

Research Briefing

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Local authority support for unpaid carers in England



Summary

- 1 Support for unpaid carers
- 2 Past and future government policy

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Summary

This briefing provides information on local authority support for unpaid carers in England, including young carers and parent carers of disabled children.

Carer's assessments

Under the [Care Act 2014](#), unpaid adult carers caring for another adult are entitled to a local authority assessment of their support needs. Where a carer is found to have needs that meet [national eligibility criteria](#), the local authority has a duty to meet those needs. This may be through support provided directly to the carer or via help provided to the person being cared for – for example, [respite care](#).

Similarly, a local authority has a [duty under the Children Act 1989](#) to carry out an assessment if it considers that a parent carer of a disabled child may have support needs, or if a parent carer requests one. Following an assessment, the local authority must decide whether the parent has needs for support and, if so, whether those needs could be met by services provided under [section 17 of the Children Act 1989](#).

Following a change to the law, since 2015 [young carers have had the same right to an assessment of their needs](#) as parent carers of disabled children. As well as deciding if the young carer has needs that can be met by services provided under the Children Act, the assessment must consider whether it is appropriate for the child to be providing care considering their own needs.

Government policy

In June 2008, the then Labour government published [a ten-year national carers strategy](#). In March 2016, the previous government launched a [call for evidence](#) on what should be included in a planned new carers strategy for England. However, the government subsequently [decided against publishing a standalone carers strategy](#) (PDF), planning instead to include carers in a then expected green paper on adult social reform. It did, however, publish a [carer's action plan the period 2018 to 2020](#).

Unpaid carers and social care reform

On 1 December 2021, the then government published a white paper on adult social care reform: [People at the Heart of Care](#). This said the government

would “build on the foundations of the carers action plan” and set out several specific commitments, including £25 million to work with the sector to “kick start a change in the services provided to support unpaid carers.” This funding was provided as part of the [Accelerated Reform Fund for adult social care](#) in October 2023.

As part of [proposed reforms to children’s social care](#), published in February 2023, the previous government set out plans to launch a ‘Families First for Children Pathfinder’ programme in up to 12 local areas in England over the following two years.

Among other things, the pathfinders were intended to test a new Family Help service, which would provide “intensive multi-disciplinary support” to families. The government said the pathfinders would test how to tailor the support provided to different children and families, including young carers.

Labour Government policy

The [Labour Party’s manifesto for the 2024 general election](#) did not specifically refer to unpaid carers. However, it did set out a commitment to undertake a long-term programme of reform to create a National Care Service, underpinned by national standards and based on a principle of supporting people to live independently for as long as possible.

1 Support for unpaid carers

In this briefing “unpaid carer” is used to refer to someone who provides help without payment to a friend, family member or neighbour needing support, perhaps due to illness, older age, disability, a mental health condition or an addiction.¹ It does not include care provided as part of a person’s job, or as voluntary work.

The briefing provides information on local authority support for unpaid carers, including young carers and parent carers of disabled children. The final section provides a brief overview of government policy.

1.1 Adults caring for other adults

Carer’s assessments

Under section 10 of the [Care Act 2014](#), where an adult caring for another adult in England appears to have a need for support the local authority must conduct a carer’s assessment.²

National rules on who is eligible for support are set out in [The Care and Support \(Eligibility Criteria\) Regulations 2015](#). Under the regulations, a carer’s needs are eligible if:

1. They arise as a consequence of providing necessary care for an adult.
2. As a result of their needs, the carer’s physical or mental health is at risk of deteriorating, or they are unable to achieve any of several specified outcomes (including, for example, carrying out caring responsibilities for a child, or engaging in work, training, education or volunteering).
3. As a consequence, there is, or is likely to be, a significant impact on their wellbeing.³

A carer’s needs are only eligible where they meet all three of these conditions.

