Manchester Social Economy Alliance.

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Insight | Development | Encouragement

Unpaid Carers in Manchester's Social Economy: The Cost to the Community

How a lack of support for volunteers and employees in Manchester's social economy groups, who also have caring responsibilities, is limiting the impact of the sector.

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MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

Manchester Community Central
Voluntary, community and social enterprise sector

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Executive Summary

As part of its role in supporting and advocating for Manchester's social economy, the Manchester Social Economy Alliance (MSEA) undertook a short research project at the end of 2025 with support from Manchester City Council's E26 programme.[1] This was to test assumptions and beliefs about the sector in relation to how it supports people in roles within it, who also have unpaid caring responsibilities.

Through a mixture of surveys and round table discussions this found that social economy groups are usually more supportive of people who are seeking to balance unpaid caring roles with paid work or volunteering. It also identified that in doing so, many social economy groups are subsequently more limited in the reach and impact that they are subsequently able to offer to wider communities.

While these findings are of encouragement and concern in equal measure, it is hoped that this research can inform and influence policy and practice that will see both unpaid carers and social economy groups in which they work, able to be better recognised and supported in the future.

[1] https://10gm.org.uk/10gms-work/supporting-the-social-economy/

Introduction

The Manchester Social Economy Alliance (MSEA) was formed to support, encourage, advocate, and represent the wider collection of groups across Manchester who are recognised as being part of the 'social economy'.[2]

As such, it is important that the MSEA has a range of current and credible data about the sector - to this end it actively engages in research activities of different kinds on an ongoing basis.

MSEA commissioned a recognised expert consultant to lead this particular research study - Adrian Ashton has living experience of balancing multiple unpaid care responsibilities with (self) employment; and whose to date in this field has led to him being invited to collaborate with the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self Employed, the national charity Working Families, and the Department of Business and Trade, on their own respective projects on this topic.

Aims of the Research

During 2025, MSEA became aware of national research that highlighted how more than 600 people in employment across the wider economy nationally are being forced to exit employment every day, owing to their becoming unpaid carers in ways that mean they can no longer maintain their employment roles.[3]

It was therefore keen to ascertain how far this may be creating a pressure for local social economy groups, as part of informing its priorities for future work on behalf of this sector.

This research also offered an opportunity to test a commonly held belief that social economy groups will be more supportive of paid staff and volunteers who have unpaid caring responsibilities, than organisations in the public and private sector.[4] While this is a common understanding amongst many, there is little research that empirically substantiates this belief from the perspective of people with unpaid caring responsibilities, so it was hoped that this study would also be able to add to the literature and understanding concerning unpaid carers more widely.

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[2] https://sites.google.com/view/mcrsocialeconomyalliance/our-aims

[3] https://www.carersuk.org/press-releases/research-more-than-600-people-quit-work-to-look-after-older-and-disabled-relatives-every-day/

[4] This belief is based on various researches that suggest the social and public sector tend to employ more people with unpaid caring responsibilities than the private sector; as well as their also being more likely to have policies in place to recognise people managing such circumstances.

For the purposes of this research, the definition of an unpaid carer that was used was:

> *"someone who is providing unpaid care and support to a family member, partner, friend, or neighbour who is disabled, has an illness or long-term condition, or who needs extra help to manage day-to-day life."*

Methodology

The study was undertaken between September and December 2025, and utilised a range of approaches in seeking to be as comprehensive as possible within this time available:

- An initial literature review via Academia, Google scholar, and open web searches (which yielded little results);
- An on-line survey over 4 weeks seeking the views and experiences of unpaid carers working and volunteering in social economy groups in Manchester (this was circulated and prompted through local carer support bodies and groups, social economy networks and bodies, and social media channels);
- Round table focus groups with unpaid carers in roles with social economy groups to explore the emergent findings in more detail; and invited local carer support bodies and services to reflect on the overall findings;
- The analysis and conclusions of the study were then also reviewed by MSEA's steering group who are representative of the social economy sector, to ensure that they could be best used to support its wider and future work.

