

**Carers in your  
Workforce Matter**

---

5. How can I retain  
the skills of my  
employees who  
are carers?



As we have seen, the loss of any worker is expensive, disruptive and has an impact on the quality of service delivered. Particularly with direct care, people who use services and their families value a consistent relationship with one or two people, finding the constant change of staff unsettling and frustrating. Therefore, it makes business sense to retain staff and their skills. However, all too often workers with caring responsibilities, faced with mounting pressure and a lack of understanding from employers, feel they have no choice but to leave paid employment.



To be able to offer some solutions, it's important to understand what areas working carers may struggle with. These can be grouped as:

**Practical challenges**, these include:

- unpredictability in caring responsibilities
- finding out about – and securing - support for the person they are looking after
- interruptions to working day (i.e. telephone calls, appointments, sorting out care arrangements when they break down)
- finding out about – and securing – help for themselves as a carer
- accessing and arranging respite care.

**Psychological challenges**, these include:

- stress involved in juggling roles of caring and working if unsupported
- feelings of guilt for leaving the cared for person
- isolation/lack of support
- lack of confidence due to the pressures mentioned and the perception that they may be viewed 'differently' to other employees
- being less ambitious for themselves
- not wanting to change jobs if current employer is carer friendly.

**Systemic challenges**, these include:

- lack of understanding by institutions of the problems faced by carers
- organisational inertia
- assumptions that carers can't/don't want to be engaged in paid employment
- assumptions that carers can't retain skilled or responsible roles or that they are not interested in career advancement
- out-of-date or ill informed attitudes towards carers (for example, no knowledge or recognition of Carers Rights (see 'Carers Legal Rights; a Summary').

Here are some suggestions about what you could do to overcome some of these challenges:

- know who are carers in your workforce by seeking to identify them, for example by circulating information during Carers Week or by surveying your staff
- don't assume you know what would help - ask!
- use staff surveys, awareness raising events, one to one and team conversations to find out more about carers' support needs
- ensure you have the right information to help 'signpost' carers to local and national support (e.g. through a local carers centre or a national helpline)
- try describing 'what' a carer typically does in order to identify employees who are carers. The term 'carer' isn't one that all people recognise, understand or identify with and thus having descriptions and explanations of what you mean by this term can help with identification, both for your organisation and the employees within it
- include information about national and local sources of support for carers in staff handbooks and on the staff intranet. A directory of useful organisations is available on the Carers UK website **[www.carersuk.org](http://www.carersuk.org)**
- offer flexible arrangements such as flexible breaks, flexible starting/finishing times/job shares
- flexible leave arrangements can make a real difference for carers. As well as statutory right to time off in emergencies, paid leave for emergency or planned caring (for example, following discharge of a relative from hospital) can be critical for carers and help to reduce absence and staff turnover
- 'normalise' carers within the organisation; awareness raising, carers champion, charity of the year etc. Perhaps having a 'carer identification' section on all staff appraisals would help to raise awareness and 'normalise' recognition of the caring role



- adapt or create a carers policy. Large employers will often have a specific carers policy but smaller organisations may include carers in their generic policies. Creating a workplace culture that is supportive to carers is also crucial to help ensure that policies become reality in the workplace
- apply equal opportunities to all posts advertised
- ensure your adverts include a reference to being an equal opportunities employer. It is also helpful to give some examples of the flexible opportunities your organisation offers
- consider offering career breaks. Career breaks or sabbaticals should also be considered on a paid or unpaid basis as they can help to retain the skills and talent of carers in your workforce in the longer term
- offer flexible opportunities for learning and development (see Section 6 ‘Learning and development for those employees who are carers; what works’)
- introduce carer champions. This can be a way of encouraging recognition, gaining feedback to suggestions for adaptations to policies etc, as well as developing a supportive network for working carers within your organisation.



# Every little helps...

## **Access to a telephone**

Being able to use a phone at work can give both a carer and the person they care for, a great sense of reassurance. Often carers are the first contact number to call in an emergency, either for the cared for person or through a call centre that may monitor the welfare of the cared for person. Therefore as well as being able to make calls, it's important for carers peace of mind to be able to receive calls also.

Clear messages which come out of research into retention strategies highlight that retention rates increase when staff feel valued and respected, enabled and supported by actions such as those above.

Lancashire County Council is committed to providing flexible working options and support to it's working carers. It has a 'Working Carer Policy', through which working carers can access support, advice and information and sign up to the Working Carers database. Workers who have signed up receive regular information, both from within the Council and also national and local carer information. To further recognise their commitment to the valuable contribution that working carers make to the organisation, two half-day carer workshops are organised per year, which can be attended in the working day. Topics have included Human Resource information, information around services available for carers, Welfare Rights and occupational health.

