

Valuing Carers

Some six million people in the UK are carers for partners, relatives or friends who are ill, frail or have a disability. But juggling care responsibilities with paid employment can be difficult, and many people are forced to change the way the work or to give up work altogether. This can create more problems – many carers see their incomes plummet, they become socially isolated, their work skills become out of date and all this can lead to low self-esteem.

Thanks to an EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) called Action for Carers and Employment (ACE National), the difficulties carers face in the job market are now widely recognised and are being addressed by employers, training providers, other service providers and politicians.

Validating and strengthening existing skills

One of the legacies of this DP, for example, is the "Learning for Living" qualification and learning resource. Developed by City & Guilds, a DP partner, this on-line learning programme helps users identify and build on their existing skills, and work towards a nationally recognised qualification known as the "Certificate in Personal Development and Learning for Unpaid Carers". The course has been of real benefit to individuals in terms of building self-confidence and restoring self-esteem. As one participant, who had to give up work to care for her brother, said: "...the learning for living course made me realise that I have a lot to offer".

ACE National also focused on raising the awareness of carers' needs among those working in different public services, such as health, social care, education, employment services and the voluntary sector. For example, a "Carer Awareness Training Programme" has been adapted from a course trialed by one of the DP's local partners, Action For Carers in Surrey. And a training pack entitled "Young Carers and the Connexions Service" aims to sensitise professionals providing career guidance to young people on the specific needs and problems faced by young carers.

To ensure that the EQUAL project formulate its policy recommendations on solid foundations, two important research studies were carried out. A study into the real value of carers' support concluded that carers in fact save the UK economy a staggering £57 billion (€ 83 billion) each year – the equivalent of a second National Health

Service (the report "Without Us" is available via the DPs website). The conclusions of a second study on barriers and bridges for carers in employment are published in a report entitled "Redressing the Balance".

Employers – the most effective advocates

Crucial to the DP's overall success was the direct involvement of public and private employers such as government departments and major companies, as well as the social partners represented by the Confederation of British Industry and three trade unions. Major UK employers, such as British Telecom or PricewaterhouseCoopers, have now become among the most vocal advocates of the DP's message – that employing carers makes good business sense. With secretarial and administrative support from ACE, these and other influential employers have created and now operate the Employers for Carers interest group (www.employersforcars.org.uk). The website provides guidance to employers on how to help carers continue to work, and to attract additional carers into their companies.

But a key objective of ACE National was to ensure that the good practices developed and lessons learnt become integrated into mainstream policy and programmes. And its efforts have certainly paid off. ACE helped to steer a Private Members Bill on providing more recognition and equality of opportunities to carers through the UK Parliament. The Carers (Equal Opportunities) Act received Royal Assent in July 2004. It places new duties on local authorities to ensure that carers have access to employment, education and leisure opportunities – the first time that these key issues for carers have been addressed in the context of equal opportunities and diversity. According to the Member of Parliament responsible for introducing the bill, Dr Hywel Francis, "ACE National's innovative partnership saw the Carers (Equal Opportunities) Act through all its stages in Parliament, giving it support from a whole range of key stakeholders, from individual carers to major employers."

Another interesting outcome of the DP's activities is the Carers Award category in the Employer of the Year Awards. Run by Working Families, a leading charity in the field of work-life balance, these awards promote innovative employment policies which support people to manage work and external responsibilities (www.workingfam-



Lord Pendry, Dr Hywel Francis MP and Malcolm Wicks MP, Minister of State for Energy, who all successfully took the Carers Act through Parliament

ilies.org.uk). In 2004, the award was won by a member of the Employers for Carers group, the Department for Constitutional Affairs, which acknowledged at the time that "we would not have achieved this success without the support of ACE."

Key factors for success

The DP's success in achieving long-term positive changes to policy and practice can be attributed to several key factors. Firstly, Carers UK, the lead partner has a strong track record in lobbying and campaigning, strong parliamentary links, a wide membership and a dedicated training unit. Secondly, the partnership between local partners – that developed and tested new tools, plus national partners – that could transfer this experience nationwide, was particularly effective. The partners also took every opportunity to publicise the DP's message, "piggybacking" on many existing and new campaigns. Finally, the emphasis on involving the media, organising events in prestigious surroundings and inviting Government Ministers to sponsor and chair events, added to the DP's public profile.

"Without EQUAL and the attention and resources that it devotes to effective partnership and mainstreaming activities, we would never have been in a position to push, or to help other people push, for these very positive changes in the UK Government's policies!" Madeleine Starr, Coordinator of ACE National.

A new EQUAL project "ACE 2" is now underway. Building on the success of its predecessor, this DP will be working towards the establishment of a National Care Strategy.

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm

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