Findings of Surveys and Round Tables

An on-line survey form was created that captured the circumstances, views, and experiences of people in volunteering and paid roles in social economy groups in Manchester who also have unpaid caring responsibilities, as the primary data capture for this research.

This form was co-designed with representatives of the sector via the MSEA, and disseminated through a number of channels including local carer bodies and networks, MSEA's contacts and networks, and social media channels.

In seeking to ensure that as many unpaid carers had opportunity to learn of this study and respond to it, the survey form was open for a period of 4 weeks during October 2025. During this time, a total of 9 responses were received. It also invited respondents to express interest in joining a subsequent round table / focus group to reflect further on the findings of it. It also offered additional individual support to any respondent who may have wished to speak further about the research, in the event that the questions to it had raised anxieties or upset within them, to help them manage these.[5]

Profile of Unpaid Carers

While the number of respondents to the survey may appear small, an analysis of their demographic profile by gender, age, ethnicity, and number of people they care for, reveals that they were reflective of national trends about unpaid carers as identified by both Carers UK, and that of 10GM in a recent local study about sandwich carers across Greater Manchester. As a result, there is a high degree of confidence that the findings can be taken as representative of the wider community of unpaid carers who have active roles within Manchester's social economy groups.

Specifically, the majority are women, aged 50-59, most are white, and in the region of 1 in 4 have unpaid caring responsibilities for more than one person. Also, there was a significant range in the number of years that a person had been in an unpaid caring role for (3 - 34); and with the average of responses being 15 years, and the median 14 years, there is confidence that respondents represented an equal spread of different lengths of time in caring roles between them all.

The round tables / focus groups further validated the experiences and profiles of unpaid carers who hold roles within Manchester's social economy groups as being reflective of national trends

[5] Providing unpaid care is recognised as having significant negative impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of people: https://carers.org/campaigning-for-change/new-research-finds-unpaid-care-has-huge-impact-on-mental-health-and-affects-low-income-households

- some people shared their own caring stories, which highlighted the variety of ways in which people become unpaid carers, and the impacts this has on them:

"J" became a carer for their spouse, following a significant health incident they suffered - and their caring needs meant that they need to be in attendance with them all the time, so unable to engage in any or voluntary paid work.

"H" became a carer for their child after they developed support needs, but has been able to access and secure support for themselves such that they are able to work on a part-time basis.

Summary case study profiles of unpaid carers who are / were part of social economy groups in Manchester

Role of Unpaid Carers in Social Economy Groups

Survey respondents were asked to clarify the nature of their role within the social economy group that they were a part of - this revealed an almost equal split between those who held salaried roles, and those who worked in a volunteer capacity.

This finding was felt to offer additional validation to the sample of unpaid carers who responded to the survey (and was mirrored in the make up of those attending the round table / focus group), in recognising that a key characteristic of social economy groups is the pronounced role of volunteering in leading them and supporting the delivery of their services and activities.

Unpaid Care as a Barrier to Gaining Roles within Social Economy Groups

It is recognised that having unpaid care responsibilities is a significant barrier for people to be able to access employment or other roles of any kind.[6] In keeping with the aims of this study, unpaid carers were asked about when they became an unpaid carer in relation to their current role (*i.e. have they become a carer since taking on their role, in which case they may be more at risk of having to 'quit' in the future in keeping with national trends; or does the nature of social economy groups make it easier for unpaid carers who want to take on other roles to be able to do so?*).

[6] Approximately ⅔ of people who become unpaid carers find that they cannot continue to hold paid jobs, nor be able to apply for them: https://carers.org/news-and-media/news/post/538-caught-between-caring-and-a-career-a-why-carers-like-me-struggle-to-find-work

All respondents to the survey who were in paid roles indicated that they already had unpaid caring responsibilities before taking in their current jobs.

This created a hypothesis that social economy groups may be more open and welcoming of unpaid carers seeking paid work than other sectors, which was explored through the focus group / round table:

- Some people shared that previous employment experiences saw the private sector being less understanding and supportive of candidates and employees with unpaid caring responsibilities than groups within the social economy.

