

Unpaid Carers Project Report

Abstract

During this project, the Parents Federation facilitated 25 lunches, 3 evening meals, 3 bike rides, 3 spa days and one day trip to Birmingham via coach. We directly interacted with over 100 unpaid carers, with event attendance increasing steeply over time as awareness of our project increased among the unpaid caring community. This project was funded by the Cardiff & Vale Regional Partnership Board, administered by C3SC and GVS.



The usefulness of these gatherings to facilitate building a network of community support and shared information between unpaid carers is both undeniable and impossible to overstate. Feedback and comments from these sessions confirm that attendees were extremely grateful for the opportunity to meet informally with other unpaid carers in similar situations. Carers frequently expressed feeling anxious, depressed and overwhelmed (or “going crazy”) due to their caring responsibilities, while also asserting that these meet-ups were a very welcome ‘short break’ and generally improved their well-being and resilience. Several attendees became ‘regulars’ at these sessions, allowing them to take full advantage of the opportunities these sessions provide, and access to a continuous source of community support.

The conversation and information shared between unpaid carers at these gatherings was testament to the importance of such gatherings. Many carers met others who had struggled with similar issues in the past and could give excellent advice on a great variety of subjects, from tips on behaviour management to local activities and charities that would help them and their disabled child. Several carers contributed articles to the Parents Fed newsletters based on the issues discussed at these gatherings, and the Federation was made keenly aware of the issues most important to unpaid carers at this time – information which will impact the work we do so as to better support and represent the needs of unpaid carers.



This project has highlighted that unpaid carers are commonly dissatisfied with the current social care and support provided by the Government, while many are also woefully unaware of the local services and community available to support them to maintain their caring responsibilities. The recent spotlight cast on the importance of ‘social prescribing’ as a way to provide support to individuals and communities while alleviating pressure on health and social services (GVS, 2023), is perfectly timed with the conclusion of our own effort to offer an alternative source of support to unpaid carers. Building on the huge success of this short project and of the 3 year Connected Carers project (2017-2020), the Parents Federation proposes the initialisation of a longer-term scheme with similar aims to further connect unpaid carers. A longer project (eg 3 years) would enable us to reach even more unpaid carers in Cardiff & the Vale, and would greatly improve the general wellbeing of unpaid carers by providing a regular source of community support and networking opportunities. With more space for long-term goals, the Federation would be well-positioned to help unpaid carers establish their own regular gatherings (without facilitators present), which would reduce staffing costs to the Federation, while most crucially contributing to the strength and longevity of support networks within the unpaid carer community, long after the project is finished.

Disabled children (young and old) deserve our full support, and the Parents Federation would be delighted to deliver a longer-term ‘bitesize respite’ project, to help the unpaid and oft-forgotten carers of these individuals to access the full amount of support, community and personal fulfilment available to them.



Analysis

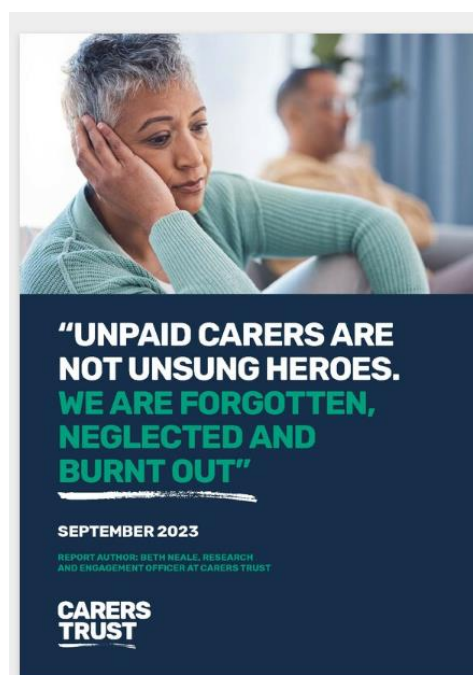
The average cost per person of hosting a lunch or evening meal for unpaid carers was £11.32. For this price, carers received several hours of respite, a free meal, and an opportunity to connect and network with other unpaid carers in their local area. This is clearly a very cost-effective way of easily delivering quality enjoyable respite to unpaid carers in a comfortable setting, while also allowing carers to help each other access support from their community and from wider support services.

