This policy brief draws on the experience of three local authorities that were members of the Employers for Carers (Carers UK) forum (in England and Wales) or recognised as a Carer Positive Employer (in Scotland). These local authorities had between 5000 and 6500 employees each. We asked them about well-established initiatives to support working carers and if they would recommend them to others.

Mandy Cook draws on her ongoing research to explore support for employees who combine paid work with unpaid care in local authorities.
EMERGING FINDINGS

All three local authorities were taking different, innovative approaches to support their employees with caring responsibilities, while continuing to meet the diverse needs of their authority and local citizens. One has a Carers Policy that sets out a variety of options for leave that its working carers can access. The leave options are flexible to meet the needs of the employee and the needs of the service. Periods of care leave are counted as continuous service for contractual purposes. Options in the authority include:

- **Emergency Carer’s Leave (paid)** - usually short term, maximum 3 working days per leave year.
- **Carer’s leave (paid)** - up to 5 working days per leave year – this is in addition to Emergency Carer’s Leave. The leave can be used flexibly in either full or half days, and/or as occasional ‘per hour’ times, e.g. for administering medication or to attend hospital appointments.
- **Carer’s leave (unpaid)** - up to 12 weeks in one leave year (time must be requested in blocks of no less than one week).
- **Carer’s leave (Terminal ill health – paid)** - up to 6 months if the employee is supporting someone with terminal ill health.
- **Additional annual leave** – up to 2 weeks per year, taken as and when needed, can be purchased and paid for over the 12-month period.

The HR team in this local authority encourages managers and employees to treat carer’s leave (especially in a situation of terminal ill health) flexibly and to give employees the option of coming into work during this period of leave if they want to:

> “You know, if you can do afternoons during that time, come in and do that; that allows the carer again to assess what’s best for them and get that right balance. You know, because sometimes we do need that bit of normality as well. So, we offer that for up to 6 months, but obviously there’s flexibility around that for the employee to come into work, if they’re able to.”

HR team member

All three local authorities recognise the business benefits of providing support for employees with caring responsibilities, although these benefits are not measured or recorded. Benefits include less difficulty in recruiting and retaining skilled workers and/or organisational disruption and productivity losses due to staff absence, employee stress and high turnover.

Although all three local authorities believe the support they offer is sustainable, if benefits are not evidenced it may be difficult to build on this support in the future. For example, senior managers who supported the initial interventions may move on, and there may need to be evidence in place to encourage their successors to sustain similar practices. These potential difficulties were recognised by one of the local authorities which is an ‘umbrella member’ of Employers for Carers. ‘Umbrella’ membership gives small or medium-sized businesses (SMEs) the opportunity to engage with Employers for Carers and to access Employers for Carers resources via the local authority, which acts as a co-ordinating body:

> “I was keen to take up the Employers for Carers offer with Carers UK for umbrella membership and I thought the obvious thing to do was to get our own house in order, because inevitably businesses are going to ask what we do.”

Local Authority Manager

> “If anyone asks 6 months, a year, 2 years down the line, is it worthwhile and why do we do it, what would you be able to say? What would you be able to show by way of evidence? Because, like all of these things, you know, they happen because we have a supportive Executive Director and Chief Exec who see the sense of it. But like any organisation, things change and people change, so it’s always good if we can show why we do it and the effect of it.”

Local Authority Manager

All three local authorities with support in place for working carers said an effective **Communications Strategy** was important. Awareness-raising is one way of helping working carers to self-identify. Local authorities are large employers, with geographically dispersed workforce in a wide range of job roles. Some employees lack access to a work computer or the staff intranet. This has prompted these local authorities to think creatively and flexibly about ways of raising awareness. The steps they have taken include:

- **Staff roadshows** (timetabled across all the local authority’s sites) are seen as particularly valuable for connecting with employees who lack intranet...
Support for employees who combine paid work with unpaid care

access. One rural local authority uses community campuses as a venue: ‘because at least then we’ve got a base where more local employees can come into’ (HR team member).

• **Talking Head** (recorded discussion between two people about a particular topic): One local authority recorded and promoted one of their working carers with her line manager ‘talking about the impact a line manager’s support can have, and how they manage that within the team’ (HR team member).

• **Depot managers** (in waste and recycling services) produce their own newsletter for staff with no intranet access, in which information for about working carers can be included. They use noticeboards for promotional material and hold fortnightly meetings with staff to keep them ‘in the loop’ about all council developments, including support for working carers.

• **Carers Week and Carers Rights Day**: A regular communications campaign is arranged every 6 months to coincide with national Carers Week in June and Carers Rights Day in November¹.

