

Improving employment opportunities for carers: identifying and sharing good practice

KEY POINTS FROM THE RESEARCH

- Effective employment support for carers can be provided through different delivery models, but those which are most effective are characterised by flexible skills provision which carers can access alongside their caring commitments, and tailored support to meet the diversity and complexity of carers' needs.
- Appropriately skilled staff and strong partnership working with other local organisations are also important criteria for effective employment support.
- Key challenges have been public sector funding cuts to carer support services and low awareness among carers of the availability of tailored employment support services.
- Case study organisations addressed some of these challenges by diversifying their funding base or by utilising pump prime funding. Raising awareness about their services has been attempted through outreach and social media.
- Much-needed employment support for carers has been delivered at a time of public funding cuts, and when mainstream employment support services have experienced major restructuring. Over half (55) of survey respondents reported a 'hard' outcome (see box) as a result of accessing the support of the six case studies involved in this research highlighting that these voluntary

This study looked at six case studies of voluntary sector organisations, in different localities in England, each with a track record of providing innovative employment support for carers, most of whom were out of work.

These case studies drew on evidence from staff, volunteers and a survey of carers who used the services. They examined effective employment support, the challenges and barriers around delivering this support and details of how these challenges can be overcome.

A survey was carried out with 86 service users (i.e. carers) of the case study organisations. A 'hard' outcome was defined as achieving the following as a result of accessing the case study support services: stay in work, start paid work, start work as self-employed, progress onto training or progress onto further or higher education.

services are very effective in terms of their impact. This is particularly impressive given the complexity of these carers' needs. For example, just under half of all survey respondents said they were struggling financially and a similar number said they had a limiting long-term illness.

- Carers often have complex needs which require a holistic response from multiple agencies and actors including: mainstream employment support providers; employers; and local authority statutory provision.

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- Sustainable, long-term employment support for carers requires a coordinated and proactive approach to partnership working from all relevant agencies and actors. This would be consistent with the current drive for a plural market response to service provision which draws on contributions from a wide range of organisations, including local government, health, the voluntary and private sectors, social enterprise and specialist providers.

BACKGROUND

The number of carers juggling work and care has risen by 11 per cent in the last ten years - with over three million people in England and Wales working alongside caring (Carers UK 2013). However, carers continue to face significant barriers to entering, or remaining in, employment. One in six carers, or around one million people, has already given up work or cut back on paid working hours to care, with a lack of formal support services to enable them to combine work and care being cited as a key reason (Carers UK *et al.* 2009).

Some support for carers to enter, and remain in, employment is enshrined in UK legislation and is also available through the welfare system. However, carers are not targeted in welfare-to-work programmes* and at a local level, most formal services (with the exception of Jobcentre Plus**) are not conceptualised as supporting or enabling carers to work. Voluntary sector organisations are valued highly by many carers, because they are perceived as reliable, impartial sources of information, advice and support (Vickerstaff *et al.* 2009).

FINDINGS

Effective employment support

This research identified four core features of effective employment support:

Flexible training

Flexible training provision, which carers could access alongside their caring commitments, allowed carers to access training alongside the unpredictable nature of their caring responsibilities. The flexible provision of training courses, which enabled carers to 'dip in and out' as and when they were able, was valued by carers, with 85 per cent of survey respondents reporting that the case study services were available at times which suited them.

Tailored support

Tailored support to cater for the diversity of carer needs, of which employment support could just be one. Case study organisations were often presented with carers at very different stages of their journey towards employment, with some more 'job-ready' than others and these required tailored responses to individual circumstances. Many of the carers were some distance from the labour market, so most employment services were geared towards improving soft skills, such as levels of confidence and self-esteem, plus IT skills, CV writing, job search support, and identifying voluntary work placements.

The importance of flexible and tailored support echoes the findings of other research which has also looked at the success of local projects in supporting carers to access employment opportunities (Formby and Yeandle 2005).

Staff with the right skills

Effective employment support requires staff with the right set of skills, i.e. with professional training qualifications and/or previous experience of supporting marginalised or vulnerable groups, as well as formal qualifications and/or in-depth experience of supporting carers with complex needs. One case study organisation, for example, had dedicated support officers

* Confirmed by qualitative interviews with four of the Work Programme's Prime Contractors conducted in January 2012.