¹ Department of Health and Social Care, [How can we improve support for carers?: Government response to the 2016 carers call for evidence](#) (PDF), June 2018, p4

² [Care Act 2014](#), section 10

³ [The Care and Support \(Eligibility Criteria\) Regulations 2015, SI2015/313, regulation 3](#)

Further information on the eligibility criteria is available in paragraphs 6.116 to 6.134 of the [Care and Support Statutory Guidance](#), published by the Department of Health and Social Care.⁴

Under section 20 of the Care Act 2014, where a local authority assesses that a carer has eligible needs, they have a duty to meet those needs (providing the carer asks them to).⁵ Where meeting the carer's needs involves providing care and support to the adult needing care, the adult must agree to the carer's needs being met in this way.⁶

A local authority has a power but not a duty to meet needs that do not meet the national eligibility criteria.⁷

Further information on [having a carer's assessment](#) is available on the website for the charity, Carers UK.⁸

Meeting support needs

Where a local authority is required or decides to meet a carer's needs, it must prepare a support plan setting out how those needs are going to be met.⁹ Carer's UK explains that the support provided could include things like:

- technology to support the carer, such as a mobile phone or a computer
- help with housework or gardening
- help to relieve stress, improve health and promote wellbeing such as gym membership¹⁰

A local authority may also meet a carer's support needs by providing help to the person in need of care. This could include the provision of respite care, which allows a carer to take a break from caring, while the person they care for is looked after by someone else. There are several respite care options, including, for example, a short stay in a care home or having a volunteer sit with the person for a few hours.¹¹

Further information on respite care is available via the following links:

- Age UK, [Respite care: having a break from caring](#).¹²

⁴ DHSC, [Care and Support Statutory Guidance](#), 27 January 2022

⁵ [Care Act 2014](#), section 20.

⁶ [Care Act 2014](#), section 20.

⁷ [Care Act 2014](#), section 20.

⁸ Carers UK, [Having a carer's assessment](#), April 2024.

⁹ [Care Act 2014](#), sections 24 and 25.

¹⁰ Carer's UK, [Assessments: Your guide to getting help and support in England](#), April 2024.

¹¹ NHS, [Carers' breaks and respite care](#) (last accessed 24 May 2023)

¹² Age UK, [Respite care: having a break from caring](#) (last accessed 25 May 2022)

- Carers UK, [Taking a break](#).¹³

Other examples of the kind of help that could be provided to the person being cared for include:

- changes to their home to make it more suitable
- laundry services
- meals delivered to their home¹⁴

The local authority may provide services themselves or arrange services from a third party. Alternatively, a carer or the person they are caring for, can request direct payments. These are monetary payments made to individuals to meet some or all of their assessed eligible care and support needs.

Further information on direct payments is provided in chapter 12 of the [Care and Support Statutory Guidance](#), and in section 2.4 of the [Library briefing on paying for adult social care in England](#).¹⁵

Paying for support

Where a local authority is meeting a carer's needs by providing a service directly to them, it has the power to charge the carer. However, a local authority is prohibited from charging a carer for care and support provided to the person being cared for (the person in receipt of care could be charged depending on the circumstances).¹⁶

If an authority wishes to charge a carer for meeting their needs (whether eligible or not) it must carry out a financial assessment of what they can afford to pay. The [Library briefing on paying for social care support](#) provides further information.¹⁷

The [care and support statutory guidance](#) states that in many cases it will be a false economy to charge a carer for the provision of support. It explains that, while charging may be appropriate in some circumstances, “excessive charges are likely to lead to carers refusing support, which in turn will lead to carer breakdown and local authorities having to meet more eligible needs of people currently cared for voluntarily.”¹⁸

¹³ Carers UK, [Taking a break](#), (last accessed 25 May 2022)

¹⁴ Carers UK, [Assessments: Your guide to getting help and support in England](#), April 2024.

