



Carers Week briefing:

Mental health and short breaks for unpaid carers

Unpaid carers

An unpaid carer is someone who is providing unpaid care and support to a family member, friend or neighbour who is disabled, has an illness or long-term condition, or who needs extra help as they get older. Care and support can look different for each caring situation, from emotional support to providing personal care, such as bathing and dressing. There are 627,715 people in Scotland who are unpaid carersⁱ. We also estimate that there are currently 28,000 young carers aged under 18ⁱⁱ.

Introduction

This briefing has been developed by Carers Scotland and Shared Care Scotland, and uses information from this year's Carers Week report, Carers Scotland's State of Caring survey and Shared Care Scotland's 'Exploring unpaid carers' experiences of short breaks and respite care' report.

We know that taking a break from caring can improve both physical and mental wellbeing. But for far too many unpaid carers in Scotland, access to short breaks remains inconsistent, insufficient, or entirely out of reach. As pressure on services grows and the cost-of-living crisis deepens, many unpaid carers are reaching breaking point.

Key findings

- 36% of all unpaid carers, and 59% of carers who were struggling to make ends meet said they had bad or very bad mental healthⁱⁱⁱ.
- 40% of BME unpaid carers said their mental health had suffered because of their caring role. Only one in four said they have access to any support that allows them to take a break from caring^{iv}.
- 60% of unpaid carers reported 'often' or 'always' feel the need for a break, however only 7.5% 'regularly' or 'frequently' receive breaks from caring.^v
- 63% of unpaid carers felt overwhelmed by caring because they have not had a break from caring¹.
- 54% of carers and former carers said they faced disadvantages in looking after their own health and 50% in their ability to take a break from caring².

¹ State of Caring 2024: Health and social care support for unpaid carers, Carers Scotland (2025)

² Caring about Equality, Carers Week 2025

- More than half (58%) of unpaid carers said taking a break from caring was critical to maintaining both their physical and mental health^{vi}
- 30% of unpaid carers stating they are financially unable to take a break, and 23% reporting they cannot afford the cost of respite care services.^{vii}
- A quarter (24%) of unpaid carers said that there was a lack of available break services and 22% said that the services available did not meet their needs (22%)^{viii}.

This year's Carers Week report focused on caring and equality. Unpaid carers face significant inequality and poverty, including poorer health than non-carers, with 8.2% of carers reporting being in bad or very bad health, compared to 7% of non-carers^{ix}. The report, based on polling of unpaid carers and former carers, found that 41% of current or former carers in Scotland said they have had a mental or physical health condition develop or become worse since taking on caring responsibilities^x. More than half (54%) said that they faced disadvantages in looking after their own health, 19% struggling to look after their own health and wellbeing.

The role of breaks from caring is crucial in sustaining and improving mental health and wellbeing. However, despite more than half (58%) of unpaid carers saying it is critical to maintaining their health, too few carers are currently able to access the breaks they need. Only 7.5% of carers reported regularly or frequently receiving a break from caring. A third (33%) of carers also reported 'rarely' or 'never' receiving a break for longer than 2 hours^{xi}.

Disparity exists between how unpaid carers spend the breaks they can access, and their break preferences. Recent Shared Care Scotland research shows that of over 1,000 respondents, nearly half of unpaid carers (44%) generally spend breaks from caring doing personal errands, such as grocery shopping or housework. Meanwhile, when asked how they'd prefer to spend breaks from caring, the most popular choices were engaging in hobbies and personal interests and attending events or entertainment.^{xii} This clearly demonstrates that even when carers gain access to a break from their caring responsibilities, this may be used to attend to other life commitments and responsibilities.

Breaks from caring are also crucial for unpaid carers to access their own health care services. Worryingly, this year's Carers Week report found that nearly a quarter (24%) of carers or former carers in Scotland had postponed or cancelled a medical appointment, test, scan, treatment or therapy because of their caring role. Short breaks and replacement care were identified as vital by unpaid carers to enable them to support access to the healthcare they need.^{xiii}

The level of unpaid carers missed out on services for their own health needs because of their caring responsibilities and the barriers to the breaks and replacement care service that could support them to access this support, has worrying implications for unpaid carers' future health and wellbeing. Furthermore, this contradicts the Scottish Government's stated intention to [develop healthcare for the population](#) that is focused on prevention, improving access to treatment and tackling health inequalities.

Scotland's [Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) recognises that *"although caring can be a positive and rewarding experience for both carers and the cared-for person, we know that many carers experience mental, physical, employment and financial impacts as a result of their caring role. We must ensure*

adequate support for carers, particularly those most at risk of poorer health, to ensure their wellbeing and sustain them in their role.”

However, research showed a 28% increase in poor mental health amongst unpaid carers in 12 months⁶, highlighting deteriorating mental health and wellbeing as the very systems needed to provide such support face increasing pressure to deliver, including vital breaks from caring.

Conclusion

This year’s Carers Week research, and research from Shared Care Scotland and Carers Scotland, provide unequivocal evidence of the significant impact of providing unpaid care and the inequalities that current and former unpaid carers face. These inequalities contribute to the poorer mental health that too many carers experience, with many describing extreme levels of exhaustion and explicitly linking their caring role to deteriorating mental health.

Many of these negative impacts could be prevented with improved support, particularly regular and appropriate breaks from caring, delivered in ways that meet individual and diverse needs, alongside replacement care that enables carers to protect, sustain and improve their mental health and wellbeing. Significant and sustained action is needed urgently.

Key Asks

- The Scottish Government must deliver the right to a break for unpaid carers, as recently passed in the Care Reform (Scotland) Bill, and **must ensure that there is sufficient investment**. Work must also be undertaken to **ensure a variety and choice of break options are available** to meet the diverse needs of Scotland’s unpaid carer population, including culturally and linguistically accessible breaks for BME carers. To support suitable short breaks provision, a national task force should be established, with a role to develop and implement a short breaks improvement plan.
- The Scottish Government must develop a **dedicated Carers’ Health Inequalities Plan** with measurable actions to improve carers’ health in the short, medium and long term, to prevent the health inequalities that unpaid carers and young carers face.
- The Scottish Government must **urgently increase investment in social care**, recognising both its fundamental role in supporting the NHS and its key role in protecting the health and wellbeing of unpaid carers and their opportunities to take part in employment and education and have breaks from caring. This should include **investing in local carer services** - including carer support within condition specific organisations - to provide support for mental wellbeing and training to support caring.

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References

ⁱ Scotland's Census 2022, Health, disability and unpaid care, National Records of Scotland (2024)

ⁱⁱ Scotland's Carers Update Release: December 2022, Scottish Government

ⁱⁱⁱ State of Caring 2024: Health and social care support for unpaid carers, Carers Scotland (2025)

^{iv} Where are we now? Health and Wellbeing Experiences and Supports for Black and Minority Ethnic Unpaid Carers across Scotland, MECOPP, Heriot Watt University and Oxfam Scotland (June 2025)

^v Exploring unpaid carers' experiences of short breaks and respite care, Shared Care Scotland (2025)

^{vi} State of Caring 2023: A health and social care crisis for carers in Scotland, Carers Scotland (2023)

^{vii} Exploring unpaid carers' experiences of short breaks and respite care, Shared Care Scotland (2025)

^{viii} *ibid*

^{ix} Scotland's Census 2022

^x Caring about Equality, Carers Week 2025

^{xi} Exploring unpaid carers' experiences of short breaks and respite care, Shared Care Scotland (2025)

^{xii} *ibid*

^{xiii} Caring about Equality, Carers Week 2025