

# An unpaid carer pathway for virtual wards

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# Introduction

This 'Unpaid Carer Pathway' helps professionals involved in the delivery of virtual wards understand at which point unpaid carers should be involved, informed, have their needs assessed, and when to be given choices, information, advice and support.

Carers UK, as part of the Carers Partnership alongside Carers Trust, committed to developing this pathway for virtual wards to ensure that unpaid carers are recognised, included and supported at key stages. It is designed to encourage positive, person-centred practice. It should be read in conjunction with the [professional's checklist](#) that has been developed.

An unpaid carer is anyone who provides care to a family member, friend or relative; they are not employed to do so and often the person they care for would not be able to cope without them. The pathway links directly to carers' rights and entitlements, offering specific points at which certain things are expected to happen.

While carers are referred to in the patient pathway for virtual wards, this 'Unpaid Carer Pathway' is more specific in helping professionals understand at which points unpaid carers need to be engaged.

The purpose of this pathway is to see and to understand an unpaid carer's journey through a virtual ward, pinpointing the precise times and places for interventions. This, along with the [professional's checklist](#) that we have developed, provide a basis against which virtual wards can assess their progress towards supporting unpaid carers.

The Unpaid Carer Pathway is designed to support the guidance and the delivery of virtual wards, NHS core duties<sup>1</sup> and responsibilities shared with local authorities.

Please see [annex one](#) for more detail about statutory legislation and guidance regarding unpaid carers and virtual wards.

<sup>1</sup> NHS England virtual wards operational framework: [england.nhs.uk/long-read/virtual-wards-operational-framework](https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/virtual-wards-operational-framework)

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# About the Virtual Wards ‘Unpaid Carer Pathway’

The purpose of this ‘Unpaid Carer Pathway’ is to help see the perspective of an unpaid carers’ journey through a virtual ward and pinpoint where particular steps and interventions should be made. It is based on the rights and entitlements of carers, legislation and statutory policy and practice guidance (see annex for more detail).

This Unpaid Carer Pathway is aligned with the [Hospital Discharge Checklist](#) which we published in 2022. This was developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including unpaid carers and is similarly based on relevant legislation and guidance (see annex one below), as well as established practice.

## Six stages of the ‘Unpaid Carer Pathway’

This pathway describes each key stage of the journey of an unpaid carer through a virtual ward, from the start of the journey and identification, passing through a virtual ward, and onward to evaluation.

**There are six stages to the pathway:**

- 1 Identification of unpaid carers
- 2 Welcome and recognition
- 3 Assessment and delivery of support
- 4 Ongoing involvement and review
- 5 Onward transition from a virtual ward
- 6 Feedback and evaluation

## The expected outcomes from this pathway

- ✎ Protection and improvement of unpaid carers' health and wellbeing.
- ✎ Improved patient outcomes from a correctly assessed care situation.
- ✎ Reduction in risk and improvement in safety.
- ✎ Increasing carers' knowledge, skills, and resilience.
- ✎ Reduced risk of re-admission to hospital / inappropriate use of services. It should be noted that some patients will need to be readmitted to hospital.
- ✎ Increased trust in services by families and friends providing unpaid care.
- ✎ Investment in carer identification on health systems supporting other public health measures e.g. flu jabs take-up.
- ✎ Prevention of health inequalities, delay of further needs for care and reduction in health needs.
- ✎ Continuous improvement based on better data collection.

## Enablers of success











To achieve the expected outcomes from this pathway, the following needs to be put in place by virtual ward providers:

- ✎ Explicit strategic and systems description of why it's important to identify, assess and support unpaid carers.
- ✎ Adoption of the Unpaid Carer Pathway and integration into patient pathway.
- ✎ Good data collection which identifies unpaid carers, including when the person they care for is admitted to hospital or a virtual ward.
- ✎ Good transfer of data across to GP patient records, including if someone is identified as an unpaid carer, gaining the right permissions.
- ✎ Strong staff awareness of unpaid carers, including young carers.
- ✎ Embedded understanding of unpaid carers' rights and duties to involve them.
- ✎ Good links with local carers' support organisations.

# Six stages of the ‘Unpaid Carer Pathway’

We have identified six key stages of an unpaid carers’ journey through a virtual ward, from identifying carers at the earliest possible stage, through to feedback and evaluation following transition from a virtual ward. Please see more detail regarding the six stages below.

