

Introduction to Carers' organisations and building relationships with local family carers' groups

Family carers are key to the development of new services within Shared Lives, especially those for older people and people living with dementia. Over the past twenty years there has been a growing recognition of the importance of the role family carers undertake

in the informal support for people needing health and social care services. It is now quite a complex world and this guide is designed to give schemes some basic information about the main carers' support organisations and how to link in with them.

National Carers' Organisations

Carers Trust: This is a new national charity formed by the merging of Crossroads Care and the Princess Royal Trust for Carers in 2012. The new charity combined the knowledge, skills, expertise and experience of its founder charities and all of the independent Network Partners, Crossroads Care schemes and The Princess Royal Trust for Carers local carers' centres.

<http://www.carers.org>

Carers UK: Carers UK provides information, advice and support for carers. They bring carers together to provide a strong voice to shapes campaigns to make life better for carers and influences policy makers, employers and service providers, to help them improve carers' lives. It provides an information and

advice service on every aspect of being a carer including advice on benefits and services and has a network of branches.

<http://www.carersuk.org>

Shared Care Scotland is the main carers support organisation in Scotland and is part of Carers UK.

<http://www.sharedcarescotland.org.uk>

Carers Direct: This is the NHS advice and information service for carers. It provides a helpline and website offering general support for carers in all areas of health and social care.

<http://www.nhs.uk>

Alzheimer's Society: AS are the leading charity on all aspects of dementia. They

have dedicated advice and support available to people caring for someone living with dementia through a helpline, on line forum, considerable on-line materials and a network of support groups.

<http://www.alzheimers.org.uk>

Most of the larger charities which specialise in health and social care issues offer some support to carers within their user groups so it's worth visiting their websites for more information.

Local Groups

Carers UK: Carers UK support a nationwide network of 144 Carers' Centres to reach carers and develop services for carers across the country. These are independent charities that deliver a wide range of local support services to meet the needs of carers in their own communities. All Carers' Centres provide, either by telephone, drop-in or outreach surgeries, advice and information, emotional support and a consultation process to help influence policy makers as well as other services specific to that area.

Crossroads Care Scheme: Crossroads Care schemes are a network of 76 local independent charities providing support to carers and the people they care for, often through the provision of flexible breaks. Services are provided through a network of local providers across England and Wales, each offering a core service where short breaks are offered through a trained carer support worker.

The aim is to provide support that is consistent and reliable and build long and trusted relationships. Each scheme is an independent

charity which may provide additional services according to funding and demand at a local level.

Alzheimer's Support Groups: Many kinds of local groups are run by the Society, such as Singing for the Brain, Dementia Cafés and carers' support groups. These 'self-supporting' groups offer a first step for people looking for informal ways to meet others.

They also offer the Carer Information and Support Programme, which is a short course for people supporting a family member or friend with dementia. The friendly, confidential group sessions provide the opportunity for discussion about the experience of caring and provide information about dementia, legal and money matters, ways of coping day to day and getting help from local services.

In each area there is also likely to be some form of carers support group which is locally funded and supported. If you are not already aware or in touch with yours, the local Council for Voluntary Service or other intermediate body should be able to give you details.

Building relationships

Many carers groups welcome outside speakers, which can provide an opportunity for Shared Lives workers, users and carers to describe the service that is available, stimulate discussion and break down barriers. However some groups are more reluctant to engage

with organisations they don't know and some carers support workers are hesitant to expose carers to organisations where they fear there may be a 'hard sell' to get vulnerable carers to sign up to services.

If your scheme decides it would like to engage with carers groups, the following tips may be helpful:

Be very clear within your own team why you want to engage. Is it primarily

a. To attract more service users

There may be a variety of reasons why talking to carers could attract more service users. If you are aiming at a diversification e.g. into older people or dementia services, this could be an effective way to make people aware of what Shared Lives could offer them and the people they care for. This is particularly important if you want to work with people living with dementia as engaging before people become FACs eligible is a key factor in building a successful relationship between the Shared Lives carer, the service user and the family carers.

b. To recruit more Shared Lives carers

Many family carers, especially those who have been caring for a long period of time,

are experts in many aspects of care and could make excellent Shared Lives carers. Although many of the people attending a carers group will be looking for on-going support, some may have been attending for some time, perhaps even after the cared for person has moved into residential care or died. Raising carers awareness of Shared Lives may, in time, open up new possibilities they were unaware of.

c. To get the message out about Shared Lives

People need to know about options. Even if Shared Lives isn't particularly relevant to them at the moment you meet the group, sharing the information will increase the profile, people will start talking about the service with their friends and families and this could lead to an increase in interest from both prospective user and Shared Lives carers.

What messages do you want to give?

You need to decide what the main emphasis of your talk will be. Is it an overview and introduction to Shared Lives generally or do you want to highlight a particular aspect. You need to be very clear about your purpose and then ensure the materials you use and the talk you give fits that purpose. If you are looking to attract more users, be sure you have the capacity to meet demand.

Be prepared to meet scepticism and even some hostility

Shared Lives can sound too good to be true to people who haven't come across it. You need to be prepared for questions about costs and funding as this will be very much at the front of some carers minds. If you can only offer services to people who are FACs eligible, you need to make people aware of this up-front.

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