¹⁵ Department of Health and Social Care, [Care and Support Statutory Guidance](#), March 2024, chapter 12; Commons Library briefing CBP-1911, [Paying for adult social care in England](#).

¹⁶ [Care Act 2014](#), sections, 17 & 24–25

¹⁷ Commons Library briefing CBP-1911, [Paying for adult social care in England](#)

¹⁸ Department of Health and Social Care, [Care and support statutory guidance](#), March 2024, para 8.49-8.51.

1.2

Parent carers of disabled children

Support for children in need

Under section 17 of the [Children Act 1989](#), local authorities have a duty “to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need” by providing appropriate services. Disabled children are included within the definition of children in need.¹⁹

The act specifies the range of services that can be made available for a child in need. These include (but are not limited to):

- occupational, social, cultural, or recreational activities
- home help
- assistance to enable the child and their family to have a holiday
- assistance in kind or in cash²⁰

Any of the services listed in the act (except day care or care or supervised activities) may be provided to any member of the child in need’s family, “if it is provided with a view to safeguarding or promoting the child’s welfare.”²¹

Local authorities may charge what they consider reasonable for providing services to a child in need and their family (but not for advice, guidance or counselling). Local authorities are not, however, under a duty to charge for services and they may not charge more than a person can “reasonably be expected to pay.”²²

A Library briefing provides more information on [local authority support for children in need](#).²³

Parent carer’s needs assessments

If a local authority considers a parent carer of a disabled child may have support needs, it must carry out a “parent carer’s needs assessment” under section 17ZD of the Children Act 1989. Such an assessment must also be carried out if the parent carer requests one. The duty to carry out an assessment only applies where the local authority is satisfied the child and their family are classed as in need under section 17 of the act (see above).²⁴

¹⁹ [Children Act 1989](#), section 17

²⁰ [Children Act 1989](#), section 17 and schedule 2

²¹ [Children Act 1989](#), section 17(3)

²² [Children Act 1989](#), section 29

²³ Commons Library briefing CBP-7730, [Local authority support for children in need \(England\)](#)

²⁴ [Children Act 1989](#), section 17ZD.

Following an assessment, the local authority must decide whether the parent has needs for support and, if so, whether these needs could be met by services under section 17.²⁵

Carers of disabled children who do not have parental responsibility²⁶ for the child do not have a right to an assessment under the Children Act 1989. However, they can request an assessment under section 1 of the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995. Such carers must show they are providing, or intend to provide, “a substantial amount of care on a regular basis.”²⁷

Further information is available via the following charity factsheets:

- Contact, [Carers assessments – help for parent carers](#) (PDF).²⁸
- Carers UK, [Having a carer's assessment](#), April 2024.²⁹

Short breaks

Under Schedule 2 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities are required to provide services designed to “assist individuals who provide care for [disabled] children to continue to do so, or to do so more effectively, by giving them breaks from caring”.³⁰ Under [The Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011](#), local authorities must produce a short breaks services statement setting out these services and the eligibility criteria for accessing them.³¹

Further information is available in guidance published by the Department for Education on [short break care: how local authorities should provide it](#).³²

1.3

Support for young carers

Before 1 April 2015 there was no legal provision in force specifically for young carers in England.³³ However, [section 96 of the Children and Families Act 2014](#) amended the Children Act 1989 to give young carers under the age of 18 the same right to a needs assessment as adult carers of disabled children.

As with assessments of adult carers, the assessment must decide whether the young carer has needs for support, and whether these could be satisfied by

²⁵ [Children Act 1989](#), section 17ZF.

²⁶ Commons Library briefing CBP-8760, [Parental responsibility in England and Wales](#).

²⁷ Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995, section 1; Carers UK, [Assessments: Your guide to getting help and support in England](#), pp17–18.

²⁸ Contact, [Carers Assessments – Help for Parent Carers](#), March 2021.

²⁹ Carers UK, [Having a carer's assessment](#), April 2024.

