

- 6.1 The Cabinet is asked to consider the report and recommendations of the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to give a response to them. The WNC constitution states that the Cabinet shall consider a report submitted by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the next available Cabinet meeting. The Cabinet shall respond to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee within two months of the report being submitted.
- 6.2 The key findings, conclusions and recommendations from the scrutiny review are set out in this section of the report.

Support for WNC staff members with caring responsibilities

- 6.3 The Task and Finish Panel was generally reassured that WNC had taken appropriate action to meet the requirements introduced by the Carer's Leave Act 2023 concerning statutory leave for carers. The Panel was advised of a proposed update to WNC's existing Carers Policy intended to

reflect the new requirements, noting that this had been informed by input from a carers' representative and would be subject to consultation with trade unions before being issued. The Panel commented that the updated Carers Policy needed to make clear that both the definition of a dependant and of long term care needed to apply for a staff member to claim statutory carer's leave. The definition of a dependant should make clear that it applied to people caring for parents as well as caring for children. It also needed to take into account the complexity of family relationships such as, for example, a grandchild providing care for a grandparent.

6.4 The Task and Finish Panel questioned how much impact the introduction of statutory leave for carers was likely to have on WNC's capacity as an organisation and potential risks to business continuity that might arise as a result, particularly given that requests for carer's leave might arise at very short notice. The Panel was advised that directorates were used to dealing with changes to overall leave entitlements. There was also a range of existing leave options that staff members could use to meet caring responsibilities that already formed part of business as usual, including flexible working arrangements, dependant's leave and purchasing additional annual leave. Historically, WNC had not experienced a high take up of unpaid leave options. The Panel sought assurance that WNC was well-informed about the number of staff members with caring responsibilities. It was advised that WNC did not propose to ask staff members to confirm if they were an unpaid carer, on the basis that a person's situation could change virtually overnight and so this information would become out of date very quickly. Instead, WNC would use the ERP system to monitor the future take-up of carer's leave to identify if any trends arose, such as demand on particular directorates or seasonal demand. This information could inform a future review of the operation of statutory carer's leave. The Panel accepted this approach and supports a review 12 months after implementation.

6.5 The Task and Finish Panel placed a message on the WNC Carers Network online forum to invite views about carers' experience of working for WNC. However, no comments were received.

Recommendations:

A) The Cabinet agrees that West Northamptonshire Council should review the take-up of statutory carer's leave 12 months after its implementation and consider whether any changes to the corporate Carers Policy are necessary as a result.

Current and future support for unpaid carers in West Northamptonshire

6.6 The plan for this scrutiny review included separate key lines of enquiry on the support currently provided to unpaid carers as part of WNC's statutory responsibilities for adult social care, and on the aims of WNC's proposed new Carer Strategy. In practice, the Task and Finish Panel has considered these as one. This reflects the context for the scrutiny review: the existing contract for the provision of carer support services in Northamptonshire is due to end in March 2025; the next contract commissioned by WNC will cover West Northamptonshire only; this contract will reflect the strategic direction and priorities set out in the Carer Strategy 2024-2029 that is due to be adopted in the immediate future.

- 6.7 The information gathered by the Task and Finish Panel has brought home that a central challenge involved in providing support to unpaid carers is the ability to identify, and communicate with, all of the people who may be carrying out this role in the community. A person with caring responsibilities may not think of themselves as a carer but as a partner, relative or friend. A person who does acknowledge that they are carrying out an additional caring role still may not see the need to make this known to the local authority: if they do not think they are eligible for any support; if they are concerned about privacy; or for a range of other reasons. This can risk a situation in which a carer only seeks information or support when they reach a crisis point. At the same time, the local authority is less informed about the number of unpaid carers in its area and is less able to engage with carers to help them to help themselves and prevent potential needs from escalating.
- 6.8 Addressing this situation involves considering both what WNC offers to carers and how it seeks to communicate this to them. The Task and Finish Panel is broadly supportive of the offer set out in the draft Carer Strategy 2024-2029. The Panel felt that the Strategy appeared comprehensive, fresh and accessible and to address areas for improvement that WNC had identified through a self-assessment carried out at the end of 2023. It was also apparent that it had been informed by people with lived experience. The Panel particularly endorses the proposals in the Strategy for a one-stop shop function that will provide advice, support and signposting to carers, moving around the Local Area Partnerships (LAPs) in West Northamptonshire, and for a WNC carers directory and app. The Panel had previously highlighted the potential role of LAPs in providing information and support to carers. It considers that this approach could also assist in addressing barriers to engagement with carers noted by the Panel, including the need to engage effectively with people in smaller rural communities and with people from BAME community groups.
- 6.9 The Task and Finish Panel has, though, identified some additional actions that it believes would augment those proposed in the Carer Strategy. The Panel proposes that a carer should be able to request that the carer assessment process be paused, for example if dealing with issues in their wider life, and resumed at a later date rather than needing to start again from the beginning. At a very practical level, this principle should be incorporated into WNC online forms so that if a user who indicates they are a carer only partially completes a form their information is retained for them to return to later. The Panel considered that this would avoid adding to demands on carers' time that could also discourage people from seeking assistance. The Panel would ideally want this provision to apply to all WNC online forms in time but recognises the need to focus initially on forms specifically relating to carers.
- 6.10 In addition, the Task and Finish Panel encourages WNC to pursue the development of a carer passport scheme for the area, working with relevant partners as necessary. Carers UK defines a carer passport as "a record that identifies a carer in some way and sets out an offer of support, services or other benefits in response. A carer passport helps carers to be identified, recognised and supported as part of the day-to-day life of an organisation or community." The Panel saw the ways that such a scheme might assist carers in managing the demands on their time, for example, if used as a basis for giving carers a higher priority for processes such as collecting medication.