** Since 2009, there is a Care Partnership Manager in every Jobcentre Plus District. In addition, Work Preparation Support for Carers is a scheme currently available to eligible carers, under which a Jobcentre Plus Personal Adviser gives tailored advice and support, and helps with costs (including replacement care) resulting from attendance at agreed training or job interviews.

specialising in supporting particular groups of carers (e.g. of people with dementia, of people with mental health issues, and older carers).

Other important staff characteristics included: understanding carers' issues, experience of dealing with a diverse range of people, patience, the ability to deal with emotional issues, and maintaining objective distance from problems. Widespread satisfaction with the skillset of staff in our case study organisations was evident, with 93 per cent of survey respondents reporting that the staff were understanding of their caring situation.

Successful partnerships

Successful partnerships were usually informal and took the form of strong referral pathways between the case study organisations and other local agencies, such as General Practices, hospitals, pharmacies, colleges, Jobcentre Plus and training providers. Although limited resources had prevented a formalisation of these partnerships (except in one organisation), most had successfully developed and built relationships with staff at partner agencies. All six case study organisations were regarded as 'centres of excellence' by staff at partner agencies and were commonly considered 'one of a kind' in terms of local employment support for carers.

Challenges to delivering effective employment support

Recent public sector cuts presented a key challenge to case study organisations, with many being forced to reduce or cease their employment support for carers. This led some to diversify their funding sources or to use short-term, pump-priming funding to support further funding applications. The lack of long-term funding resulted in an inability to plan ahead, retain key staff members, monitor long-term outcomes of employment support (including those around cost savings and effectiveness), and embed and sustain good practice.

Although all case studies attempted to market the service locally, through partner networks,

and their own newsletters and information packs, most acknowledged that more could be done to raise awareness about their employment support service, particularly where the service was not centrally located – for example, in rural areas. Indeed, over half of survey respondents reported that they had only found out about the employment support service through either accessing the case study organisation itself (on site) or through the case study organisation's own marketing material (leaflets, information packs and newsletters).

Resourcing proactive marketing activity was a common challenge, although in one area, outreach sessions in rural locations saw a significant increase in demand for the services. In another area, a separate case study organisation had made use of social media to raise awareness about its employment support service, regarding this to be a relatively low-cost, 'resource-light' means of marketing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

Evidence from this research highlights innovative, effective and specialist employment support delivered by voluntary sector organisations to meet individual carer needs. The current governments' emphasis on the role of the voluntary sector, ongoing trends in service provision towards personalisation and individual budgets, at the same time as spending restrictions in the public sector, suggest that there will be greater reliance on support provided through voluntary organisations in the years to come.

However, this research raises questions about the sustainability of this reliance, not least because of the recent funding cuts to voluntary sector services. While two case studies have secured alternative funding sources, the remainder have had to reduce or cease their employment support services altogether. Moreover, as key stakeholders* pointed out, carers often present complex and multiple needs which require a holistic response, ideally from multiple agencies and actors who can share responsibility for a

* Including employers, representatives from the Work Programmes prime contractors, Jobcentre Plus, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS), Carers UK, local councils and the voluntary sector.

proactive and coordinated approach to partnership working. For example, employers' support for carers in the workplace varies and there remain particular challenges in engaging small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

Finally, the short-term and unreliable nature of funding that often characterises voluntary sector support means that the good practice emerging from such projects is rarely taken up, evaluated and implemented more widely. Grant makers and funders need to take this into account when formulating the parameters of funding in this area and consider not just extending the length and amount of available funding, but also encouraging a partnership approach to funding, where the conditions and criteria of the funds focus on joint partnership working between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

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ABOUT THE STUDY

This study was carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies and the Centre for International Research at the University of Leeds. The research involved a scoping phase which consisted of a literature and policy review, interviews with key experts and sector stakeholders and a review of the wider evidence in Europe, which was carried out by Carers UK.

The case study phase formed the bulk of the research and consisted of the following elements:

- Interviews with case study staff and other practitioners
- A survey of carers/service users
- Interviews with carers/service users

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