

Unpaid Carers Strategy

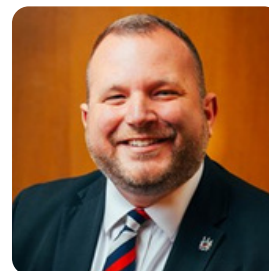
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#WeAreCommunity

Foreword

As a city, Manchester is proud of its strong communities and the values of compassion, inclusion, and solidarity that define who we are. At the heart of these communities are thousands of unpaid carers who provide invaluable support to family members, friends, and neighbours every day.



Councillor Thomas Robinson

Executive Member for
Healthy Manchester
and Adult Social Care

Unpaid carers make an extraordinary contribution to our city. They help loved ones to live independently, maintain dignity, and remain connected to their communities. Yet we know that caring can also bring significant challenges, affecting health, wellbeing, employment, finances, and opportunities to participate fully in community life.

This strategy represents a significant milestone in our commitment to recognising, supporting, and valuing unpaid carers. What makes this strategy particularly important is that it has been shaped by carers themselves. Through extensive engagement and co-production, carers have shared their experiences, highlighted the barriers they face, and helped identify the changes that matter most.

Their message is clear. Carers want to be recognised earlier, listened to as equal partners, able to access support more easily, and confident that help will be available when they need it. They want a system that works with them rather than around them.

As the Council's Executive Member but also as a former unpaid carer myself, we are committed to ensuring that carers are at the centre of our decision-making. We recognise that supporting carers is not solely the responsibility of health and social care services. It requires action across employment, housing, education, communities, and the wider public sector. Most importantly, it requires us to continue listening to carers and working alongside them to shape the services they rely upon. This strategy sets out a clear vision for the future. It reflects our ambition to make Manchester a city where unpaid carers are recognised, respected, and supported throughout their caring journey. By working together with carers, community organisations, health partners, and local residents, we can create lasting change and improve outcomes for carers and those they care for.

I would like to thank every carer who contributed their time, experience, and insights to the development of this strategy. Your voices have shaped this document, and your continued involvement will be essential to delivering its ambitions.

Together, we can build a Manchester where carers are seen, heard, valued, and supported.

Introduction

Unpaid carers are the champions of our city, providing care, compassion, and continuity for loved ones.



Peter Tomlin
Strategic Director of
Adult Social Services

Their contribution is not only personal but profoundly civic, forming the backbone of Manchester's health and social care system.

This strategy is a testament to their voices. It has been co-produced with carers from every corner of Manchester, reflecting the diversity, strength, and resilience of those who care. It sets out a bold and compassionate vision for how we, as a city, will recognise, support, and empower unpaid carers, not just in moments of crisis, but throughout their caring journey.

As Strategic Director of Adult Social Services, I am proud to endorse this strategy and commit to its delivery.

We will work in partnership with carers, the Carers Manchester Network, and our voluntary sector colleagues to ensure that the actions outlined here are not just aspirations, but realities.

Together, we will build a Manchester where carers are seen, heard, and valued. Because when we care for carers, we care for our whole city.

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1. Executive summary

Unpaid carers are the unsung heroes of Manchester, providing vital care and support to family members, friends, and neighbours, often without recognition, financial support, or access to services.

This strategy has been co-produced with carers from across the city, reflecting their lived experiences and the challenges they face daily. It sets out a bold and compassionate vision for how Manchester will support, value, and support its unpaid carers.

Manchester City Council, in partnership with the Carers Manchester Network and voluntary sector organisations, commits to delivering this strategy with transparency and accountability.



2. Introduction: A co-produced strategy for Manchester's unpaid carers

Unpaid carers are the lifeblood of our communities. They provide essential care and support to loved ones, often without recognition, financial reward, or adequate support. In Manchester, it is estimated that there are more than 37,000 carers of family members, friends, and neighbours with physical or mental health conditions, disabilities, neurodivergence, or age-related needs. Their contribution is immeasurable, yet their needs are frequently overlooked.