- All stated that they felt the social economy was more supportive than other sectors owing to its underlying culture (*not the existence of any policies or procedures*). This means that groups within it are not only more accommodating of flexible working requests, but that this also makes it easier for people to openly talk about being an unpaid carer (*one person shared how their spouse hasn't been able to disclose their respective unpaid caring role within their private sector employment, owing to the stigma that their workplace culture associates with being such*).

- However, people also identified that while the sector may be more open and wishing to be supportive of people with unpaid caring responsibilities than elsewhere, sector groups were also less likely to be able to offer anything more than limited flexible working arrangements owing to their pre-existing limited resources in general.

Other respondents to the survey indicated how their journeys of becoming an unpaid carer had meant that they had had to leave their previous employment [*sector unknown*]. But that as the needs of the person they cared for have changed, they have now begun to seek to re-engage in the workforce, but are concerned that this gap in their career and working life will mean that no employer will consider them as a viable candidate:

"I had to give up my own career to care for my daughter. I am now at the point where she is leaving home and I am looking for work but have no obvious referees or previous jobs for doing this which affects my chances of getting work. I do not think that the extensive experience that I have collected as a carer will be appreciated in my job search."

That the social economy can offer a range of volunteering roles, including in relation to helping people gain/re-gain paid work, suggests that for unpaid carers the social economy can offer untapped and currently unrecognised support for them in this regard.

How Unpaid Carers are Supported by the Groups they Work/Volunteer with

Respondents to the survey were asked about the types of support currently available to them in their role within their respective group, and also what they might wish for that is not currently offered to them.

In keeping with wider trends and other research about what unpaid carers in paid roles most need and appreciate, flexible working practices and options rank most highly:

Type of support offered	No. of survey responses
flexible hours	6
peer support group	2
ability to remote work	1
empathy and respect	1

Table: *support offered to unpaid carers in their roles by social economy groups they are part of*

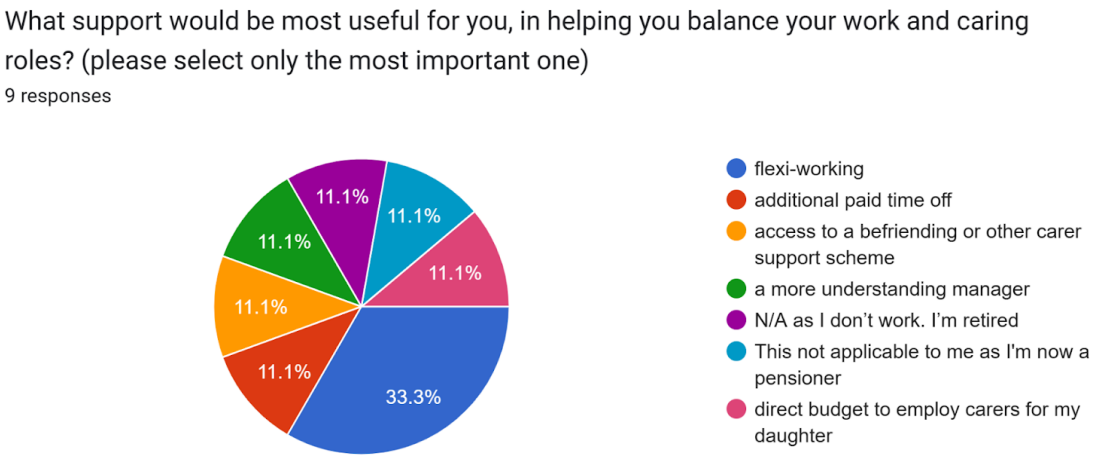


Chart: *types of support unpaid carers prioritise in helping them balance unpaid caring responsibilities with their role within the group they are part of*

There was also comment shared by one unpaid carer about the importance of having to have been offered any type of role at all, alongside their unpaid caring responsibilities:

"I think of giving up work every day, but it's actually work that keeps me going - at work I have purpose, friends, fun, and support."

The focus group / round table explored this finding, to try and understand how far these supports that were being offered and accessed had been designed in response to the individual person, or how far they may be indicative of a wider culture and practices more generally (*such as being based on policies, etc*). This identified that although most groups did not have any formal procedures or policies in relation to unpaid carers, their underlying culture made it easier for people to ask for support, and to subsequent co-design that with the group they are part of.