³⁰ [Children Act 1989](#), Schedule 2, paragraph 6.

³¹ [The Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011](#), SI 2011/707.

³² Department for Education, [Short break care: how local authorities should provide it](#), 24 March 2011.

³³ The [Carers and Disabled Children Act 2000](#) defined a carer as someone over 16.

services provided under section 17 of the Children Act. Among other things, the assessment must also consider whether it is appropriate for a child to provide care considering their own needs.³⁴

In addition, when carrying out a needs assessment of an adult under the Care Act 2014 (see above), local authorities must consider the impact of the person's needs on any child involved in providing care to them. The authority must also identify whether any tasks the child is performing are inappropriate given the circumstances.³⁵

Further information is available on the website of the charity, the Carers Trust at: [Getting support if you are a young carer or young adult carer](#).³⁶

³⁴ [Children Act 1989](#), section 17ZA, as inserted by [Children and Families Act 2014](#), section 96

³⁵ [The Care and Support \(Assessment\) Regulations 2014, SI 2014/2827](#)

³⁶ Carers Trust, [Getting support if you are a young carer or young adult carer](#)

2 Past and future government policy

2.1 Carers strategy and action plan (2008-2020)

In June 2008, the then Labour government published a ten-year national carers strategy.³⁷

In March 2016, the then Conservative government launched a call for evidence on what should be included in a planned new carers strategy for England.³⁸ However, in its response to the consultation, in June 2018, the government said it would not publish a carers strategy and carers would instead be included in the then expected green paper on adult social care reform (see section 2.2 below).³⁹

The government did publish a [Carers Action Plan 2018-20](#) setting out “a cross-government programme of work to improve support for carers”.⁴⁰ A one-year progress review on the action plan, which set out several further initiatives, was published in July 2019.⁴¹ Work on the action plan ended in December 2021. An annex to the white paper on adult social care reform (see section below), published in December 2021, set out some of the action plan’s “key achievements.”⁴²

2.2 Adult social care reform white paper (2021)

Background

As noted above, the previous government dropped plans for a standalone national carers strategy in preference to including carers’ issues in a green paper on social care reform.⁴³ However, the expected green paper was not published before the 2019 general election. Following the election, the government committed to bring forward proposals for adult social care

³⁷ HM Government, [The national carers strategy](#), June 2018

³⁸ Department of Health, [How can we improve support for carers?](#), 18 March 2016

³⁹ DHSC, [How can we improve support for carers? Government response to the 2016 carers call for evidence](#) (PDF), June 2018, pp5-6

⁴⁰ DHSC, [Carers action plan 2018 to 2020](#), June 2018, p7

⁴¹ DHSC, [Carers action plan 2018 to 2020: 1-year progress review](#), July 2019, pp23-4

⁴² DHSC, [People at the Heart of Care: adult social care reform white paper](#), 1 December 2021, Annex B, pp101-103

⁴³ PQ 196242 [[on Carers](#)], 5 December 2018

reform before the end of 2020.⁴⁴ This deadline was subsequently pushed back to the end of 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁵

The adult social care white paper

On 1 December 2021, the government published the [People at the Heart of Care](#) white paper on adult social care reform.⁴⁶

The white paper set out a range of policies aimed at “empowering unpaid carers” who, it said, can “find it difficult to find support they may be entitled to, and in some cases feel that the support on offer is insufficient to maintain their own health and wellbeing, support their employment, and achieve outcomes that matter to them.”⁴⁷

The white paper said the government would “build on the foundations of the Carers Action Plan” to set out a new approach based on three strands:

- 1) Working with the sector to kick start a change in the services provided to support unpaid carers
- 2) Identifying, recognising and involving unpaid carers
- 3) Supporting the economic and social participation of unpaid carers.⁴⁸

Specific commitments included:

- £25 million to work with the sector to “kick start a change in the services provided to support unpaid carers.” The government said this funding would “identify and test a range of new and existing interventions that support unpaid carers, which could include respite and breaks, peer group and wellbeing support.”⁴⁹ The funding was provided as part of the [Accelerating Reform Fund for adult social care](#), launched in October 2023.⁵⁰
- A new duty on Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) to involve carers when exercising their commissioning functions. This duty was included in the [Health and Care Act 2022](#) and came into force from 1 July 2022.⁵¹
- Amending the school census to include young carers. The white paper said this would “raise the visibility of young carers” and allow for greater

⁴⁴ BBC, [The Big Interviews: Boris Johnson on BBC Breakfast, \(at 16 minutes 25 seconds\)](#), 14 January 2020

⁴⁵ PQ 64976 [[on Social Services: Reform](#)], 2 July 2020; PQ 59766 [[on Social Services](#)], 22 June 2020; Prime Minister’s Office, [Queen’s Speech 2021: background briefing notes](#), 11 May 2021

⁴⁶ DHSC, [People at the Heart of Care: adult social care reform white paper](#), 1 December 2021

⁴⁷ [As above](#), para 5.1

⁴⁸ [As above](#), para 5.24

⁴⁹ [As above](#), para 5.26

⁵⁰ DHSC, [Accelerating Reform Fund for adult social care](#), October 2023; [HL Deb 12 March 2023, c1894](#)

⁵¹ DHSC, [People at the Heart of Care: adult social care reform white paper](#), 1 December 2021; [Health and Care Act 2022, section 25](#); [National Health Service Act 2006](#), section 14Z45

understanding of the impact of caring on educational attainment, attendance and absenteeism.⁵² This change was made in 2023.⁵³

- Increasing the voluntary use of unpaid carer markers in NHS electronic health records. The white paper described the ability to identify carers as “crucial for recognising and supporting unpaid carers and improving policy making.”⁵⁴

1 Reforming how people pay for adult social care

In addition to the reform plans set out in the December 2021 white paper, in September 2021 the government [set out plans to reform how people pay for adult social care in England](#) (PDF). The proposals included the introduction of an £86,000 cap on the amount anyone would have to pay towards their personal care over their lifetime. The means test for accessing local authority funding support would also be made more generous.

The government originally planned for the reforms to be implemented from October 2023. However, at the [Autumn Statement 2022](#), it announced they would be delayed by two years to October 2025.⁵⁵

In a [statement on 29 July 2024](#), the Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, said the current government had “inherited a projected overspend of £22 billion” for the 2024/25 financial year. The Chancellor set out several projects that would be cancelled in order to reduce spending by £5.5 billion in 2024/25 and £8 billion in 2025/26.

Among other things, the Chancellor said the government would not take forward the proposed charging reforms, which, she said, would “save over £1 billion by the end of next year”.⁵⁶

A [Library briefing provides further information on the reform proposals](#), including their cancellation.⁵⁷

One-year progress report

On 4 April 2023, the government published a policy paper setting out progress made in implementing the December 2021 white paper’s proposals: [Next steps to put People at the Heart of Care](#).⁵⁸ The paper also provided information on the allocation of funding announced in the white paper.

⁵² DHSC, [People at the Heart of Care: adult social care reform white paper](#), 1 December 2021, p61

⁵³ [PQ 20437 \[schools: carers\]](#), 19 April 2024

⁵⁴ [As above](#), para 5.32

⁵⁵ [HC Deb 17 November 2022, c850](#)

⁵⁶ [HC Deb 29 July 2024, cc1044-1037](#).