This strategy was developed collaboratively with **carers, community organisations, and professionals** across Manchester. It draws on the lived experiences of over 250 carers who participated in meaningful engagement through facilitated focus groups, and surveys between September and October 2025. These carers represent the city's rich diversity across age, ethnicity, gender, caring roles, and neighbourhoods. Their voices have shaped every chapter of this strategy. These sessions were designed to ensure that the voices of carers that are diverse in age, background, caring responsibilities, and lived experience, were at the heart of the strategy.

Furthermore, **voluntary and community sector organisations and carers** have been equal partners in the steering group overseeing the development of this strategy. The strategy is grounded in the principle that carers are experts by experience. It recognises that caring is not a one-size-fits-all role. Some carers support loved ones with dementia, others with mental health conditions, learning disabilities, autism, or chronic illness. Some are caring for multiple people, while others are navigating the transition from child to adult services. Many carers are also managing their own health conditions, working full-time, or living in financial hardship.

This strategy sets out a bold and compassionate vision: to make Manchester a city where unpaid carers are recognised, supported, and valued. It identifies eight key themes that emerged from the co-production process and outlines clear actions to address the challenges carers face. These themes include identity and recognition, emotional wellbeing, access to services, respite, financial support, systemic change, peer support, and future planning.

Manchester City Council, alongside the **Carers Manchester Network and voluntary sector partners**, is committed to delivering this strategy in partnership with carers. We want to, and can, build a city that listens to carers, learns from them, and acts with urgency and empathy.



3. Strategic Context: National and Local Alignment

The development of Manchester's Unpaid Carers Strategy is shaped by a range of national and local policy drivers. Nationally, the Care Act 2014 remains a cornerstone, placing a legal duty on local authorities to assess and support carers' needs.

This is complemented by the **Carer's Leave Act 2023**, which introduces new employment rights for working carers, and the **Health and Care Act 2022**, which reinforces the importance of integrated care systems in recognising and supporting unpaid carers. The Local Government Association (LGA) continues to advocate for a refreshed National Carers Strategy, calling for a whole-system approach that reflects the growing complexity of carers' needs and the diversity of caring roles.

Locally, **Manchester's Carers Commissioning Strategy 2023–2025**, developed in partnership with the Manchester Local Care Organisation (MLCO) and the Carers Manchester Network, sets out a clear vision to improve identification, access to support, and outcomes for unpaid carers. It emphasises co-production, equity, and the development of a carer-led movement that extends beyond statutory services. This is further supported by the **Carers Breaks Strategy 2025–2028**, which aims to enhance access to meaningful respite opportunities, co-designed with carers themselves.

These strategies align closely with the ambitions of the **Manchester City Council Plan**, which prioritises inclusive, person-centred services, improved health and wellbeing, and stronger communities. Supporting unpaid carers is integral to achieving these goals, recognising their vital contribution to the city's health and care system and ensuring they are valued, visible, and supported in their roles.



4. Background

Unpaid carers play a vital role in Manchester's health and social care ecosystem. They provide essential support to family members, friends, and neighbours with physical disabilities, mental health conditions, learning disabilities, neurodivergence, chronic illnesses, and age-related needs.

Despite their contributions, unpaid carers often remain invisible within formal systems, under-recognised in policy, and under-supported in practice.

Carers consistently described their roles as demanding, isolating, and emotionally complex. Many reported having to reduce or leave paid employment, navigate fragmented services, and manage legal and financial responsibilities without adequate support. The emotional toll is significant, with carers expressing feelings of burnout, anxiety, and being “constantly available.” The lack of preventative support means many only receive help when they reach crisis point.

There is also widespread confusion around the term “unpaid carer.” Some carers associate it with being on benefits, while others feel the term trivialises their role. Many only realise they are carers when prompted by professionals or when accessing services. This lack of early identification delays access to support and contributes to carers feeling undervalued.

The strategy also recognises the intersectional challenges faced by carers and particularly women, older carers, carers from ethnic minority communities, and those supporting individuals with complex needs. These groups often face additional barriers related to cultural expectations, language, digital exclusion, and systemic conscious and unconscious bias.

This strategy sets out a vision for Manchester where unpaid carers are recognised, respected, and supported not only in times of crisis but throughout their caring journey. It builds on the strengths of the Carers Manchester Network and community organisations, and calls for systemic change across health, social care, employment, and policy.

