

## Adult Social Care and Health Select Committee

# Scrutiny Review of Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service

### Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the Adult Social Care and Health Select Committee's scrutiny review of Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service.
- 1.2 The Care Act 2014 gave carers the same legal right to assessment and support as the person they care for. The most recent Census 2021 found that there were 5.8 million unpaid carers in the UK, with 1.7 million of these people providing 50 or more hours of care per week ([Key facts and figures | Carers UK](#)).
- 1.3 Carers play a substantial and vital role in meeting social care needs, with the cost of replacement care locally for Stockton-on-Tees having previously been estimated to be around £464 million annually. From an early intervention and prevention perspective, addressing the needs of carers enables Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) to delay or possibly avert the need for complex and costly social care interventions, and by sustaining carers within their caring role, the stability of local adult health and social care services is supported. Identifying and providing support to these individuals is not just mandated by the Care Act 2014, but a sound economic and socially responsible decision (which may also prevent carers themselves needing services in their own right). Providing information, advice and support to carers ensures they promote their own wellbeing, carer breakdown is prevented, and resilient communities are established.
- 1.4 The local Adult Carers Support Service was brought in-house to SBC in January 2018 and works with adults who are providing informal care and support for adults across the Borough. Since then, the service has developed significantly, with over 5,000 referrals during this time. As of June 2025, it was working with 3,200 unpaid carers within Stockton-on-Tees, offering ongoing advice, information and support alongside statutory carers assessments, support planning, carers personal budgets, and time-out assistance. SBC are also supporting nearly 2,000 carers with a direct payment, which amounts to a projected spend of £550,000 for this provision in this financial year.
- 1.5 Whilst the existing offer was considered to be effective, it was felt that it would be of benefit for the service to be scrutinised to provide assurance around its current delivery. It was hoped that this review would help highlight any gaps in the service and, in turn, help shape future developments for local provision. Also, the Committee's work could lead to the following efficiencies, improvements and / or transformation:
  - **Primary:** To understand the impact of the carers service on promoting the wellbeing and needs of unpaid carers, identifying where the service was reaching its objective and where future focus needed to be concentrated to improve service delivery / satisfaction for carers.
  - **Secondary:** To understand and identify where partnership working could be improved to promote the rights and needs of carers, ensuring they were being treated as expert partners and identified for support when required.

- 1.6 Caring for someone, particularly for those with greater needs, can be incredibly hard. It has the potential to have a profound and lasting impact which can affect an individual's physical and mental health, and compromise their ability to hold down employment (previous Carers UK research found that around 600 people per day were giving up work to care) or enjoy leisure / social activities. As well as the stress and worry over supporting a person close to them, caring roles can also result in adverse financial implications for those involved.
- 1.7 The Committee found that national estimates on the number of those carrying out an unpaid caring role vary (the most recent Census 2021 suggested that there were 5.8 million unpaid carers in the UK), and it is well acknowledged that ascertaining an accurate figure is challenging given many individuals do not view their support of a loved one as 'providing care'. That said, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) stated that there were approximately 20,000 unpaid carers across the Borough, which represents around 10% of the total population of Stockton-on-Tees. Given there were a total of around 3,500 carers open to the local Adult Carers Support Service in 2024, there appears to be significant potential for an increase in demand for the existing offer should a proportion of these people seek help.
- 1.8 The Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service is a key feature of the Council's offer of support for the Borough's adult carers. Annual referrals have continually escalated from around 450 in 2018 (when SBC made the decision to bring the service in-house) to nearly 700 in 2024, with a subsequent increase in associated funding to manage this demand. The service provides a range of bespoke support, is widely promoted across the Council's various print and electronic platforms, and also works with external organisations to emphasise the importance of supporting carers and how SBC can assist. A crucial and much appreciated element of the local offer is the 'Time Out' service which gives carers up to eight hours of ad-hoc support per month free-of-charge, allowing them a break from their caring role.
- 1.9 The Council's ongoing work with Mobilise (the UK's digital platform for unpaid carers) was highlighted to the Committee which had helped to provide a range of free online services, as well as identify hidden carers. Given the recent decision to extend this partnership beyond the current contract deadline of April 2026, SBC will need to ensure it has the necessary quality and performance controls in place to monitor the effectiveness of this arrangement. Moving forward, SBCs work around its digital offer for clients and their carers will provide an opportunity to review any future arrangements with external providers with regard to this support.
- 1.10 In terms of wider health considerations around carers, NHS North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB) personnel drew attention to the legal requirement (under the Health and Care Act 2022) for the NHS to involve unpaid carers in decisions about the care and treatment of the individuals they supported (this included participation in the planning and delivery of care, as well as in discharge planning from hospital settings). Whilst the ICB did not have any direct responsibilities in this area, it did work collaboratively at a local level with Local Authority and 'system' partners (including operational teams to ensure clinical pathways considered carers) to support the adult carers agenda, and the NENC ICB / ICP Joint Strategy specified a key programme aim of 'working to identify and support more people who are providing unpaid care within the region'. From a general practice perspective, 4,741 individuals had been identified as a 'carer' or 'cares for a relative' – the Council should consider how best it can promote the local Adult Carers Support Service within these settings, as well as being mindful that improvements in carer-identification may ultimately result in more demand on the existing offer.