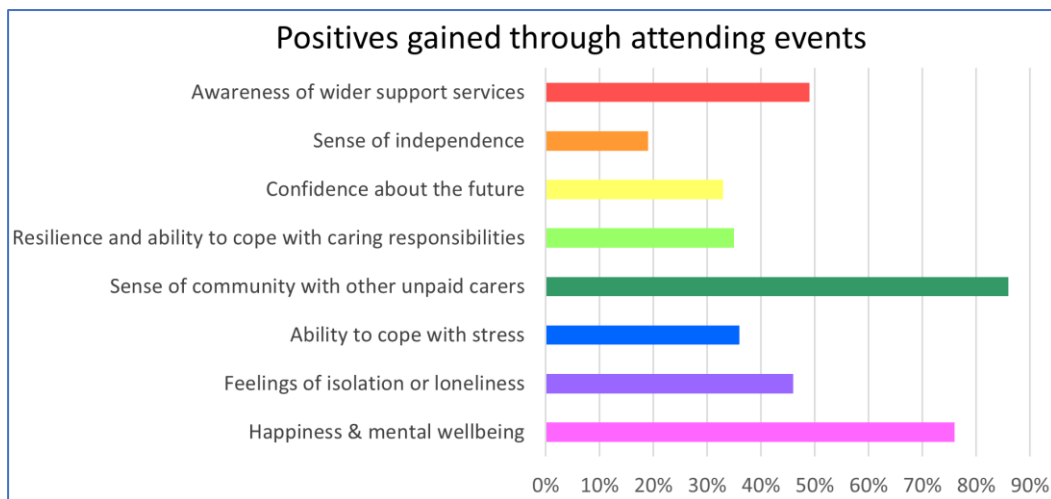
Over 100 unpaid carers attended these events in total, of which 37 had not had contact with the Parents Fed before. Many more carers who attended were members already but had not interacted with the Parents Fed in several years; these carers were pleased to renew their engagement with the Federation and were enthusiastic about attending more meetups in the future. New members were most likely to engage with the Project by attending lunches (short, sociable, undemanding gatherings that are easy to 'drop in' to). Organised bike rides tended to attract a small group of regular attendees. The 3 spa days offered to Parents Fed members were generally oversubscribed, due to huge interest from carers (not unsurprising; carers were especially grateful to attend these events). 71% of carers attended more than one event during the project. Informal feedback was collected throughout the project by event facilitators, with carers frequently expressing gratitude to the Parents Fed for organising these events, and taking full advantage of the opportunity to share their experiences and current problems with other unpaid carers in a warm and welcoming environment.



A voluntary post-project survey was filled in by 30 unpaid carers to help us gauge the success of the current unpaid carers project, and gather opinions to help shape the content of future projects of a similar nature. 71% of carers surveyed were aged 41-65yrs old, with a further 21% being aged 66yrs and over. 1 in 5 carers had never had a carers assessment, while it has been over 2 years since 69% of carers have had a carers assessment. Many carers are dissatisfied with their experience of trying to obtain a carers assessment, with several reporting that they have (so far) had to wait almost a year for an assessment. Carers described the assessments as “clearly a budgetary exercise only”, with “never anything useful to offer”. One carer was even actively discouraged from applying for a carers assessment by a council employee, who told them there is “no point” in doing carers assessments as they had “no budget to give carers any support” anyway.

Carers’ general lack of confidence in the Government’s ability to deliver adequate social support is reflected in a much larger survey recently conducted by the Carers Trust, which found that only 55% of unpaid carers feel they get the support they need to be an unpaid carer. The Carers Trust survey concludes that “an under-funded and broken social care system is placing unsustainable pressure on unpaid carers”, and indicates that support levels drop further amongst older people, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and carers from marginalised backgrounds including ethnic minorities, LGBT+ unpaid carers and women. (Carers Trust, 2023)

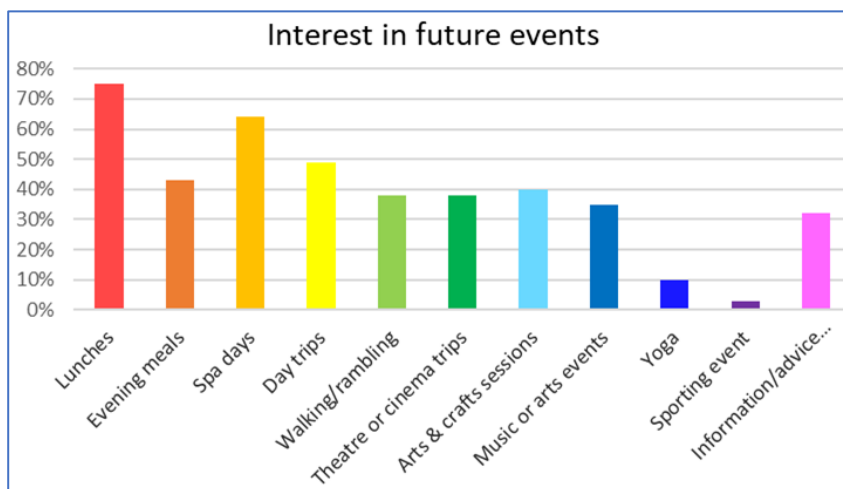




4 in 5 carers said that attending a Parents Fed event had a positive impact on their happiness/well-being, and gave them a sense of community with other unpaid carers. Half of carers surveyed said the events positively impacted their awareness of wider support services, and that they helped lessen feelings of isolation & loneliness. 35% of carers said the event they attended had a positive impact on their resilience and their ability to cope with the stress of their caring responsibilities.