Alongside the support that unpaid carers received/accessed through the group that they held roles in, they were also asked about other sources of support available to them:

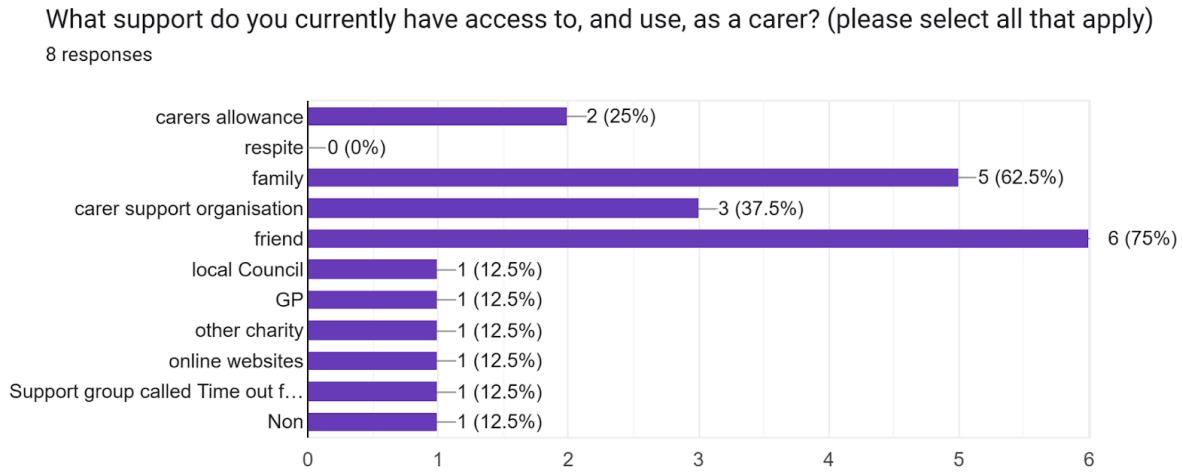


Chart: *support access by unpaid carers other than from the group they are part of*

That the majority of support that unpaid carers access is not from structured carer support services further highlights the importance of groups that they are part of being able to fully understand and appreciate their circumstances and be able to find ways to support them:

- The introduction of the Carers Leave Act reflects a wider recognition of the importance of the role an employing body has in how unpaid carers are supported;

- Anecdotally, some larger employers across all sectors have created carer forums within their organisations for staff to mutually support each other. These also offer employers insight into how they might better understand unpaid carers' needs who are in their employment, and how to support them in the context of the wider organisations' needs.

Recognising that nearly all social economy groups would be too small to be able to resource and manage such forums, the focus groups / round tables were used to explore how far unpaid carers might find such a resource useful if it were created as a shared resource between all social economy groups:

- Some expressed that having a peer community could be beneficial in helping people feel more confident and comfortable to not only identify and accept their roles and identities as unpaid carers,[7] but also to begin to ask for support from the groups that they are part of.

- However, others felt that the support networks and groups that they are part of need to either be emotional (*which are usually engaged with by people whose caring roles and circumstances mean they're not able to work, and so more isolated*), or to share practical knowledge (*usually engaged with by people who are juggling caring with some time of paid work and lack time to engage in social offers, but through work will be having social contact with other people*). This is because the additional pressures on a person's time in balancing unpaid caring responsibilities with a paid or structured volunteering role mean that there is little time for them to be able to engage in anything other.

- People also shared that they learnt of any unpaid carer peer / support groups that they are part of through either that group investing ongoing resources into promoting awareness about its existence, or their being personally invited by an existing member of it.

In light of the above, it is unclear as to any benefit that creating a forum for unpaid carers who hold roles in social economy groups might offer (*or even be able to be engaged with by them*).

Impacts of Unpaid Caring on Carers

As part of understanding the responses to the survey, unpaid carers were asked about the impact that having such a role has on them personally. This allowed wider benchmarking against trends from national surveys and research to be drawn on, in further understanding how far the experience of unpaid carers in Manchester's social economy groups might be as expected. In doing so, this also allowed for better confidence to be had in the analysis of findings.

