

Virtual wards toolkit:

Getting it right for unpaid carers

Resources created by Carers UK
as part of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance



Purpose of the toolkit

This toolkit brings together resources that the Carers Partnership has developed to support the delivery of virtual wards in England and ensure they consider and engage with unpaid carers. This toolkit is intended for use by local authorities involved in virtual wards, local carer organisations, and carers engaged with virtual wards. It will also support virtual wards teams to ensure they are providing the right support to unpaid carers.

It includes:

- [A policy explainer](#) about virtual wards – to help local organisations and carers understand what virtual wards are.
- [A template leaflet for local organisations](#) – to share with unpaid carers to help them understand virtual wards in your area. You can tailor this with specific local information, your own logos, contacts and more.
- [An advocacy guide to empower carers](#) – helping them feel more confident about caring for someone on a virtual ward, and access to information and advice, support, and that they have a choice in providing care.
- [Our 'professionals' checklist](#) - to support commissioners and other staff managing virtual wards as well as those delivering services to make sure that they are properly communicating with and supporting unpaid carers.
- [Our Unpaid Carer Pathway](#) - to support local virtual ward teams and unpaid carers to better understanding the processes involved in the delivery of virtual wards, improving communication and ease of delivery.



Why support unpaid carers?

- 9% of the population in England – 4.7 million people – are providing unpaid care.
([Census 2021](#))
- The value of carers' support in England is £154 billion per year – equivalent to a second NHS.
([Carers UK and University of Sheffield, 2023](#))
- 12,000 people a day become unpaid carers.
([Carers UK and the University of Sheffield, 2022](#))
- 1 in 3 NHS staff members are also providing unpaid care.
([NHS Staff Survey](#))



Why involve unpaid carers in virtual wards?

- **To recognise the significant value of unpaid carers** and provide them with the support they need and deserve.
- **To help ensure that the right care decisions are made the first time.**
- **To prevent unnecessary hospital admissions.** 49% of carers in England either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that a virtual ward would prevent those they care for from being admitted to hospital unnecessarily ([State of Caring 2023](#)).
- **To ensure people receive care where they want it.** A majority of carers in England say a virtual ward would allow those they care for to receive care in a more comfortable environment ([State of Caring 2023](#)).
- However, **a majority of carers also say that a virtual ward will mean them providing more care.** ([State of Caring 2023](#)). As carers tend to have poorer health, wellbeing and work outcomes than non-carers, it is important to make sure that care decisions do not exacerbate these.



Why involve unpaid carers in virtual wards?

- To improve outcomes for the person needing care.
- To provide more person-centred care.
- To support millions of carers to continue to [juggle paid work alongside their caring responsibilities](#), by giving them choices about how they care.
- To support positive relationships for staff working in the NHS and social care.
- To fulfil NHS legal duties to involve and support unpaid carers (see next slide for details).



Legal requirements to involve and support carers

Provisions exist in legislation and the NHS Constitution that require health and care services to engage and support unpaid carers.

Care Act 2014:

- Carers' own needs are considered as important as the people they care for. This might affect a decision about whether a virtual ward is the right care choice.
- Duty to involve unpaid carers in the care planning process, recognise and address their contributions to care, give them a choice about caring (willingness and ability to care), assess any potential impact on their wellbeing or ability to provide care and provide support to meet assessed needs.
- Local authorities must also promote the physical and mental health of carers.

Health and Care Act 2022

Discharge of hospital patients with care and support needs

- An NHS Trust must ensure, as soon as is feasible, after it starts to make plans relating to discharge for any patient that is likely to require care and support following discharge, that it takes any steps that it considers appropriate to involve the patient and any carer of the patient.



Legal requirements to involve and support carers

Health and Care Act 2022 (Section 25, amending Health Act 2006)

Each Integrated Care Board has a duty to promote the involvement of patients, and their carers, in any decisions which relate to the prevention or diagnosis of illness in the patients, or their care or treatment.

In practice terms this means:

- Ensuring that the contributions of carers are properly acknowledged and valued when it comes to planning and providing care.
- Being proactive in communicating with carers, ensuring that they are kept well informed throughout the process from planning care, to implementation, and ensuring that there is correct follow-up after the use of a virtual ward ceases.
- Training and information should be provided for staff involved in the delivery of the virtual ward so that they can better understand the needs of unpaid carers, and ensure they are fulfilling their duties towards them.

NHS Constitution (duties set out in updated and amended Health Act 2009)

All bodies have a duty to promote the NHS Constitution and all those working within the NHS must have regard to it. It states that unpaid carers should:

- be treated with dignity and respect,
- have the right to be involved in decisions and choices about care, and
- have the right to be kept properly informed.



NHSE operational framework for virtual wards: Key points on unpaid carers for systems leads

NHS England's [operational framework for virtual wards](#) sets out guidance for everyone involved in the planning, implementation, delivery, and/ or monitoring and evaluation of virtual wards, including how they should engage with unpaid carers. Annex 2 is the section on carers with additional information on the responsibilities of virtual wards in relation to carers throughout the rest of the document.