- 1.11 North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust (NTHFT) provided extensive evidence on the ways in which it considered carers (recognising them as partners in care) and promoted local support services. The recently implemented 'Carers Charter' was an encouraging development which should now be embedded and continually reinforced to staff and patients. NTHFT also highlighted the need for thinking around how the Trust's community services / teams were targeted in relation to carers, particularly given the number of people involved in a caring role was likely to continue increasing.
- 1.12 The Committee fully supports the acknowledgement from SBC of the need for an open culture to encourage engagement and listening with carers, and several examples were given demonstrating this endeavour. Whilst the response rate to the latest annual carers consultation survey was limited, important themes were nevertheless identified (including the value of peer support), and the Committee look forward to learning more about how the actions taken in light of this feedback have enhanced the local offer.
- 1.13 The Committee undertook its own engagement with local carers by visiting the LiveWell Dementia Hub in November 2025. The importance of being able to easily access carer-related services (aided by up-to-date contact details) and having the opportunity to share experiences with those who are going through the same challenges was reiterated, and it was clear that the ability to meet in-person (within a welcoming environment which provided an excellent source of carer-related information) was hugely valued, as was the Council's Time Out service. Regarding the latter, the Committee note the request from carers for more flexibility around the booking process (currently having to give over a month's notice which could be difficult as personal appointments were not always predictable), though commends the new 'Time Out Together' element which has the potential to benefit a greater number of those in a caring role (allowing multiple carers to have a break at the same time whilst their loved one partakes in group activities / games). Ensuring the Time Out offer is as efficient and effective as possible should be a cornerstone of the future service moving forward.
- 1.14 Recognising the Borough's young carers and the importance of their transition into adult support services, the Committee was pleased to receive a very informative contribution from Eastern Ravens Trust (a local charity supporting young carers within Stockton-on-Tees). Feedback from young carers highlighted concerns about dealing with change, how appropriate the local Adult Carers Support Service was for young adults, and a lack of knowledge of such an offer after they had reached adulthood – this suggests there is work to do to promote the options available to them once they reach the end of their time with Eastern Ravens (this should be helped through the already established relationships between the young carers and adult carers services), as well as making this offer as appealing as possible for those transitioning into it. The creation of some form of dedicated 'young adult' carers service / element may be more justifiable if there is an increase in the number of individuals aged 18-24 requesting / accessing support (as of early-November 2025, just 38 out of the 3,100+ carers open to the Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service were in this age bracket).
- 1.15 In October 2025, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) published its final report following the late-2024 inspection of SBC adult social care services, and carer-related commentary was shared with the Committee for the purposes of this review (as was relevant feedback from the Local Government Association (LGA) peer assurance challenge of SBC Adult Social Care that was undertaken in July 2024 in preparation for the anticipated CQC inspection). The regulator's findings, whilst broadly positive, did highlight some concerns around the availability of information on support for unpaid carers, as well as the Council's own acknowledgement of the need for further work to both identify these individuals and fully understand their needs. Clarity around improvements to the information and advice offer

for people who were funding their own care, and in relation to the ongoing work to reshape the Council's 'front door', was also noted.