The NHS Long Term Plan commits to encourage the national adoption of carer passports in health settings. The Panel was advised that WNC had had positive discussions with the NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board (ICB) and North Northamptonshire Council about introducing a local carer passport scheme in electronic form. The Panel hopes that this can be progressed.

- 6.11 The Task and Finish Panel considers that it would enhance proposed methods of communication on advice and support for carers if WNC also offered a physical, business card sized promotional card. This could direct carers on to information sources, using a QR code or other appropriate method. The Panel feels that the benefit of an promotional card in this format is that it could be so readily circulated: by WNC officers going out to the meetings with community groups, by councillors and by other partners. In this way it could represent a lighter touch approach that could help to address the challenge set out in paragraph 6.7 of the report above, that some carers may not want extensive information but should not be left with no recourse should their situation change.
- 6.12 During its work the Task and Finish Panel has been conscious that unpaid carers as a whole include people across different ages, with different employment situations, who may provide different types of care for cared-for people with different needs. The Panel recognised the need for WNC to prioritise support, for example to reflect the preponderance of carers in older age groups in West Northamptonshire. However, the Panel wishes to caution WNC against taking an approach to communicating and implementing the Carer Strategy 2024-2029 that could have the unintended consequence of making it seem less relevant to some of the target audience. This could occur if, for example, support for unpaid carers appeared to be seen as an age-related issue. Carers may not seek available information and support if the way it is presented and delivered does not seem relevant to them or actually made them feel diminished in any way. Striking the right balance is not easy but it must be considered. WNC's approach to communicating and implementing should also not be solely online.
- 6.13 Lastly, the Task and Finish Panel has looked at broader partnership working in relation to supporting carers. The Panel considered that GPs should ideally be well-placed to play a key role in supporting the health and wellbeing of carers, as locally based service-providers in a position to identify if a person was carer, respond directly to medical needs or help to direct them to other information and support. The Panel was advised that support for carers was part of the national priorities for GPs. However, it was not clear about the extent of their role in practice. The Panel recognised other demands on GPs' capacity and that their priorities are a matter for NHS commissioners. However, the Panel encourages that WNC, as a member of the Northamptonshire ICB, works with NHS partners where there is an opportunity to develop more joined up local services for carers, as much as for other types of services supporting the health and wellbeing of West Northamptonshire residents.

Recommendations:

- B) The Cabinet agrees to implement the one stop shop function for carers and the carer guide proposed in the draft Carer Strategy 2024-2029.
- C) The Cabinet agrees that online forms for processes relating to unpaid carers operated by West Northamptonshire Council should enable information entry to be paused and resumed, rather than having to be completed at once or started again from the beginning.
- D) The Cabinet agrees to develop a Carer Passport Scheme for West Northamptonshire, working with partners where it would support this aim.
- E) The Cabinet agrees to develop a physical promotional card directing to sources of information and support for unpaid carers for use in West Northamptonshire.
- F) The Cabinet agrees that the communication and promotion of support for unpaid carers in West Northamptonshire should be reflective of the following:
 - People of all ages can be carers and it could be off-putting to some if support for unpaid carers seems to be presented as an age-related issue
 - Communication and promotion must be able to reach people who are not online.
- G) The Cabinet agrees to work with health partners through the NHS Northamptonshire Integrated Care Board to pursue opportunities to develop more joined up services for unpaid carers.

7. Implications (including financial implications)

7.1 Resources and Financial

7.1.1 Specific recommendations resulting from the scrutiny review may have resources and financial implications. The Cabinet should consider these implications when producing its response to the recommendations as set out in paragraph 6.1 above.

7.2 Legal

7.2.1 The role of Overview and Scrutiny is to make recommendations to the Cabinet. The Cabinet will need to consider those recommendations and then reach decisions based on the usual public decision-making criteria. The recommendations of a relevant Overview and Scrutiny committee supported by evidence can be the basis of a Cabinet decision, but Cabinet's responsibility remains to ensure that it has sufficient information to make a decision including the financial and legal implications of the specific proposals presented.

7.3 Risk

7.3.1 The recommendations resulting from the scrutiny review are intended to contribute to mitigating risks associated with the provision of support to unpaid carers. The Task and Finish Panel sought to identify recommendations that are reasonable and practical in current circumstances.

The Cabinet is able to give further consideration to risks that may be connected with implementing specific recommendations when producing its response to them.

7.4 Consultation and communications

7.4.1 The Task and Finish Panel heard from a range of expert advisors when gathering information for the scrutiny review, as set out in the final report.

7.5 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny

7.5.1 The recommendations presented to the Cabinet are the result of a scrutiny review by an Overview and Scrutiny task and finish panel. The final report of the task and finish panel was considered and approved by the Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 24 June 2024.

7.6 Climate Impact

7.6.1 None directly relating to this report.

7.7 Community Impact

7.7.1 The recommendations resulting from the scrutiny review are intended to have a positive impact on unpaid carers and cared for people in all areas of West Northamptonshire.

8. Background Papers

Adult Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee agenda papers and minutes – 14 September 2023 and 24 June 2024

Support for Unpaid Carers Task and Finish Panel agenda papers and minutes – January to June 2024