## Stage 1 – Identification of unpaid carers

-  Ensuring identification of any unpaid carers takes place at the earliest possible stage.
-  The recording of unpaid carers’ details in patient records, including if there are multiple carers e.g. if two siblings are sharing the caring.
-  Not making assumptions that all those providing unpaid care are adults and ensuring identification of any young carers.
-  Ensuring permissions and consents regarding involvement of unpaid carers are properly recorded. If the patient does not consent to sharing of information, unpaid carers still have the right to be recorded and involved if the care they provide is integral to the health and wellbeing of the patient, or by not sharing details, the carers’ own health and wellbeing will be put at risk.
-  Ensuring the patient and the carers involved understand the reason for admission, how long the patient is expected to be on the virtual ward, and the care and treatment they can expect, including any technology that will be used.
-  Making any necessary special arrangements to support unpaid carers who will be involved with care, including referral to social care support where this is needed for either the patient or the carer.
-  Provision of information and advice in relation to juggling paid work alongside their caring responsibilities, including income and potential social security benefits they may be entitled to (e.g., Carer’s Allowance).
-  Sharing links or referral to local carers’ support – including details of any local carers’ organisations (see Carers UK directory [here](#)).
-  Signposting to Carers UK’s [advice and information resources](#).
-  Ensuring all carers have a sense of onward care following discharge from the “virtual ward”, including some sense of “what will happen after this” for carers. This will help carers understand that the virtual ward pathway is part of an overall care pathway which involves and supports unpaid carers.

### Statutory legislation and guidance underpinning Stage 1

- NICE Adult Carers Support Guideline Quality Statement One
- NHS Constitution
- Duty of ICBs to promote involvement of the carer in the patient’s treatment, diagnosis and care (Health and Care Act 2022)
- NHS Trust duty to involve the carer at the point of hospital discharge (Health and Care Act 2022)



## Stage 2 – Welcome and recognition

- ✍ A welcoming approach which means that any unpaid carers understand that they will be treated as equal partners in care.
- ✍ Having a positive attitude towards unpaid carers.
- ✍ Ensuring that language about virtual wards is accessible and can be understood.





### Statutory legislation and guidance underpinning Stage 2



- NICE Adult Carers Support Guideline
- Wellbeing principle, Section 1, Care Act 2014
- Care Act 2014 guidance
- Children and Families Act 2014 in relation to young carers
- Virtual wards guidance
- Guidance on Health and Care Act 2022 duties to involve carers at the point of hospital discharge. This also includes references to young carers

## Stage 3 – Assessment and delivery of support

- ✍ Ensuring that any unpaid carers understand what is being asked of them and that they are able and willing to provide the care required. Make sure they understand that they have a choice about caring and can say ‘no’.
- ✍ Considering the factors which may impact on the carer’s ability to provide care, including:
  - their own physical and mental health conditions. Professionals should be particularly aware of health conditions which are more prevalent amongst carers, for example musculo-skeletal issues and mental health conditions,
  - whether they are in paid employment,
  - the impact this will have on their other caring responsibilities.
- ✍ Particular consideration should be given to young carers, including whether the care is age appropriate and any potential impact on education.
- ✍ Ensuring that any carers involved have the information, advice, training and skills to undertake the care required. This might include referring a carer for (or making them aware of their right to) a rapid carer’s assessment or a young carer’s assessment by their local authority. See more information about carers’ assessments [here](#).





-  Making sure that carers have all the information they need if someone's condition worsens or if the carer is unable to care while the patient is receiving care on a virtual ward. This includes ensuring they know who to contact and how.
-  Making sure that carers understand the technology being used, including readings that need to be taken of the patient.
-  Building in planning for emergencies. Ensure carers understand what needs to happen if they are no longer able to care for the patient on the virtual ward, and that they have a contingency plan in place.
-  Signposting carers to Carers UK's advice re. [planning for emergencies](#).



### **Statutory legislation and guidance underpinning Stage 3**

- Multiple provisions within the Care Act 2014; Section 1 wellbeing, Section 2 duty to prevent, delay or reduce the need for care, sections on assessments and duty to co-operate
- Duty to reduce health inequalities, Health and Care Act 2022
- Patient safety provisions

## **Stage 4 – Ongoing involvement and review**

-  Making sure that the carers involved feel confident about the care they will need to provide and have sufficient information and advice. Do not expect carers to ask all the questions, and refer to the [professionals checklist](#) that has been developed.
-  Checking in (and regularly re-checking) with carers that they are managing the care they need to provide, and ensuring they understand they have a choice about providing care once the patient has been referred onto the virtual ward.
-  Adjusting the care and support provided to the patient and carer by the virtual wards team, including by increasing support if necessary.
-  Preparing for transition from the virtual ward as part of an onward care pathway.



### **Statutory legislation and guidance underpinning Stage 4**

- Care Act 2014 provisions
- Patient safety provisions
- All relevant legal provisions set out above such as Health and Care Act 2022 duties to involve carers, health inequalities duties, continuing care responsibilities, NHS Constitution, etc.



## Stage 5 – Transition from the virtual ward

- ✍ If this is into hospital, then information about the carer should be transferred, with their permission, to ensure that there is continuity of care.
- ✍ If community-based care is going to be introduced or continue (i.e., continuing healthcare or social care, or an increased reliance on the carer), then planning must start early and there is a duty to involve the unpaid carer and ensure that they are supported.
- ✍ Supporting people to receive an assessment of their needs as an unpaid carer. This includes making them aware they can request an assessment and signposting them to adult social services. More information is available [here](#).
- ✍ Referral to local carers' support if this has not already been done. This is to ensure the carers involved are aware of the support they can access locally. See Carers UK's [directory of support](#).
- ✍ Ensuring that services don't stop abruptly without explanation and that information is shared in a sustainable and ongoing fashion with services i.e. the GP practice or other setting.