⁵⁷ Commons Library briefing CBP-9315, [Proposed reforms to adult social care \(including cap on care costs\)](#)

⁵⁸ DHSC, [Next steps to put People at the Heart of Care](#), 4 April 2023

The paper said the government was taking steps towards implementing a new survey of unpaid carers which would address “gaps in the evidence base surrounding the circumstance, experience and needs of unpaid carers in England.” It also said the government would commission an evaluation of support provide to unpaid carers, funded through the [Better Care Fund](#). It said the intention was that the evaluation would “help inform local decision-making around what to commission and how to deliver effective support services for unpaid carers, as well as national policymaking.”⁵⁹

2.3 Children’s social care reform strategy (2023)

On 2 February 2023, the government published an implementation strategy and consultation on children’s social care reform, [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#) (referred to below as “the strategy”).⁶⁰ This formed the government’s response to the [Independent Review of Children’s Social Care](#), which it had launched in January 2021.⁶¹

The strategy said the government would provide £45 million to launch a ‘Families First for Children Pathfinder’ programme in up to 12 local areas in England over the following two years.

Among other things, the pathfinders would test a new Family Help service, which would provide “intensive multi-disciplinary support” to families facing significant challenges in a non-stigmatising way.”⁶²

The strategy said the pathfinders would test how to tailor the support provided to different children and families, including young carers.⁶³

In July 2023, the government [announced that Dorset, Lincolnshire and Wolverhampton would take part in the first wave of pathfinders](#).⁶⁴ The nine local authorities that would take part in the second wave were announced in April 2024.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ DHSC, [Next steps to put People at the Heart of Care](#), 4 April 2023

⁶⁰ Department for Education, [Children's social care: stable homes, built on love](#), 2 February 2023

⁶¹ The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, [Final Report](#), May 2022; Department for Education, [Education Secretary launches review of children’s social care](#), 15 January 2021; [HCWS717](#), 18 January 2021

⁶² Department for Education, [Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation: Children’s Social Care Reform 2023](#), February 2023, pp16-17

⁶³ Department for Education, [Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation: Children’s Social Care Reform 2023](#), February 2023, pp37 and 46-48

⁶⁴ Department for Education, [Transformation to children's social care to put families first](#), 26 July 2023; Department for Education, [Families first for children \(FFC\) pathfinder programme](#), 10 November 2023

⁶⁵ Department for Education, [Apply to become a families first for children pathfinder area](#), 10 November 2023

More generally, the strategy noted concerns about the difficulties families face trying to access support for disabled children and made several commitments “to strengthen and improve” the support provided.⁶⁶

It also said the government would work with the Law Commission to review the legislation on providing help to disabled children and their families.⁶⁷ The Law Commission started preliminary work on the review with an aim to publish a consultation in summer 2024.⁶⁸

Further information is provided in the [Library briefing on reform of children’s social care in England](#).⁶⁹

2.4 Labour government policy

The Labour Party’s manifesto for the 2024 general election did not specifically refer to unpaid carers.⁷⁰ However, on adult social care it said a Labour government would “undertake a programme of reform to create a National Care Service, underpinned by national standards, delivering consistency of care across the country.” It added that “services will be locally delivered, with a principle of ‘home first’ that supports people to live independently for as long as possible.”⁷¹

In an interview during the election campaign, Wes Streeting, now Health and Social Care Secretary, said it would “take 10 years to build the kind of national care service that I think will last this country the best part of the next century.”⁷²

⁶⁶ Department for Education, [Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation: Children’s Social Care Reform 2023](#), February 2023, p26; Department for Education, [Children’s Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Consultation Response](#) (PDF), September 2023, pp16-18

⁶⁷ Department for Education, [Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation: Children’s Social Care Reform 2023](#), February 2023, p17

⁶⁸ Law Commission, [Review into 50-year-old laws on social care for disabled children](#), 17 October 2023; Law Commission, [Disabled Children’s Social Care](#)

⁶⁹ Commons Library briefing CBP-9818, [Reform of children’s social care in England](#)

⁷⁰ Health Foundation, [Social care after the general election: will anything change?](#), 28 June 2024

⁷¹ Labour Party, [Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024](#), p100

⁷² Independent, [Streeting promises social care costs cap despite absence from Labour manifesto](#), 14 June 2024

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