64% of carers most appreciated being able to connect with other carers and share experiences. Half of carers were very grateful for the meal or activity they attended being free of charge, with frequent mention of the high cost of living the UK is currently experiencing. 1 in 2 carers emphasised the value of being able to get advice and information at these events, with 32% of carers expressing interest in attending sessions specifically run to educate and answer people's questions on issues such as benefits, direct payments and writing wills.

100% of carers surveyed were interested in attending more Parents Fed events in future, with half of responders suggesting they would attend 2 or more events a month. 8 unpaid carers have already expressed interest in helping facilitate future events throughout Cardiff and the Vale, which is ideal for the model of community-led social gatherings (coordinated/funded by the Parents Fed) that we are aiming for. Regarding the nature of potential future events, 3 in 4 carers



expressed a strong interest in attending lunches and half of carers surveyed were interested in evening meals. We would like to offer more evening meals in future, as these events are likely to provide respite for a different demographic of unpaid carers (those who are not available during the day due to work or caring responsibilities).

60% of carers were interested in spa days or day trips; these activities are more expensive per person to provide, but also generally provide more hours of respite to individual carers than a lunch does. The spa days (which included a 40 minute massage) were hugely appreciated by attendees, with multiple carers expressing their profuse thanks to the Parents Fed for giving them such a "lovely treat"; a spa day is truly a luxury that most unpaid carers would not have the time or money to organise for themselves, yet it provides an invaluable few hours of respite where unpaid carers can truly relax and indulge in the rarest of commodities: genuine 'me time' away from their caring responsibilities, and a chance to focus on their own wellbeing in a purpose-built calm and healing environment.

2 in 5 of carers surveyed were interested in attending social gatherings that take place in a more creative setting. Arts and crafts sessions would allow unpaid carers to (re)discover their creativity in a comfortable environment, away from their caring responsibilities, while also giving carers with social anxiety a chance to be part of a community – quietly focusing on their craftwork in like-minded company may seem a more appealing prospect than attending a lunch where the main activity and expectation is to talk and actively connect with others. Carers were also interested in organised excursions to the theatre or arts/music events. Creativity and artistic expression are often one of the first things to be ‘deprioritised’ when faced with caring for someone with long term health problems or disability, but practicing and being exposed to creativity is well-recognised as being beneficial to a person’s wellbeing, stress management skills and propensity to think positively about the future. (Tan et al, 2021)

38% of carers were also interested in organised walking tours as a possible Parents Fed activity for the future. A healthy exercise routine is another important part of a balanced lifestyle that can be of low priority to unpaid carers compared to their caring responsibilities. A communal walk around a local park, forest or coastline can provide more actively-inclined unpaid carers with an opportunity to socialise with each other, while giving them a much needed change of scenery and greatly benefitting their health and well-being at the same time. We already have a Parents Fed member (who first engaged with us during the Project), who is enthusiastic to help facilitate walks and craft sessions local to Cosmeston Lakes.

In summary, the Unpaid Carers Project was hugely popular and events were increasingly well-attended, with most carers simply being thrilled to be out of the house and engaging with a community within which they felt comfortable and understood. Carers regularly told us how beneficial these events have been to them and how much they have gained from attending, in the form of “support, advice, new friends and respite”.

Testimonies from unpaid carers:

“It was a lovely treat, helped me relax and spend some ‘me time’ which is a rare treat due to costs and time.”

“We have appreciated all the opportunities for support, understanding and friendships. We have learnt so much from other carers who understand the challenges of supporting others.”

“These events were a life saver, passing information and finding others who are experiencing similar daily challenges meant I didn’t feel like I was alone in dealing with all of it.”

“It was lovely to meet new people in a similar situation, helpful & supportive discussions”

“It’s great that unpaid carers are getting some thought and recognition... It’s lovely to have a free meal or free activity that I would not be able to afford myself”

“Lovely, relaxed evening spent with like-minded people which had a positive effect on my overall well-being”

“These events are so beneficial to myself, I enjoy meeting with others in similar position to myself”

“Very useful meeting regularly with other carers in similar situations; sharing info and problems, learning about events such as the Senedd autism meetings.”

References:

- GVS (2023) “Social prescribing growing in Wales”. Available from www.gvs.wales/news/ [Accessed 21st December 2023]
- Carers Trust (2023) “Adult Carer Survey Report”. Available at <https://carers.resourcespace.com> [Accessed 21st December 2023]
- Tan, C et al (2021) “Being Creative Makes You Happier: The Positive Effect of Creativity on Subjective Well-Being”, Int J Environ Res Public Health, 18(14): 7244