By centring the voices of carers and embedding their lived experience into every chapter, this strategy seeks to transform how Manchester supports its unpaid carers ensuring they are no longer a hidden workforce, but a valued and respected part of the city's care infrastructure.

5. Carers in Manchester

There are at least 37,072 carers in Manchester. This is 6.7% of the whole population (Census 2021). However, it is important to remember that these are only those people who identified as carers through this process. There are many more people who provide unpaid care who are not included in these figures.

Table 1 below shows the number of carers identified in the 2021 census, and the number of carers engaging with different services in the city. A breakdown of carers based on census data is shown by sex, ethnic group and age are shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4 below.

Table 1 Unpaid carers engagement with services in Manchester

Carers engagement with services in Manchester	No. of carers	% of carers
Total carers (Census 2021)	37,072	
Carers assessments completed in last 12 months (City Council, Feb 2025)	2167	5.8%
Carers supported by The Contact Point in last 12 months (Gaddum, Feb 2024)	1699	4.6%

Table 2 Sex of unpaid carers, % of carers and % of whole population (Census 2021)

Sex	No. of carers	% of all carers	% of whole population
Female	21,753	58.7%	7.8%
Male	15,319	41.3%	5.6%
Grand total	37,072	100.0%	



Table 3: Ethnic group of unpaid carers, % of carers and % of whole population (Census 2021)

Ethnic group	No. of all carers	% of all carers	% of whole population
White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	21,712	58.6%	8.1%
Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh	6,586	17.8%	5.7%
Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African	3,480	9.4%	5.3%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	1,640	4.4%	5.7%
Other ethnic group	1,404	3.8%	5.0%
White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Roma or Other White	1,351	3.6%	3.8%
White: Irish	899	2.4%	9.5%
Grand total	37,072	100.0%	

Table 4: Age of unpaid carers, % of carers and % of whole population (Census 2021)

Ethnic group	No. of all carers	% of all carers	% of whole population
Aged 15 years and under	694	1.9%	0.6%
Aged 16 to 49 years	20,234	54.6%	6.6%
Aged 50 to 64 years	10,859	29.3%	13.8%
Aged 65 years and over	5,285	14.3%	11.4%
Grand total	37,072	100.0%	

6. Vision

We want Manchester to be a place where every carer feels recognised, respected, and supported.

Carers are people who look after family or friends who couldn't manage without their help. Whether it's a parent, partner, child, or neighbour as caring can be rewarding, but also challenging.

Our vision is to:

- **Recognise carers early so they get the help they need, when they need it.**
- **Value carers as equal partners in the care they give.**
- **Make support easy to find and tailored to each carer's situation.**
- **Raise awareness so more people understand what carers do and why it matters.**
- **Listen to carers' voices and involve them in shaping the services that affect them.**



Together, we're building a city that truly supports its carers because caring for carers means caring for everyone.

7. Co-production

As part of the collaborative engagement carers shared their lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations in safe, supportive environments.

They spoke candidly about the emotional, financial, and practical realities of caring, and offered clear, actionable ideas for how services could better support them. Engagement was held in collaboration with organisations including:

- Together Dementia Support (TDS)
- Talbot House
- ACCG (African Caribbean Care Group)
- LMCP (Learn Motivate Change Prosper)
- Wai Yin Society
- Lifted
- Manchester Carers Forum (MCF) – across Burnage, Cheetham Hill, Crumpsall, Blackley
- ACMHS (African Caribbean Mental Health Services)
- Online Focus Group for digitally engaged carers
- Gaddum.

Each session was facilitated by experienced staff and note-takers, with support from lived experience representatives. The feedback gathered was rich, detailed, and consistent across communities, highlighting systemic issues, gaps in support, and opportunities for transformation.

This strategy is not just informed by carers, it was built in partnership with them. Their insights have shaped every chapter, from identity and recognition to future planning. The following chapters reflect the themes that emerged most strongly from the consultations, alongside the actions carers told us they need.



Themes from co-production

The Manchester Unpaid Carers Strategy has been shaped by the voices of carers themselves. Through a series of in-person and online events, carers from diverse backgrounds and caring experiences shared their challenges, frustrations, and aspirations.