[7] It can typically take more than 2 years for a person to accept that they have become an unpaid carer (which makes it harder for employers and others to be able to identify and support them in turn): https://www.carersuk.org/policy-and-research/our-areas-of-policy-work/identification/

In keeping with wider national trends,[8] it was found that if an unpaid carer is able to hold either a paid or voluntary role with a social economy group, that ⅓ are unable to pursue career opportunities or engage in training and development to upskill themselves. It also found that up to 1 in 5 people have had to notably either reduce what they can earn, or been forced to quit their role in the group completely.

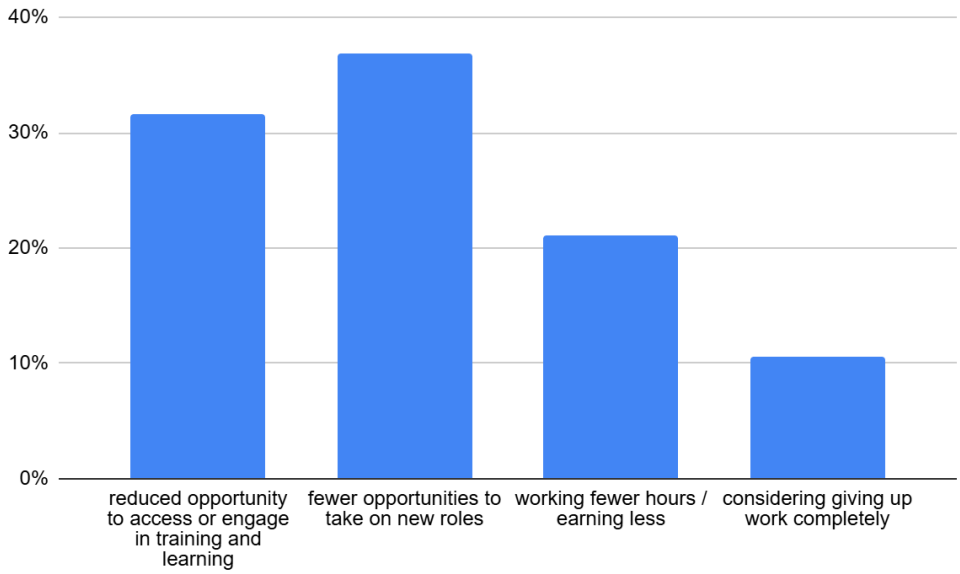


Chart: *impact of being an unpaid carer on role and work for the carer*

This latter point relates to the prompt which this research was concerned with testing - how far social economy groups may be being weakened by people within them becoming unpaid carers, and having to quit their existing roles because of this.

There were also comments from unpaid carers that highlight that the reasons why people may feel they should / need to give up their current roles within groups is not only because of the pressures of balancing their current role with their caring responsibilities, but also because of some of the implications of how they have adopted flexible working practices to be able to balance them:

"I am considering giving up work completely, as I don't feel part of the team because I'm only in the office 1 day a week"

[8] See Carers UK 'state of caring 2025'

Impacts of Unpaid Caring on Social Economy Groups

In helping MSEA understand how far the topic of unpaid carers is one that it (*and others)* should prioritise in its future programmes and activities, the impact of a group having unpaid carers within its paid staff and / or volunteers was also explored. In doing so, it is believed that this is the first time any research has considered what the specific impacts of unpaid carers are on the individual organisations that they hold roles within.[9]

The findings to this part of the research indicate the notable impact not just to individual groups, but also the wider social economy, and the various communities it supports:

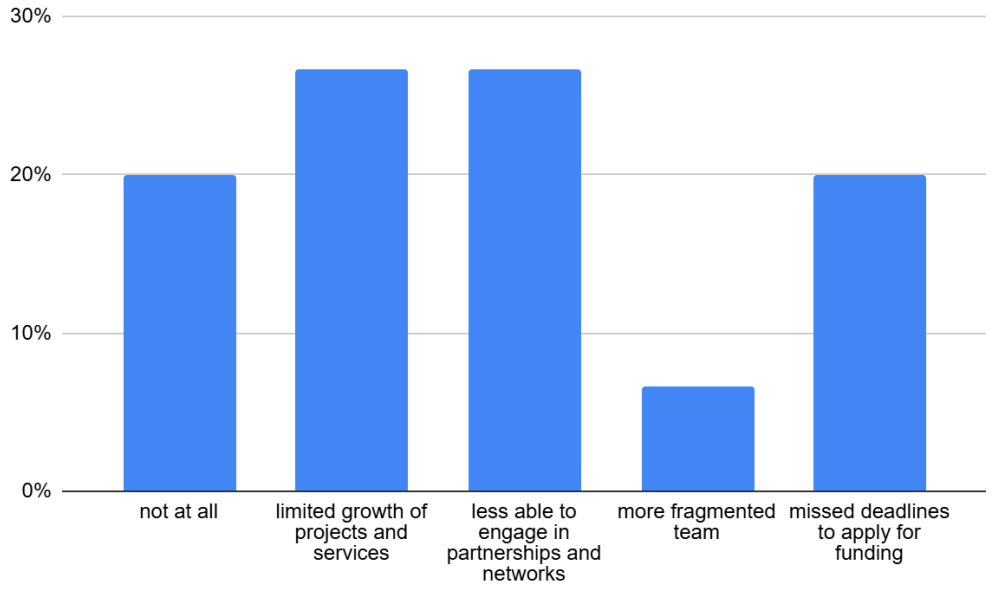


Chart: *impact to the social economy group of it employing unpaid carers or having them amongst its volunteers*

It is apparent that the impact of being an unpaid carer in people previously identified (*their having less ability to work or deliver activities within fixed/assured schedules, and not being able to develop their skills and expertise*) is having a notable negative impact on the groups that they hold roles within.

[9] To date, only the impact of unpaid caring responsibilities to the wider economy, and on people who are also self-employed are understood to have been explored in other studies and research:
https://www.ipse.co.uk/campaigns/other-campaigns/self-employed-unpaid-caring-responsibilities
https://thirdsectorexpert.blogspot.com/2024/09/how-better-support-for-carers-could.html

The consequences of the nearly ⅓ of all social economy groups who have unpaid carers amongst their team (*as employees or volunteers*) are significant for the negative consequences this is causing to the wider communities that those groups exist and seek to support:

- Income and funding opportunities have been lost, meaning that wider services and support that communities rely on is becoming more fragile and at risk.

- Changing needs amongst wider communities are not able to be fully met or supported, by groups not being able to fully appropriately respond to these.

- The wider sector is less connected and cohesive from groups not being able to network fully together in co-ordinating activities and services.

However, 1 in 5 groups found that having unpaid carers amongst their teams had not created any noticeable negative impact. Through the focus groups / round tables, some people shared how their group had actually benefitted from their also being an unpaid carer:

"The skills and perspectives I've had to develop as an unpaid carer has meant my colleagues have recognised my having become a better manager to my team, which has meant we've been able to deliver better results in our programmes and projects."

Conclusions and Recommendations

This initial survey into unpaid carers who also hold roles within groups that make up Manchester's social economy has found reasons for both encouragement and concern:

- There is clearer evidence that the social economy is more supportive of people who are/become unpaid carers, in helping them balance working/volunteering with caring, in comparison with other sectors.

- The experiences and profiles of unpaid carers who have roles in Manchester's social economy groups is broadly comparable to their counterparts who are unpaid carers elsewhere. This means that national initiatives to support unpaid carers will be equally relevant to them.

- Reflecting national trends, there are indications that Manchester's social economy will increasingly lose talent and skills within its current workforce as more people become unpaid carers into the future. This also applies to people who may be in volunteering roles too, which means that the skills and capacity of the sector will be eroded without recognition or interventions.

- The existing cost of supporting unpaid carers as part of the teams within social economy groups is not just being felt by the individual carer, but also by wider communities that these groups exist to support, from missed opportunities for funding and new projects that are needed to support their needs.