**CHALLENGES**

All three leading local authorities see support for employees in front-line or customer-facing roles as a big challenge. They say line managers need to be creative in how they manage staff, and that this is vital to ensure business needs are met, and employees are supported appropriately:

“We have a teacher shortage, we have so many on supply, especially in the rural schools. I think that give and take is really important, and I think managers would try and be as accommodating as they possibly can be without putting a disruption to the service they’re providing.”  

HR team member

**DEBATES & IDEAS**

Partnership working is becoming important for local authorities in providing and improving support for working carers. Partnerships include all council departments, local carers centres and the NHS:

“We realised that maybe we were a bit blindsided with HR and just working as a silo in terms of carers and not thinking about how there’s other teams within the council looking at a Carers Strategy - but for the area rather than employees of the council. So, I’m going to be joining the Carers Strategy Focus Group, and I’m going to be going along to the next meeting to see how we can work together better. I’ll tap into them and they can tap into me, to share ideas as well.”  

Local Authority HR team member

One local authority had started to hold its **Staff Carers’ Network meeting** (peer-to-peer support) in the local carers centre, which for some employees, was the first contact they had with the centre, and the support offered. The carers centre also promotes the support that the local authority offers to its employees:

“A really good link with the Carers Centre is that occasionally they’ve got somebody in who is seeking support and if they know they’re an employee of the council then they can give advice about what support the council can offer.”  

HR team member

**KEY MESSAGES**

Based on this research, our ‘good practice’ recommendations are:

- **Think about introducing paid carer’s leave** within your local authority, which could be used by employees for things like attending necessary appointments (particularly health and social care appointments) with the person being cared for. Think about what you CAN do initially, e.g. introducing up to 5 half-days paid leave, and build on this over time.

- **Think about the sustainability of any workplace interventions** that you introduce to support working carers. Monitoring, evaluating and reviewing your approaches can ensure that policies are working, and are adapted and amended as needed to meet the needs of your local authority and the working carers you employ. Capturing business benefits is important, especially if senior leadership changes.

- **Don’t be deterred by budget constraints or lack of resources**. You can still put support in place for working carers. An effective communications strategy can be very valuable and won’t cost much, especially if it’s tied in with Carers Week in June and Carers Rights Day in November. For member
authorities, Carers UK and Carer Positive in Scotland can provide free promotional material, ideas for events, e.g. ‘Care for a Cuppa’ (Carers UK) and free promotion of your events on their websites. Making employees aware of carers’ legal rights in the workplace, and highlighting existing support within your local authority, is a good first step.

- **Be creative and adopt a ‘CAN-do’ attitude.** This will help in developing an inclusive and proactive approach to working carers. You can highlight the value your local authority places on staff who are carers and demonstrate that an open and supportive culture is fostered when employees feel able to take up the carer support provided.

- **Explore how partnership working could help** develop and improve your support for working carers. This could be your HR team working with other departments within the local authority, who can provide knowledge and expertise about support for carers, or looking at partnerships in the wider community, e.g. NHS or third sector organisations.

- **If your HR team lacks the resources to run a support group for employees,** encourage staff with caring responsibilities to set up their own support group, with initial support from HR, or to join an existing network, e.g. run by a local carers centre. Where carers are able to support each other, they are likely to feel less isolated. Members of the support group can also contribute ideas for any policy decisions, e.g. developing a Carers Policy. It is important to ensure that the views, opinions and needs of working carers are included and policies are fit for purpose.

1 **National Carers Week** is an annual campaign to raise awareness of caring, highlight the challenges carers face and recognise the contribution they make to families and communities throughout the UK, and usually takes place in June. **Carers Rights Day**, annually in November, is held by Carers UK to bring organisations across the UK together to help carers in their local community know their rights and find out how to get the help and support they are entitled to.

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### NEXT STEPS

- The **Sustainable Care Programme**’s research team studying **Combining work and care** will combine these findings about local authorities with our research findings on support for working carers in private sector organisations and central government departments.

- The research will examine the sustainability of care leave policies and their consequences for employees’ well-being and organisational effectiveness.

- Workshops will be arranged, with selected employers and other stakeholders, to explore progress, monitoring and success measurement tools designed to assess the business benefits of supporting working carers.

- The team will also develop a framework, linking working carers’ challenges to technological solutions (the “Working Carer’s Technology Toolkit”).

- The research findings will be disseminated to employer, employee, policy and practitioner audiences.

### ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This research focuses on how organisational effectiveness can be enhanced by modernising support for working carers, and is linked to the **Sustainable Care: connecting people and systems** programme. Modernising support for working carers is a major and growing issue impeding productivity and organisational effectiveness across all industrial sectors. This research engages with businesses alert to the benefits of eliminating unnecessary costs and of modernising workforce management by helping employees remain active and productive when caring for an older, sick or disabled person, and will extend this approach to a wider and more diverse range of organisations.

This policy brief was prepared by Mandy Cook, edited by Sue Yeandle and designed by Kelly Davidge.