These sessions revealed consistent themes across the city, highlighting systemic gaps, emotional burdens, and practical barriers that carers face daily. Importantly, carers also offered clear, actionable recommendations to improve their lives and the services they rely on.

The following themes are drawn directly from these sessions and represent the lived experience of Manchester's unpaid carers. They are not just suggestions, they are calls for change, rooted in real stories and urgent needs. These insights must inform every aspect of the strategy's implementation, ensuring that carers are not only heard but actively supported.

Theme 1: Carer Identity and Recognition

Unpaid carers are the backbone of our communities, yet many do not recognise themselves as carers.

This is particularly true in families and communities where caring is seen as a natural extension of family, cultural, or religious duty.

The term "carer" itself is often misunderstood or carries stigma, some associate it with paid care work, while others feel it trivialises the emotional and physical labour involved.

This lack of recognition delays access to support, entitlements, and services, and contributes to carers feeling invisible in professional settings. To ensure carers are recognised, respected, and supported from the outset, it is vital to prioritise early identification, challenge stigma, and adopt inclusive understandings of what it means to care. These actions lay the foundation for more responsive and equitable support systems.

Theme 2: Emotional and Mental Health Impact

The emotional toll of unpaid caring is profound and often invisible.

Carers frequently experience stress, anxiety, isolation, and burnout, compounded by the lack of dedicated mental health support. Many carers report feeling constantly available, unable to switch off, and unsupported in crisis situations.

The emotional labour of caring is rarely acknowledged by professionals, and generic mental health services often lack the understanding needed to support carers effectively. Supporting carers effectively requires a strong focus on building emotional resilience, providing tailored mental health services, and ensuring safe, inclusive spaces where carers feel heard, understood, and supported.

Theme 3: Access to Support and Services

Carers face significant barriers when trying to access support.

These include fragmented services, digital exclusion, poor communication, and lack of awareness of entitlements.

Navigating the system is often overwhelming and time-consuming, with carers reporting being passed from one service to another, repeating their stories, and receiving little follow-up. The system is reactive rather than proactive, often only responding when carers reach crisis point.

A joined-up, transparent, and culturally competent approach is needed to ensure carers can easily find and receive the support they need.

Theme 4: Respite and Breaks

Respite is not a luxury it's a lifeline.

Carers need regular, flexible breaks to maintain their own health and wellbeing, yet many struggle to access suitable options. Whether due to lack of services, cost, or the complexity of their caring role, the absence of respite contributes to burnout and crisis.

Carers often report needing to reach a breaking point before respite is offered. Investing in a range of respite options including culturally appropriate and community-led models is essential to ensure carers can access timely breaks and avoid reaching crisis point.

Theme 5: Financial Recognition and Support

Unpaid carers contribute immeasurably to society, yet many live in financial hardship.

The current system of Carer's Allowance and means-tested benefits fails to reflect the true value of their contribution. Carers often face additional costs, reduced income, and limited access to financial advice. Many have had to leave employment or reduce working hours, and report being penalised for doing so. Addressing inequalities and offering practical support are critical steps to help carers achieve greater economic stability and ensure fairer outcomes.

Theme 6: Systemic Change and Professional Practice

Carers consistently report feeling unheard, undervalued, and excluded by statutory services.

Poor communication, lack of continuity, and limited understanding of the carer role undermine trust and effectiveness. Carers are often left out of care planning, safeguarding discussions, and discharge processes. Embedding carer-awareness across all professional practices, enhancing training, and fostering respectful, person-centred engagement are essential to recognising carers as equal partners and experts in care.

Theme 7: Peer Support and Co-Production

Carers thrive in communities where their experiences are shared, validated, and valued.

Peer support groups offer emotional relief, practical advice, and a sense of belonging. Co-production ensures that carers are not just consulted but actively shaping the services they use.

Carers want to be involved in decision-making, service design, and policy development. Investing in grassroots organisations, amplifying carer voices, and embedding co-production as a core principle of service delivery are essential to building more inclusive and responsive systems of support.

