

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#) ar [Gwella mynediad at gymorth i ofalwyr di-dâl](#)

This response was submitted to the [Health and Social Care Committee](#) consultation on [Improving access to support for unpaid carers.](#)

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Senedd Cymru Health and Social Care Committee:

ADSS Cymru response to the inquiry into improving access to support for unpaid carers

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General Comment

The Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Cymru is the professional and strategic leadership organisation for social services in Wales and is composed of statutory directors of social services, the All-Wales Heads of Children’s Services (AWHOCs), the All-Wales Adult Service Heads (AWASH) and tier three managers who support them in delivering statutory responsibilities: a group which consists of over 300 social services leaders across the 22 local authorities in Wales.

The role of ADSS Cymru is to represent the collective, authoritative voice of senior social care leaders who support vulnerable adults and children, their families, and communities, on a range of national and regional issues in relation to social care policy, practice, and resourcing. It is the only national body that articulates the view of those professionals who lead our social care services.

As a member-led organisation, ADSS Cymru is committed to using the wealth of its members’ experience and expertise. We work in partnership with a wide range of partners and stakeholders to influence the important strategic decisions around the development of health, social care, and public service delivery. Ultimately, our aim is to benefit the people our services support and the people who work within those services.

Response to the Inquiry

This consultation response draws on the findings and conclusions from two pieces of work commissioned by Welsh Government and undertaken by ADSS Cymru: the Day Opportunities and Respite Care Review (2022) and the Rapid Review of Unpaid Carers’ Rights (2023). The evidence from these reviews was taken back into national policy forums, most notably the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) on Unpaid Carers, and directly informed the design of new support for unpaid carers, including the creation of the national Short Breaks Scheme. This response also reflects on the concerns raised by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and the Older People’s Commissioner for Wales, recognising the challenges they have highlighted while also emphasising the significant progress that has been achieved in recent years.

Barriers faced by unpaid carers

The ADSS Cymru reviews confirmed that unpaid carers faced significant barriers in accessing respite and day opportunities, especially following the pandemic when many services were reduced or suspended. Common challenges included delays in assessments, variation between areas, transport

and digital exclusion, and financial pressures. Oversight bodies have reinforced these concerns, highlighting inconsistency in the administration of carers' needs assessments and the particular challenges facing older carers.

Since the ADSS reviews, short breaks provision and access to that provision has improved across Wales, due, in part, to additional funding from Welsh Government via the Short Breaks Scheme and Carers Support Fund. For example, within Gwent, local authorities have created Bridging the Gap Gwent with Short Breaks funding and deliver the Carers Support Fund locally across each local authority. Moreover, local authorities and their partners have introduced innovative approaches to maintain contact and provide more flexible forms of respite, including community-based models and hybrid arrangements that blend in-person and digital support. These efforts demonstrate a commitment to improving access while working within significant resource constraints, particularly in relation to the workforce.

Current availability and regional variation

The reviews also found that the availability of day opportunities and respite services varied across Wales, with some services not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. However, this period also saw the development of new approaches, such as hub-and-spoke provision, through-age services, and hybrid models. These innovations have increased flexibility and choice in some regions, even as overall capacity has remained under pressure.

The MAG process has provided a mechanism to track this variation and begin addressing it systematically. Carers' voices have been fed into delivery planning, with priority placed on ensuring more equitable access to short breaks across Wales.

Demand, unmet need and assessment

Demand for respite has increased, reflecting both the growing complexity of need among those receiving care and the pressures experienced by carers themselves. Many carers continue to identify unmet need, both for regular and emergency respite.

Local authorities have worked hard to address this by reducing assessment backlogs, widening the workforce able to carry out well-being conversations, and partnering with the third sector to deliver assessments and targeted respite. An important theme is the need to balance the rights and wishes of the cared-for individual with the carer's need for a meaningful break. This requires careful co-production, particularly to ensure that unpaid carers know and understand what their rights are, but it is a challenge local authorities are actively responding to. It is also worth noting that whilst a carer's needs assessment and formal respite is a statutory right, a lot of what local authorities offer unpaid carers is not a statutory and therefore funded year on year and can be subject to systemic pressures.

Role of Regional Partnership Boards and commissioning

Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) have been instrumental in advancing respite provision. They have provided the platform for new regional initiatives, such as the Short Breaks Scheme, which was designed with a £9m ring-fenced investment over three years (2022–25). This scheme was

specifically structured to prevent substitution, ensure monitoring of impacts, and expand access through both RPB allocations and a competitive third-sector stream.

RPBs now report on the scheme every six months, with their data used to identify gaps and tailor provision to local need. This has established a regular performance loop and created stronger accountability. Carers' engagement and needs analysis have been central to this work, ensuring that provision is shaped by user voice as well as system priorities.

While commissioning practices are not yet fully consistent across Wales, the combination of RPB oversight, targeted funding, and structured monitoring has strengthened the approach considerably. This reflects a clear shift towards more strategic, evidence-based, and co-produced commissioning.

Implementation of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014

The Act provides a robust framework for recognising and supporting unpaid carers, ensuring they have equal rights to assessment and support as those they care for. However, the implementation has faced challenges. There has been a lack of consistency, with variability in the timeliness and quality of assessments, as well as in how identified outcomes link to respite provision. Moreover, local authorities have acknowledged that reaching those with higher caring roles who may be unable to attend events due to their responsibilities or lack awareness of available support has also been a challenge. This highlights the critical role of health services, as individuals are more likely to engage with health services earlier in their journey, often reaching social services only at a crisis point. ADSS Cymru acknowledges the need for a more integrated approach, where health and social care services work collaboratively to identify and support carers proactively, ensuring their needs are met before reaching a crisis.

At the same time, significant progress has been made. National and regional work through the MAG has focused on strengthening carers' needs assessments and the information, advice and assistance (IAA) that underpins them, recognising these as critical gateways to respite. This work has been taken forward through a task-and-finish group and sustained engagement between senior leaders in local authorities and health boards. The intention has been to standardise access, improve consistency, and ensure that carers' statutory rights are fully realised.

Importantly, leadership has been key. The appointment of Alwyn Jones, a former ADSS Cymru Cadeirydd and Director of Social Services at Wrexham, as Independent Chair of the MAG (Oct 2022 - June 2025) provided a strong, solutions-focused approach. Under his leadership, the Group pursued practical reforms, ensuring that evidence from the ADSS Cymru reviews and carers' engagement translated into policy and delivery changes that directly benefit carers.

Concluding Comment

ADSS Cymru recognises the challenges that remain in ensuring consistent and equitable access to respite for unpaid carers. The concerns raised by the Ombudsman and the Older People's Commissioner highlight areas where further improvement is still needed.

However, we also emphasise the significant progress that has been achieved since 2022. The two ADSS Cymru reviews commissioned by Welsh Government provided a clear evidence base, and this was translated through the Ministerial Advisory Group into concrete action, including the design and

delivery of the Short Breaks Scheme, systematic monitoring by RPBs, and upstream work to strengthen carers' assessments.

As the national leadership body for social services, ADSS Cymru remains committed to working with Welsh Government, Regional Partnership Boards, carers' organisations, and the wider sector to build on this progress, address ongoing challenges, and ensure that unpaid carers can access the respite and support they need to sustain both their caring role and a life alongside caring.

References

ADSS Cymru (2022) [Delivering Transformation Grant Work Programme 2021/22: Day Opportunities and Respite Care Review](#). Cardiff: ADSS Cymru.

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