

CARERS

Supporting the carers

Friends and family form a vast social care army — but how can councils support them?

Adrian O'Dowd reports

Carers are vital. There are an estimated six million of them and they form an unpaid army of helpers saving the economy perhaps £57bn.

Carers UK, the charity representing their interests, says six out of 10 carers believe their responsibilities damage their health and seven out of 10 worry about money.

All too often they are taken for granted — last year from an initial list of 200 councils just Sunderland City Council, Rochdale MBC, Hertfordshire CC and Sefon MBC were awarded beacon status for the way they support carers.

1 COUNT THE CARERS

Tracking down hidden carers is an important first step before support can be offered, according to Sunderland.

During Carers Week last June the Princess Royal Trust Sunderland Carers' Centre — a voluntary organisation — prepared four quick questions for staff to ask everyone who called the council's contact centre. The questions were: "Are you aware this is Carers Week?" "Do you what that is?" "Do you know about the carers' centre?" and "Can we send you information about it?"

From the 431 people who agreed to answer the questions, 41 new or 'hidden' carers were found to be unaware of the support available. They also identified 60 carers who did not see themselves in that role.

Ailsa Martin, coordinator of the carers' centre, says: "Since August, we have had funding for an information worker at the centre and their remit has been the discovery of carers who do not know what help is available and how we can share information.

"It's early days, but since August, the work that person has been doing has identified 265 adult carers and 21 young carers who were unaware of services.

"We want to help people identify themselves as being a carer."

The centre has also organised drop-in sessions for carers at a range of venues including bingo halls, supermarkets and council customer service centres.

"We are enabling the statutory services to reach the people who need help before they reach crisis level," adds Ms Martin.

2 GET OUT OF THE OFFICE AND BANG ON DOORS

You will not catch everyone by waiting for them to call — another issue is how to target hard-to-reach carers from neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation and those from black and minority ethnic communities.

Rochdale has used a partnership approach to target this issue through its Carers' Resource. Launched in 2002, it's a one-stop shop service run from a fixed base in Rochdale combining health, social care, adult and community learning, and regeneration.

One way that Rochdale has tried to reach carers is through an initiative called 'Opportunity knocks', a multi-agency project led by a voluntary organisation, the Rochdale Federation of Tenants & Residents Associations.

This 18-month initiative, which started last summer, involves sending a team of eight people for two days every fortnight to knock on doors throughout 15 areas — mostly council estates. Their job is to see if carers are aware of guidance, support, financial help and opportunities for training, employment and education the council can offer them.

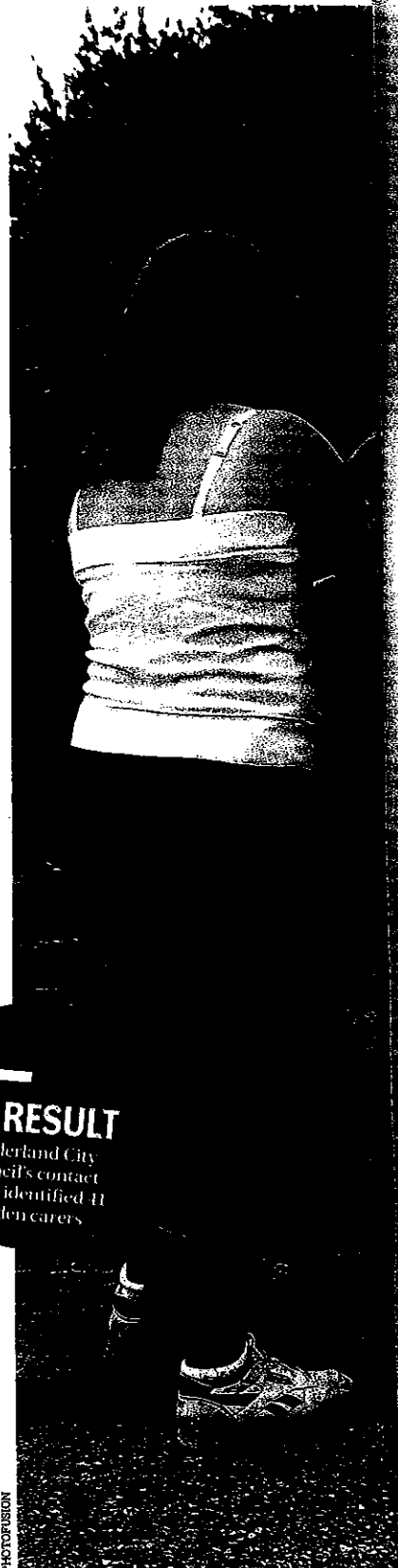
The project has gone through four of the 15 areas so far and has made referrals for around 12% of people it has spoken to, which is more than double the rate anticipated in its initial targets.