Theme 8: Planning for the Future

Many carers worry about what will happen to their loved ones when they are no longer able to care.

This anxiety is especially acute for older carers, parents of autistic or learning-disabled adults, and those supporting individuals with complex needs. Future planning whether legal, financial, or practical is often overlooked or inaccessible.

Carers need support to make informed decisions, prepare for emergencies, and ensure continuity of care. Providing clear pathways, trusted advice, and proactive support is essential to help carers plan for the future with confidence and dignity.



8. Solutions – Turning Insight into Action

The recommendations shared by carers across Manchester are clear and consistent. They reflect the lived reality of unpaid carers navigating complex systems, often without recognition or support. This chapter outlines the practical solutions that respond directly to those recommendations.

These solutions are designed to be deliverable, measurable, and in collaboration with carers and the organisations that support them.

1

Create a Centralised Carer Support Hub

Solution: Promote a single, accessible online and physical hub where carers can find information, complete forms, access welfare rights advice, and be signposted to relevant services. This hub should be co-designed with carers and include:

- A phone line and walk-in service
- Printed materials for digitally excluded carers
- Translation and interpretation services.

2

Introduce a Carers Navigation Service

Solution: Train Carer Navigators who can support carers through complex processes such as benefits, legal paperwork, and accessing respite.

Navigators should ideally be embedded in GP practices, hospitals, and community organisations.

3

Expand Flexible and Culturally Appropriate Respite

Solution: Develop a range of respite options including:

- Sit-in services for short breaks
- Respite beds for emergency and planned care
- Volunteer-led models for trusted informal support
- Respite that allows carers and cared-for to attend together

4 Improve Mental Health Support for Carers

Solution: Commission carer-specific mental health services including:

- A listening line and peer support network
- Crisis support pathways separate from safeguarding
- Training for therapists to understand carer-specific issues.

5 Strengthen Financial Support and Advice

Solution: Work with national partners to advocate for increased Carer's Allowance and remove financial barriers. Locally:

- Offer benefit checks and financial planning through single point of access
- Promote awareness of direct payments.

6 Embed Carer Awareness Across Services

Solution: Deliver and or promote carer-awareness training for:

- Health and social care professionals
- Education and employment sectors
- Frontline staff in statutory services

Include carers in care planning, safeguarding, and discharge processes. Introduce a Carers' Charter to set expectations across sectors.

7 Invest in Peer Support and Co-Production

Solution: Promote peer-led carer groups across Manchester, with a focus on:

- Inclusion of male carers, young carers, and carers from underrepresented communities
- Small, localised groups that foster trust
- A Carers Co-Production Panel to shape services and monitor delivery
- Continuing to strengthen relationships with VCFSE partners in the Carers Network and support long-term sustainable funding models ensuring that carers support in the city is stable, inclusive, and resilient.

8 Support Future Planning for Carers

Solution: Provide practical support for carers planning for the future, including:

- Legal and housing advice
- Emergency care plans.

9. Cross cutting themes



Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

A robust monitoring and evaluation framework is essential to ensure that the strategy translates into meaningful outcomes for unpaid carers. This framework must be built on transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement. It should include mechanisms for tracking progress against strategic objectives, measuring the impact of interventions, and incorporating feedback from carers themselves. Regular reporting cycles, including quarterly reviews and annual impact assessments, will help maintain momentum and ensure that the strategy remains responsive to emerging needs. Manchester carers partnership board will hold and monitor progress through the above approach with governance arrangements and reporting lines maintained by respected partners.

Carers will be actively involved in the evaluation process through advisory panels, surveys, and lived experience forums. By embedding a culture of learning and adaptation, Manchester can ensure that the strategy evolves in line with carers' realities and delivers sustained change.



Workplace and Employment Support

Employment is a critical factor in the wellbeing and financial stability of unpaid carers. However, many carers struggle to balance work and caring responsibilities due to inflexible schedules, lack of understanding from employers, and limited access to support. The strategy must promote carer-friendly employment practices across Manchester, encouraging businesses to adopt flexible working arrangements, provide paid carer leave, and offer workplace adjustments.