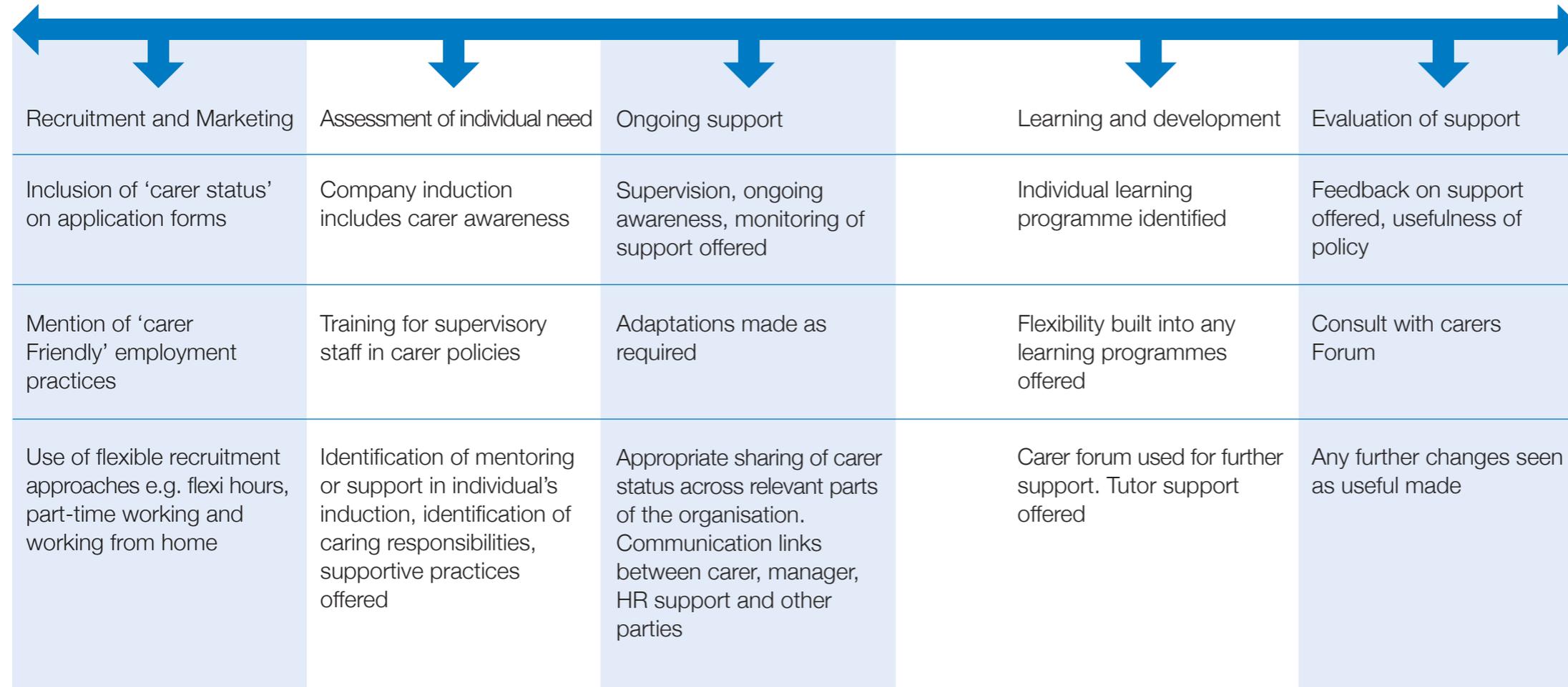
Joanne McMaster, Carers Strategy Officer, says 'the scheme has been in place for over two years now and provides invaluable support to working carers. Around 650 carers are currently signed up to the scheme and receive information and advice not only in relation to their caring role but also around the flexible working opportunities the council offers them as working carers. We as a council recognise the importance of supporting working carers, valuing the contribution they make. It makes business sense to care for carers!'

Larger social care employers that are comprised of a number of departments or teams often deliver their support to staff through a range of policies, processes and approaches. Adopting a 'whole organisation approach' can ensure that the needs of employees who are carers are actively considered at all levels, by all staff and across all parts of the organisation. Consider the following approach within your organisation:



# Whole organisational approach to supporting carers in your workforce

## Leadership, management and infrastructure



## **Creating a flexible workforce for a flexible service**

Providing care and support to citizens is a 24 hour day, 365 days a year activity. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. In order to cover this amount of service and support, flexible working patterns will be required. This flexibility can enable people who have other responsibilities such as children or caring responsibilities to work hours that are flexible enough to work around their family and other commitments.

In order to facilitate this, employers should:

- examine their staffing needs and refocus their approach to one that works with a multiplicity of staff to deliver outcomes, rather than the traditional notion of the full-time workers
- ensure efficient rota and payment systems
- develop job descriptions that are outcome-based, not process focused
- introduce induction and learning programmes that equip staff to cross the continuum of care, from personal assistant to allied medical professional
- plan for a system that is responsive and able to cope with unexpected absences; this can be of great benefit to employees and also gives peace of mind to people who use services and their families.

Increasingly, the use of technology can be a way in which employees can work flexibly. In some roles within social care, it is possible to use devices such as mobile 'smart' phones to work 'remotely' which can allow carers the flexibility needed to fit in caring responsibilities and work. The use of such technology is not dependant on an office being open, which can also mean that employees can work flexibly to better suit their caring responsibilities, whilst still getting the job done.

Hertfordshire County Council is an example of an employer who is seeking to offer solutions to the challenges of working and caring.

Hertfordshire County Council has a long track record of supporting carers both within its own workforce and more widely within the county. The Council was named in 2009 by Working Families as one of the best family friendly employers of the past three decades for the leadership it has shown in its flexible working and family friendly initiatives.

- 31% of the Council's staff are carers. Support for work-life balance is central to its policies.
- A range of flexible working opportunities are offered to all employees.
- Council employees can take up to five days paid leave to deal with emergencies involving dependants and also an extra 20 days unpaid leave each year.
- The work-life balance strategy was linked to the Council's comprehensive change programme, which over three years reduced accommodation from 51 offices to three main bases. Flexible working is not just an HR policy, but a recognised means of achieving business objectives and personal commitment.
- The Council has seen increased **staff retention rates** as a result of these policies.<sup>27</sup>



**Skills for Care**

West Gate  
Grace Street  
Leeds  
LS1 2RP

Telephone 0113 245 1716  
[www.skillsforcare.org.uk](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk)

© Skills for Care 2012