

Handled with Care

Manchester Carers Forum

Introduction

While caring for people with health problems including diseases and chronic illnesses is a natural human response, some bear the burden more than others. Often these are the responsibilities of a parent caring for a child with difficulties. But sometimes managing the household, medication and the responsibilities of an adult life must fall on the small shoulders of a child. These responsibilities can place immense mental, physical and emotional strain on carers. The value of this invisible and unpaid workforce has been estimated at £87bn, yet carers' relationship with public services remains unclear and undefined.

Carers require individualised support that isn't restricted or policed by the public sector, support that recognises the varying nature of human relationships.

How can we appropriately recognise the act of care within families and communities? How can carers be empowered to offer a high quality of care? How can we support our carers?

Origins of the project

The Manchester Carers Forum provides support for people who are caring for patients with a variety of diseases, conditions or chronic illnesses. The forum offers peer support, advice, mentoring and breaks for carers. It acts as 'the voice of the carer', which challenges, informs and educates services, institutions and policy makers. The forum's aim is to ensure that carers' interests and priorities are recognised and included in service planning and commissioning decisions.

The forum was established as an independent charity in 2001 by carers from Manchester. From 1993 the Forum had been a project managed by the Gaddum Centre. Today the organisation comprises six carer support groups operating in North, Central and South Manchester, including two based in GP centres. The forum has 3,000 members, 35 volunteers, including trustees, and seven paid members of staff, many of whom bring lived experience as carers.

Partnership working

The forum has established strong relationships with the public sector. The forum leads an alliance of other care organisations to tender for work and at present have a contract with Manchester City Council, three Manchester-based Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Manchester Health and Social Care Trust.

Nationally, the forum is also linked to Carers UK, supporting their lobbying on behalf of the carers' movement. Its relatively large capacity enables it to visit other parts of the country to advise on how the Carers Forum works and how the model might be replicated in other places.

Approach and delivery

In addition to lobbying and representing carers' interests, the main work of the forum is offering support groups for carers across Manchester. The organisation offers one-to-one support through peer mentors, ideally working with carers before they reach crisis point.

The forum offers additional support for those with substance misuse problems; free legal consultations with a local solicitors' firm; and group respite breaks. It responds to the challenges of **caring** by providing computer skills sessions for **carers**, and running a dementia **carers** peer mentoring and befriending project.

Education is a third important strand of activity. Some carers are involved in the training of social workers and provide placements for them. A number of the forum's trustees engage with the University of Manchester in their Assessed Readiness for Direct Practice training. As a result of these links, a 'frailty tool' for use in the community is being developed in partnership with a company called Intelesant.

Success and outcomes

A crude calculation – based on 16 hours per week at minimum wage levels – suggests that the forum members potentially provide care that is worth around £15m a year, before any employer costs. This is 50 times the forum's present turnover of £300,000, funded from various sources, including The Local Authority, the three Clinical Commissioning Groups, the Mental Health and Social Care Trust and private sector grants.

The growth of the forum offers evidence of its success in its activity: more people are coming to the organisation for help, there is greater capacity to offer support, strong connections have been developed across ethnic, cultural, geographic and disability boundaries, there is a greater credibility with partners and as a result there are good links which support signposting to other services. Long-term objectives are also being realised, with 20 MA students trained in social work.

Future plans

Despite the forum's growth, the reduction in funding from the local authority since 2010 is forcing it to look to other sources of funding, such as Children In Need and independent trusts. Changes to ways of working are being considered.

Conclusion

The activity and determination of Manchester Carers' Forum is both a support for carers and a reminder to public services and politicians of the essential work they do. The support network offered by the forum ensures that carers are able to build their own resilience and capacity.

Researchers Shona Johnstone, Robin Millar