Awareness campaigns targeting employers can help shift perceptions and foster inclusive work environments. Additionally, carers seeking to enter or re-enter the workforce should have access to training, career advice, and job placement services. By integrating employment support into the carers strategy, Manchester can reduce financial hardship and enhance the quality of life for carers who wish to remain economically active.



Digital Inclusion Strategy

Digital exclusion remains a significant barrier for many unpaid carers, particularly older individuals and those from marginalised communities. Without access to digital tools and skills, carers may be unable to engage with services, participate in consultations, or connect with peer support networks. The strategy must prioritise digital inclusion by providing training, access to devices, and affordable internet solutions.

Services should be designed with accessibility in mind, offering multilingual content, intuitive navigation, and compatibility with mobile devices. Importantly, offline alternatives must remain available to ensure that no carer is left behind. By bridging the digital divide, Manchester can empower carers to engage fully with the support systems available to them and enhance their autonomy and connectivity.

Cross cutting themes



Integration with Health and Social Care Plans

Unpaid carers are integral to the health and social care ecosystem, yet they are frequently excluded from formal planning and decision-making processes. The strategy must ensure that carers are recognised as key expert partners in care, with their insights and contributions embedded in service design, delivery, and review. This includes involving carers in multi-agency meetings, care planning discussions, and discharge processes.

Health and social care professionals should receive training on carer engagement and be equipped to identify and support carers effectively. By aligning the carers strategy with broader health and social care frameworks, Manchester can create a more cohesive and person-centred system that values and supports carers at every level.



Emergency and Crisis Response

Unpaid carers often operate under immense pressure, and without timely support, they can reach crisis points that jeopardise their health and the wellbeing of those they care for. A proactive emergency and crisis response system is essential to prevent breakdowns in care and ensure rapid intervention when needed. This includes establishing clear protocols for emergency respite, crisis intervention teams, and rapid access to mental health support.

Carers should be equipped with emergency care plans and identification tools that facilitate swift recognition by professionals. Integration with emergency services and community organisations will enhance responsiveness and coordination. By prioritising crisis preparedness, Manchester can safeguard carers and ensure continuity of care during critical moments.



Young Adult Carers and Transition Support

Young adult carers face unique challenges that can significantly impact their education, social development, and mental health. As they transition from childhood to adulthood, they often encounter gaps in support and uncertainty about their future roles.

The strategy must address these transitional needs by creating clear pathways that guide young carers through changes in services, entitlements, and responsibilities. Transition planning should be holistic, encompassing emotional wellbeing, career aspirations, and legal rights. By recognising young adult carers as a distinct group with specific needs, Manchester can foster a generation of empowered individuals who are supported throughout their caring journey.



Public Awareness Campaign

Public understanding of unpaid caring remains limited, contributing to stigma, under-identification, and lack of support. A comprehensive public awareness campaign is essential to shift perceptions and foster a culture of recognition and respect.

The campaign should highlight the diverse realities of caring, celebrate carers' contributions, and encourage early identification. It must engage a wide audience through local media, social platforms, schools, workplaces, and community events. Storytelling, visual media, and carer-led initiatives can humanise the caring experience and build empathy. By raising awareness, Manchester can create an environment where carers feel seen, valued, and supported by their communities.

10. A shared future

Unpaid carers are the foundation of our communities, providing essential care, often at great personal cost, and frequently without recognition or support. This strategy has been co-produced with carers from across Manchester, reflecting their lived experiences, insights, and aspirations. It is built on the voices of those who care for loved ones every day, and who have shared their stories with honesty, urgency, and hope.

The themes and recommendations outlined in this strategy are not abstract policy ideas but grounded in real lives. They reflect the emotional, financial, and practical realities of caring, and they demand a response that is compassionate, coordinated, and courageous.

Manchester has an opportunity to lead the way in how unpaid carers are supported. By implementing the actions in this strategy, we can build a city where carers are recognised, respected and supported. A city where services work together, where carers are not left to navigate alone, and where caring is no longer a hidden burden but a shared responsibility.

This strategy is not the end but the beginning of a renewed commitment to carers. Its success will depend on continued collaboration, investment, and accountability. Above all, it will depend on listening to carers and acting on what they tell us.



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