- That this research was undertaken at all was found to be an encouragement to unpaid carers in ways beyond the findings it has captured:

"Spending this time with others in this focus group / round table has helped me to stop, pause, and listen to make better sense of my own circumstances and experiences as an unpaid carer"

In light of the above, the following recommendations are suggested as to how the findings of this research might be utilised to best effect for the benefit of the social economy sector in Manchester, and the different communities that they serve and support:

1. Encourage funders and commissioners to be more flexible with deadlines for tender and bid responses, in recognition that groups who have unpaid carers within their teams are currently struggling to meet these existing deadlines.

2. Build on the existing practices of different volunteering programmes and opportunities, to enable more people who are/have been unpaid carers to access pathways back into employment (*should they wish to*), as a means to address the barriers to gaining work that being/having been such creates for them.

3. Any future research or studies into unpaid carers, or the capacities of social economy groups in Manchester, should build on these initial findings through identifying how many groups within Manchester's social economy have unpaid carers amongst their volunteers and paid staff. This would allow an extrapolation of the findings of this research to more accurately quantify the extent to which the sector is losing income (*from missing funding deadlines*) and not able to fully meet the needs of local communities (*by not being able to scale or develop services*). In doing so, the sector (*and unpaid carers*) would have a further strengthened evidence base to advocate for itself with policy makers and others.

Appendix

Survey Data not Otherwise Included in Main Body of Report

9 responses
All female

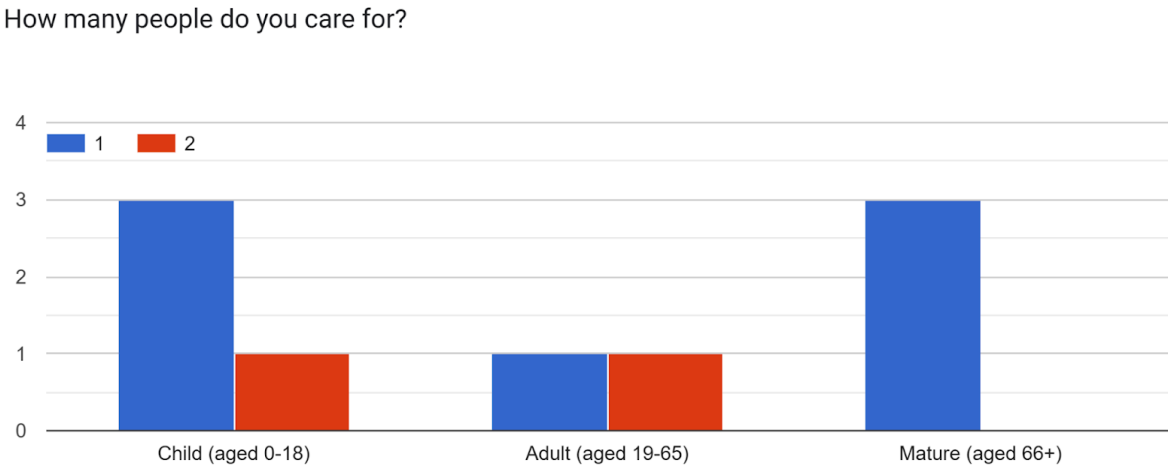
Age range

age	respondents
18-24	-
20-25	-
30-34	-
35-39	-
40-44	-
45-49	11%
50-54	22%
55-59	44%
60-69	-
70+	22%

Ethnicity

White	78%
White (mixed)	11%
Mixed	11%

Carers UK = most unpaid carers likely to be women aged 55-59, and 90% white (*facts about carers, Dec 2024*)



Identifies some are ‘sandwich carers’ (unpaid caring responsibilities for more than 1 person) - focus of previous study in Manchester: *A participatory scoping study of experiences of unpaid care giving among members of the ‘sandwich generation’ in Greater Manchester communities.*

Believed that in the region of 1 in 4 unpaid carers fall into this definition (carers uk) - so sample responses remain representative of wider caring trends and profiles.

Bibliography

State of caring 2025, Carers UK

Inequalities in informal caregiving across the adult life course in Europe, University College London, 2024

A participatory scoping study of experiences of unpaid care giving among members of the ‘sandwich generation’ in Greater Manchester communities, 10GM, 2025

Additional research references included as footnotes through this report