### Legislation and statutory guidance underpinning Stage 5

- Most relevant duties i.e. Health and Care Act 2022 duties to involve, Care Act 2014 duties, NHS Constitution

## Stage 6 – Feedback and evaluation post-transition

- ✍ Ensuring that unpaid carers' views are gathered. This includes their perspective on both (a) the care for the person being cared for, and (b) the impact on carers' own lives; including their health, wellbeing, education, ability to work, to take time off, and their relationships.
- ✍ Asking questions about whether they had sufficient information, whether they were identified and recognised and what the outcomes were for them personally. Please refer to the [professional's checklist](#) that we have developed.

### Legislation and statutory guidance underpinning Stage 6

- Health and Care Act 2022 involvement duties
- Health and Care Act 2022 duties to reduce health inequalities and improve patient outcomes
- Care Act 2014 duties
- Cooperation duties under multiple pieces of legislation
- NHS Constitution

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## How does this Unpaid Carer Pathway for virtual wards fit with hospital discharge planning?

The Unpaid Carer Pathway has been kept deliberately similar to the [hospital discharge pathway](#) and is designed to link seamlessly with that process, if it has already been followed for in-hospital care.

Caring at home is very different to providing support in hospital as the responsibility of unpaid carers and the reliance on them is far greater. Turning a home into a hospital can be a big change for many people and their families. This makes all of the stages in this pathway critical to patient and carer wellbeing, safety and outcomes.

### Where to find more information

- [Hospital discharge checklist](#)
- [Virtual Wards unpaid carers toolkit](#)
- [Virtual Wards explainer](#) for carers and local carers' organisations
- Virtual wards [template carers' leaflet](#) for local virtual wards to adapt
- Virtual wards [checklist and advocacy tool](#) for unpaid carers
- Systems and [professional's checklist](#) for supporting carers within virtual wards

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## Annex one: Statutory legislation and guidance background to the virtual wards Unpaid Carer Pathway

This Unpaid Carer Pathway is designed to support the guidance and the delivery of virtual wards, as well as NHS England’s core duties and responsibilities to unpaid carers (which are shared with local authorities). These include:

- Virtual wards operational framework guidance - [england.nhs.uk/long-read/virtual-wards-operational-framework](https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/virtual-wards-operational-framework) which recognises that unpaid carers should be recognised as equal partners in care who can provide vital information about the person with care and support needs.
- Health and Care Act 2022 duty on Integrated Care Boards to promote the public involvement of unpaid carers in the prevention, treatment, diagnosis and care of the patient (Section 25, 14Z36) [legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/31/section/25/enacted](https://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/31/section/25/enacted)).
- Health and Care Act 2022 duty placed on NHS Trusts to involve carers at the point of hospital discharge. (Section 91 amending the Care Act 2014) [legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/31/section/91](https://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/31/section/91).
- NHS Trusts must have regard to the guidance on hospital discharge (Section 91, Health and Care Act 2022), which sets out principles of supporting carers and incorporates Care Act 2014 provisions. [legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/31/section/91](https://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/31/section/91).
- ICB and Integrated Care Partnerships duties under the Health and Care Act 2022 (Section 25, 14Z35) to promote population health and to reduce health inequalities.
- [NHS Constitution](#), to which every health body and health worker must have regard, includes the involvement of unpaid carers.
- Care Act 2014, duty to cooperate with health bodies regarding carers’ assessments, where appropriate, and cooperation duties more generally under s. 6 of the Care Act 2014.
- [Continuing Healthcare](#) guidance, para. 347 with respect to supporting and involving carers.
- Hospital discharge guidance which includes a provision which states that where a local area agrees to fund a period of care, “this should also ensure that no carers are left without adequate support or an assessment of their longer term needs (if needed)”.
- [Data Saves Lives strategy](#) which promotes the promote identification of carers and digital delivery of support alongside traditional forms of support.
- [NICE Adult Carer guideline](#) which helps health and social care practitioners identify people who are caring for someone and give them the right information and support. It covers carers’ assessments, practical, emotional and social support and training, and support for carers providing end of life care.

*NOTE: The Health and Care Act 2022 responsibilities to towards unpaid carers are “all age”. Therefore, planning assumptions must include identifying whether there are any young carers – children under the age of 18 – who may be providing or about to provide care.*

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## Acknowledgments

This resource has been created with the input of unpaid carers, professionals working in health, virtual wards leaders, local carers' organisations and local authorities. We are grateful for the input of these individuals, along with policy makers at NHS England, DHSC and ADASS/LGA.

The Carers Partnership consists of Carers UK and Carers Trust, as part of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance.

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## Contact

For further information about this virtual wards Unpaid Carer Pathway, please contact the Carers UK policy team at [policy@carersuk.org](mailto:policy@carersuk.org).

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