Project co-ordinator Sara Broom says: "It is amazing the amount of people we meet that have no idea what is on offer — people who would like to work but do not know how to get support. People are just not aware of what is out there."

3 FOCUS ON YOUNG CARERS FACING TOUGH CHALLENGES

Hertfordshire has been running a multi-agency strategy for over 10 years and targeting young carers has been a high priority.

One of several bodies that helps inform the



4 RESULT

Sunderland City Council's contact centre identified 41 hidden carers

PHOTOGRAPH

RESULT
Hertfordshire CC is in touch with 500 young carers and offers extra support

overall strategy is the young carers strategy group, which has been covering the crucial area of carers aged under 18 since 2001.

Project officer for disabled children and young carers, Becky Dunning, says: "It is important to focus on young carers' because they have different needs as young people."

"We are trying to reduce the negative effects of caring on young people. They can be in a position where it is affecting their education and their ability to take part in regular activities."

The group works in partnership with many agencies and has a contract with voluntary organisation Carers in Hertfordshire for it to provide the Young carers project.

"The project is in touch with around 500 young carers living in Hertfordshire. We offer support, breaks and activities and send out a regular newsletter," says Ms Dunning. "The organisation raises awareness of young carers' issues with a range of professionals linking with schools, health and other mainstream services."

Carers in Hertfordshire also runs a Young carers council which acts as the voice of young carers, giving their views at council events, organising their own speakeasy events with different themes, and running a dedicated website.

Ms Dunning adds: "There was nothing in place for young carers before this and we did not have a clear idea of how many there were. Now we have names on a database, there are a number of schools that have young carer support groups running at lunchtime and youth services have trained staff so they can respond to the needs of young carers."

Hertfordshire is also just about to start a project to identify the needs of black and minority ethnic young carers. It has recruited a specific worker who is focusing on one area of the county where there are high numbers of minority families and young people. The concern is that minority young carers are currently under represented within young carers' services.

4 APPOINT CARERS' CHAMPIONS

Appointing or identifying carers' champions is another approach taken at Hertfordshire. It helps boost recognition for carers and leads to better access to support and services.

Find out more

Sefton Carers Centre — Lynne Woods, team manager: 0151 288 6060

Carers UK — www.carersuk.org

Sunderland Carers' Centre — Ailsa Martin, centre coordinator: 0191 567 3232

Hertfordshire CC — Tim Anfilogoff, policy manager: users and carers: 01707 280761

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers — www.carers.org/ 020 7480 7788

Tim Anfilogoff, the council's policy manager for users and carers, says Hertfordshire has realised the importance of a key lead in all agencies.

The council has appointed about 50 carers' champions and they are a point of contact for people wishing to know more about the issues and for carers themselves. Communicating with other agencies about the need to identify carers is a key part of their role.

The champions are not paid for this specific role as it is seen as part of their work.

Mr Anfilogoff says: "We have identified these champions and we want to actively involve them. Some are called 'champions' and some, 'lead carers' co-ordinators'. Leaflets are not enough. We need to train the people that are giving information out and then monitor the outcomes."

"You need to know if what you are doing is making a difference. You have to get away from the idea that if we tell people something once, then it is sorted."

5 GIVE THEM A BREAK

The importance of a break for carers has been taken on board by Sefton which has a long-standing relationship with voluntary organisation The Princess Royal Trust Sefton Carers Centre.

An emergency respite team has been running out of the centre for the past five years. The five-strong team is on duty 365 days a year and a team member can be with a carer within an hour of them asking for help.

Liz Williams, chief executive of the Sefton Carers Centre, says: "If we get a call from a carer who has become ill or is going to hospital, they will get through to the team. A team member can go in and take over for up to 48 hours. During that time, we will find out whether that situation is likely to continue. If it is, then we will get in touch with the local authority duty team."

Emergency call outs keep the team pretty busy, but Ms Williams says staff are also available to offer support if a carer is suffering broken nights or just getting to the end of their tether because of the amount of pressure they are under.

Charlie Barker, director of adult social services at Sefton, says: "If you talk to other colleagues, most local authorities are totally dependent on carers. They provide the bulk of care for some people. If they choose to do that, then we must give them as much support as we can so it does not become a chore and so they can have a life."

Mr Barker's advice to other authorities wishing to improve their record on supporting carers is this: "You have to be serious about it and be very clear about the resources you are committing. You need to work with the local carers centre if you are lucky to have one. If you don't there will be some mechanisms such as the voluntary sector through which you can contact carers. This has to be our core business. If we did not have carers out there, we would not be able to cope."

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