1.16 The CQC report also referenced national data from the Survey of Adult Carers in England (SACE, June 2024) which showed that:

- 90.7% of carers found information and advice from SBC helpful (better than the England average of 85.22%)
- 75% of carers engaged with the Local Authority said they found it easy to access information and advice (significantly better than the England average of 59.06%)
- more carers in Stockton-on-Tees (47.83%) were satisfied with support they received than the England average (36.83%)

However, there were also areas to work on, with outcomes from the same survey indicating:

- more could be done to improve the respite offer to unpaid carers
- more carers locally (34%) were unable to maintain paid employment because of their caring duties compared to the England average (26.7%)
- only 25.19% of carers said they were accessing a support group or someone to talk to in confidence (which was worse than the England average of 32.98%)

Encouragingly, the CQC concluded that the Council had 'a clear vision and strategy for adult social care which sought to improve outcomes for people with care and support needs, unpaid carers and reduce inequalities of experience and outcomes for people in the local area'. The Committee is therefore keen to understand how SBC proposes to respond to the regulator's feedback and, in related matters, encourages the Council to continue efforts to raise the profile of those staff working on the frontline / 'front door' of these support services.

1.17 Wider research demonstrated a range of approaches and initiatives regarding support for adult carers across the UK, some of which are already a feature of the local offer. Several carer-related good practice guides were also brought to the attention of the Committee, with the Council's Time Out service highlighted by the Carers Trust as a positive example in providing short breaks for carers. Increasing acknowledgement of the importance and role of unpaid carers will likely encourage the publication of further material which SBC should seek and consider as part of the ongoing development of the local support service.

1.18 The Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service is clearly a highly valued and crucial element within the Council's adult social care offer, attracting wider recognition and appreciation for what it provides. That said, evidence collected as part of this review has flagged areas for attention in relation to carer-identification, signposting to / promotion of support, transitioning of young carers into the adult service, the ability to meet demand as more carers request / require help, and the need for continuous evaluation of the local offer. Unpaid carers save local organisations a vast amount of money – as such, despite the ongoing financial limitations on the Council, they must be supported as much as possible. Those accessing the service have reported very positive experiences – the challenge is ensuring this can be of benefit to a greater number of carers, many of whom remain hidden.

## **Recommendations**

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) In terms of general Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service development, SBC should:**
  - a) Ensure measures are put in place as part of the review of the Council's 'front door' to strengthen identification of carers and the promotion of the local support offer (including the Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service).**
  - b) Ascertain and consider the findings from the London School of Economics and Political Science (Care Policy and Evaluation Centre) research project on what support combinations help improve carers' lives and what works to facilitate availability of and access to this support.**
  - c) Consider ways to increase the response rate for its annual carers consultation survey.**
- 2) Regarding the partnership with Mobilise (the UK's digital platform for unpaid carers), SBC should:**
  - a) Develop its own in-house digital support offer for local carers to build on / complement the services available through this external provider.**
  - b) Ensure it has the necessary quality and performance controls in place (including the need to report on measurable targets) to monitor the effectiveness of this arrangement.**
  - c) Seek to understand any separate arrangements that Council's outside the North East have with Mobilise and whether these enhance the offer to carers more than the ongoing partnership with the 10 North East Local Authorities.**
- 3) In relation to the Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service 'Time Out' element, SBC should:**
  - a) Complete an internal review of the booking system to identify ways of creating more flexibility for carers when requested a break from their caring role.**
  - b) Consider whether it would be appropriate to introduce a standing / means-tested charge for the service to broaden this for more carers going forward, enabling greater sustainability of its provision and importance (as identified via the LGA Peer Assurance Challenge of SBC Adult Social Care in July 2024).**
- 4) Promotion of the Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service offer to young carers should be strengthened so they are more informed about the support available to them when they reach 18.**

*(continued overleaf...)*

**Recommendations (continued)**

The Committee recommend that:

- 5) **Consideration should be given to the ways in which the Stockton-on-Tees Adult Carers Support Service can build on what appeals to young carers when they approach / reach 18 so they are more compelled to seek support in their caring role when they become young adults.**
- 6) **The new carers awareness e-learning module be rolled out to SBC staff, Members and external partners.**
- 7) **SBC further considers how the local support offer for carers can be promoted within the wider health system (including general practices and community settings).**
- 8) **SBC provides a response to the Committee on the carer-related commentary included within the Care Quality Commission (CQC) final report on SBC adult social care (published in October 2025).**