

Caring Together – 'Giving Carers a Break, Norfolk'

Earl of Northampton's Charity
Church & Communities Programme

Making sure unpaid carers get the support they need

Caring Together provides trained volunteer befrienders to give unpaid carers regular short breaks from their caring responsibilities.

The aim is to allow carers time to focus on their own health needs, reducing isolation, stress and tiredness. The project provides support for those carers who may not qualify for or want formal care but who still need support.

"Feeling less alone and knowing where to access the right help for my situation has made a huge difference to me." Carer



Why the work is needed

There are approximately 81,000 people in Norfolk who regularly care for a loved one. 90% of these unpaid carers report feeling lonely and isolated. Around two thirds (63%) say that their mental health has suffered due to not being able to have a break, leading to depression, anxiety, anger and frustration.

Approach

Trained volunteers are matched with unpaid carers to offer companionship, respite, and practical help. Led by a full-time coordinator and supported by a part-time administrator who recruit, train, and support volunteers.

Befrienders give carers regular short breaks, usually for a few hours, to rest, see friends, or pursue hobbies. Volunteers also assist with tasks such as shopping, gardening, or dog walking. The support is flexible and personalised, offered in-person or by phone.

The service is guided by values of inclusivity, prevention, and effectiveness, ensuring all carers can access support before reaching crisis.

Key approaches include:

- Listening carefully and responding to individual needs and preferences
- Selecting empathetic, values-driven volunteers and matching them well, considering experiences and interests
- Building trusting relationships with carers
- Having experienced staff who provide guidance and ensure safety

"It's about whatever that carer needs - to give them someone to talk to, to sit with the cared-for person so the carer can go out or just have a moment to themselves."
Project lead

Impact



Growing Reach: The service has recruited 16 volunteers and supported 15 carers, delivering more than 500 hours of befriending support across Norfolk.



Meaningful Change: Feedback shows carers feel more supported, less stressed, and have renewed confidence, enabling them to continue in their roles.



Rewarding Work: Volunteers gain confidence, skills, and friendships and describe their work as “rewarding” and “meaningful.”

“Sometimes my befriender is the only person I have a proper conversation with all week.”
Carer

“It’s given me someone to listen to me and talk through my worries about caring for my husband.” Carer



Challenges

A key challenge is recruiting enough volunteers to meet the needs of the service. Some carers have to wait longer for, or go without, support.

There is an emotional toll for volunteers involved in supporting carers who are exhausted, isolated, or grieving.

The rural nature of Norfolk presents a challenge in terms of poor transport provision and distances to be covered.

Competition for funding and maintaining service quality are ongoing concerns.

Learnings

The team has learned the importance of adaptability and the preventative power of befriending:

“The preventative work... they don’t know what they’re doing for that person inside, and how important it is for the person they’re supporting.” Project worker

Staff have also recognised the value of working holistically across services to achieve better outcomes:

“It’s that holistic thing we can do through care that we couldn’t achieve if we didn’t have both services working together.” Project lead

Organisational Resilience

The organisation’s resilience is supported by good financial reserves, a variety of services and an ability and willingness to learn from challenges. There is also a skilled and experienced staff team and a strong focus on staff and volunteer well-being.

The Future

With renewed Mercers funding for three more years, the service aims to continue and expand, seeking further funding and developing its volunteer base.

“Mercers have given us another three years, which is fantastic... I am confident that the value of the service will be demonstrated, and the organisation will support us to keep that going....” Project lead

The charity is also pursuing multiple strategies to ensure long-term sustainability including bids to join various Frameworks, which would allow it to deliver carer breaks and befriending services.