Key points include:

- Unpaid carers should be recognised as **equal partners in care** who can provide vital information about the person with care and support needs.
- To support carers and mitigate any potential risk associated with virtual wards that unpaid carers will be asked to pick up more caring responsibilities, **virtual wards must be designed in such a way that enables professionals to:**
 - **identify unpaid carers**
 - **signpost carers to carers' assessments and further support**, such as advocacy and respite care
 - involve carers as equal and expert partners in care
 - **be aware of carers' rights** under the Care Act and young carer rights under the Children and Families Act. These acts work together so that carers of all ages, and the people they support, can get the assessment and support they need
 - **have informed discussions with carers about the choices available for care and their right to choose the level of care they provide**, including no care if they are unable or unwilling to provide any care
 - **ensure that carers have access to information** about what to do if they are no longer able to provide care on a virtual ward or their needs or those of the person receiving care increase



Why involvement matters to carers – in their own words

“You essentially know how it’s going to go...

If you are treated as part of the team, and your knowledge utilised you know you are going to have a better experience...

If you are treated as a real pain or a problem, you know it’s going to be really awful.”

Norman, an unpaid carer who has experienced multiple hospital discharges



Carers UK co-production and engagement with carers

- Co-producing key resources such as the [advocacy guide](#) with carers, our [Professional's checklist](#) and our [carers pathway](#) for virtual wards.
- Unpaid carers were given an accessible explanation about virtual wards and asked their views even if they had not experienced a virtual ward - [State of Caring survey 2023](#):
 - 46% of carers in England who responded said that a virtual ward would give them and the person they care for more ownership of the care being provided.
 - However, they also said that virtual wards had the potential to increase pressure on unpaid carers.

Further context:

- Public Health England found that caring was a social determinant of health
- 54% of carers in England who responded to Carers UK's State of Caring survey say their physical health has suffered as a result of caring, and 79% feel stressed or anxious for the same reason.



Carers' views on virtual wards – a mixed picture

Source: Carers UK's [State of Caring 2023 survey](#)

"I am not opposed to the concept of the virtual wards; indeed, they could be a very useful means of monitoring and keeping an eye on lots of different patient just discharged from an in-stay. However, given my and my husband's experience of them they are most definitely not 'one size fits all'. Family, carers and friends of those needing the care and monitoring should and must be taken into consideration before decisions are being made for them. There should be a clear, safe, care management plan in place agreed by all before any discharge onto a virtual ward."

"No support for carer, poorly informed, asked services to contact me to arrange appointments and this didn't happen resulting in discharge through non engagement by person needing care. The idea is fantastic, the practicality is not."

"It was very empowering while my spouse had covid to have the back up in case he got worse and beyond what I could cope with. I just had to submit readings online 2x per day."

"Hospital at Home service resulted in my mum being cared for at home, avoiding an ambulance journey and a long wait in A&E just to be discharged home hours later."

"It was great for the person receiving care as they were in their own home but it meant myself and my siblings lives were disrupted as the amount of support they needed was more than could be provided by the NHS/Social Care. Three of us were not able to work and deliver our employment responsibilities, which is OK for me as I have a supportive employer but my siblings were criticised and even threatened with disciplinaries!"



Resources for local virtual wards teams to support carers

Below are resources designed for local virtual wards teams to better engage with and support unpaid carers: These have been co-produced with carers and key professionals across health and social care.

A *template leaflet for unpaid carers*. Designed to provide basic information about virtual wards to give to unpaid carers locally. Local information and local branding can be inserted so it is tailored for your local area.

A *professionals' checklist* which will support commissioners and other staff managing virtual wards to make sure that they are properly communicating with and supporting unpaid carers, and aware of their legal duties.

A *carer pathway* intending to lay out the process that carers will go through from initially being asked to consider a virtual ward, up to its delivery and completion.

[Template leaflet](#)

[Professionals'
Checklist](#)

[Carer Pathway](#)

Resources for local organisations and unpaid carers

For local organisations and unpaid carers:

A virtual wards policy explainer, which provides more detail about the functions of virtual wards. Designed for local organisations and unpaid carers.

[Policy explainer](#)

Information and advice guide for carers:

An advocacy guide, intended to give carers confidence in how they interact with virtual wards, and help them to ensure that they are in the best position to achieve the correct level of support.

[Advocacy guide](#)

Further information

Thank you to all the unpaid carers and health, care and voluntary sector professionals who offered their time and expertise to help co-produce these materials.

For more information about this toolkit, or our work on virtual wards, please contact:
policy@carersuk.org.

Find out more about virtual wards on the [NHS England website](#).

This resource has been developed by Carers UK as part of the Carers Partnership, alongside Carers Trust, as part of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance (HWA). The HWA is a partnership of VCSE sector organisations and health and care systems, seeking to further improve and develop the provision of health and care services in England.

