



Shine a Light on Care: Listening to Parents and Carers



The full report and recommendations can be found at:
<https://www.bristolwomensvoice.org.uk/our-research/>
or scan the QR



Executive Summary

This report, authored by Siobhan Canavan for Bristol Women's Voice and the Value the Caring Economy Alliance, presents findings from comprehensive research into the experiences of unpaid carers in Bristol. The study engaged more than 250 women through a survey, ten lantern workshops, six in-depth interviews, and one focus group to understand the challenges faced by those caring for children, elderly relatives, and Disabled family members.

Research highlights a stark national context: 1.2 million unpaid carers in the UK live in poverty, with 400,000 in deep poverty.^[i] Bristol mirrors these trends, with 34,000 carers in the city and 42% of full-time carers extremely worried about heating costs.^[ii] Across 83 quality-of-life indicators, full-time carers consistently fare worse than city averages.

1. Financial Hardship

Carers face severe financial pressures due to inadequate support structures, benefit cuts, and the inability to maintain full-time employment. Many struggle with costs of specialist care, equipment, and basic living expenses while supporting vulnerable family members.



My mother cannot work since she looks after both my sister and grandmother, who require 24/7 care... we struggle a lot financially.

2. Employment Challenges

Carers encounter significant barriers in the workplace, including inflexible working arrangements, unsupportive employers, and limited career progression opportunities. This particularly affects women, who are seven times more likely than men to become economically inactive due to caring responsibilities, resulting in reduced pension contributions and long-term financial insecurity.



We're told to ask for flexibility—but when we do, we're made to feel like a problem. That has to change.

^[i] www.carersuk.org/reports/poverty-and-financial-hardship-of-unpaid-carers-in-the-uk

^[ii] Bristol Quality of Life survey 2022/23: <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/6332-quality-of-life-2022-23-final-report-with-appendix/file> Accessed 4.9.25

3. Childcare Access

Parents, especially those with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), face limited access to affordable, high-quality early years provision. This forces many to abandon employment or career advancement, creating a cycle of economic disadvantage.



I had to give up work because I couldn't find affordable childcare that would accommodate my son's autism.

4. Lack of Breaks

Carers report feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, with minimal access to regular breaks, emergency breaks, or mental health support. The absence of short-term and longer-term relief options leaves carers without essential recovery time.



I haven't had a break in over a year. I'm constantly on edge, exhausted, and feel like I'm drowning.

5. Social Isolation

Only 27.8% of unpaid carers in Bristol report having adequate social contact, representing a significant decline from 46.2% in 2012/13. This isolation is particularly acute among Asian/Asian British carers, contributing to deteriorating mental health.^[iii]



The only place I feel understood is in my carers' support group. It's a lifeline.

6. Healthcare Barriers

Both carers and those they support face difficulties accessing timely healthcare appointments. Carers often sacrifice their own health needs, with 44% delaying treatment due to caring responsibilities.^[iv]



There's no system in place to check on carers' health. We fall through the cracks.

^[iii] Personal Social Services Survey of Adult Carers in England, 2023-24

^[iv] Carers UK (2023) The state of Caring 2023 The impact of caring on: health November 2023

7. Discontinuity of Support

Long-term carers experience fragmented support systems, particularly during transitions from children's to adult services. High staff turnover (31% in Bristol's adult social care) creates instability and forces carers to repeatedly explain their situations to new professionals.^[v]



Support always feels reactive – like we're firefighting – not like there's a sustainable system in place.

8. Legal and Advocacy Support

Carers struggle to navigate complex legal, welfare, and healthcare systems without adequate advocacy support. Access to legal advice remains limited, with 70% of the UK population lacking access to community care legal aid providers.^[vi]



I had to fight for every bit of support. Without legal help, I wouldn't have gotten the care package my child needs.

Impact and Implications

The undervaluation of the caring economy has profound economic consequences. Bristol loses £1-5 billion annually from women's economic inactivity due to caring responsibilities. Nationally, unpaid care is valued at £162 billion, nearly equivalent to NHS spending.^[vii] The gendered nature of caring disproportionately affects women, particularly those from Black and minoritised communities and Disabled women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these challenges, with 38% of carers providing increased care due to reduced or closed services.^[viii] This trend, combined with rising living costs and benefit cuts, has created an unsustainable situation for many families.

Recommendations

The full report presents tangible recommendations across key statutory sectors and employers. A summary of these is below:

^[v] ^[viii] Skills for Care (2023) The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England Skills for Care

^[vii] Skills for Care (2021) The Value of Adult Social Care in England

^[vi] The Law Society (June 2025) Community Care – legal aid deserts:

<https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/campaigns/justice-and-rule-of-law/civil-justice/legal-aid-deserts/community-care> Accessed 4.9.25

National government should simplify the benefits system, introduce statutory paid care leave, address long-term financial impacts on women carers, and expand childcare eligibility criteria.

Regional and local authorities must prioritise carers in financial support allocation, improve information access, commission targeted outreach, develop employment standards for caring-inclusive workplaces, invest in respite services, and fund legal advice services.

Healthcare systems need to expand mental health services for carers, implement carer liaison services, and train healthcare providers to understand carer needs.

Employers should implement mandatory carer support training and develop inclusive workplace policies that accommodate caring responsibilities.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The report emphasises that these findings are not new - similar recommendations have been made repeatedly. What's needed is decisive action rather than further research. The Value the Caring Economy Alliance commits to updating online service directories, collaborating on employment standards, supporting women's economic wellbeing, and promoting carer-inclusive workplaces. We call upon decision-makers to also commit to action.

The research demonstrates that addressing carer needs requires coordinated effort across sectors, recognition of care's intersectional and gendered nature, and sustained investment in support systems. Without meaningful intervention, the current crisis in the caring economy will continue to deepen, with devastating consequences for individuals, families, and the broader economy.

The message is clear: Bristol's 34,000 carers need immediate, comprehensive support to escape poverty, isolation, and ill health while maintaining the essential care that underpins community wellbeing. The time for action is now.

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About the Caring Economy Alliance

The Caring Economy Alliance is a coalition of nine powerful community organisations. Together, we're calling for serious investment in the backbone of our society: the caring economy. That means better childcare, stronger support for social care, fair pay for care workers, and flexible working for all so that people can care without sacrificing income.

We are:

- Bristol Black Carers
- Bristol Women in Business Charter
- Bristol Women's Voice
- Carers Support
- Chinese Community Wellbeing Society
- Co-Produce Care
- WECIL
- Economic Task Group, West of England Women's Commission
- Women's Budget Group



