Carers of East Lothian

Carers of East Lothian Strategy 2026 to 2031

OUR VISION:

"Our vision is an East Lothian community where adult carers are recognised, accepted, and fully included without discrimination in daily life. We see a future where every carer is empowered through early intervention, accessible support, and strong partnerships."



Executive Summary/Foreword

Since 1996, Carers of East Lothian (CoEL) has supported thousands of unpaid carers across the county.

Caring will most likely affect all of us at some point in our lives. Unpaid carers make an enormous contribution to society-it is estimated that the care they provide has a value of £18.3 billion every year. Yet, despite the vital role carers play in families, communities and the wider health and social care system, they are far too often overlooked. Every single day, they give their time and energy to look after others. For the past 30 years, we have been proud to stand beside them. Many carers have described the organisation as a lifeline.

Carers' voices and experiences are at the heart of this 2026–2031 Strategic Plan. Through events, surveys, and other engagement activities, we gathered insights into their experiences, challenges, and priorities. We also drew on the expertise of our staff, Board of Trustees, Carers Panel, and volunteers. Many staff and volunteers have personal experience of caring, while every member of our Carers Panel is a current or former carer. Together with analysis of trends from our recent work, these insights shaped the priorities and ambitions in this plan.

The feedback we have received presents a clear picture of carers' experiences and priorities. We understand that:

- Caring can have a significant impact on mental health, wellbeing, employment, finances, relationships, and life balance.
- Access to timely information, advice and support is important to carers. Many carers access support when they have been caring for quite some time.
- Peer support, trusted relationships, and human connection are highly valued. Carers do not want digital only support.
- Access to breaks from caring are essential and often difficult for carers to access.
- Carers want stronger advocacy, improved professional awareness of caring, and greater recognition of carers as equal partners in care.

Building on Our Work So Far

Through developing our strategy, we found that carers deeply value our core services, including:

- Information and advice
- One-to-one support including emotional support, support navigating services, and advocating for carers.
- Group support: Regular peer support opportunities, community activities, and workshops.
- Counselling

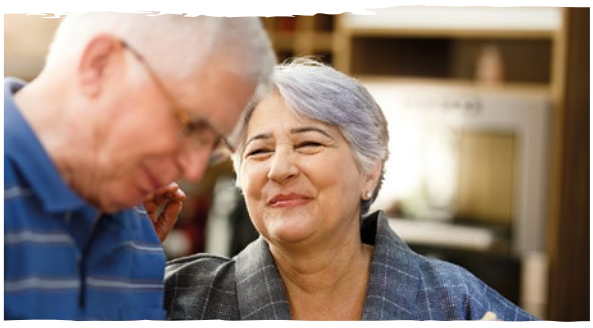


What Carers Want Next

We also learned what carers want to see more of in the future:

- Carers need ongoing support from people and services that understand the realities of caring. They want others to recognise how caring can affect every part of their life, including their mental health, wellbeing, work, finances, relationships, and ability to balance their own needs with those of the person they care for.
- Carers want their voices heard clearly on local issues. They need strong advocacy, improved awareness of the realities of caring amongst professionals and decision makers, and greater recognition as equal partners in care.
- Carers need communication that makes support simple to find. They are asking for timely information and advice, alongside more opportunities for peer support, trusted relationships, and meaningful human connection.
- Carers need support before they hit a crisis point. Many carers wait too long for support, they need quicker recognition from professionals and easier access to essential breaks from caring.

This strategy and its associated operational plan set out how we will strive to achieve these things over the coming years, ensuring carers get better support in East Lothian.



Rising Challenges

As a charity, we face a combination of growing challenges. Our population is aging, the health and social care systems are under immense pressure, and more people are becoming unpaid carers. The demand for our support is rising while funding is increasingly harder to secure. To meet these challenges, we must find new ways to protect our resources, adapt our services, and ensure we remain a strong, reliable lifeline for every carer who needs us.

As an organisation we are aware that technology is changing faster than ever, bringing new updates and tools every day. We need to keep up with these new developments and use technology to improve our services. But we promise that our personal, one-to-one support will always be central to what we do. Technology will never replace human connections – it will only help us give carers the support they need in a way that is meaningful and works best for them.



National and Local Environment

The National Picture: Transforming Carers' Rights

We are operating in a time of change – within UK and Scottish law and within our local East Lothian communities. As we write our strategy, we are aware of the changes taking place within both the UK and Scottish Government. The Care Reform Act (Scotland) 2025 and the introduction of the Right to a Break will impact on carers and our work going forward. We will need to constantly monitor changes that affect carers and adapt our services and support to incorporate them.

The Local Picture

East Lothian is also changing quickly, and the reliance on unpaid carers has never been greater. East Lothian is one of Scotland's fastest-growing areas and has one of the fastest-growing older populations in the country. Local health policies focus on supporting people to live independently at home for longer. As a result, the care required is becoming much more complex, putting immense pressure on community support systems.

The most recent Census identified 13,147 unpaid carers in East Lothian. However, we know that many carers do not recognise themselves as carers, instead seeing themselves as a supportive partner, parent, family member, or friend. As a result, the true number of unpaid carers is likely to be much higher, with many people missing out on support because they do not realise it is available to them.

Caring affects people of all ages and backgrounds. Many carers are juggling their roles alongside work, education, and their own health issues. These challenges are further compounded in East Lothian by rural isolation, transport limitations, and the rising cost of living.

Learning from Our Previous Strategy

Our 2026–2031 strategy is built on the foundations of our previous 2022–2025 Strategic Plan. Carers have consistently told us that they value having a local carers' centre that provides trusted information, practical support, emotional support, peer groups, counselling, and services that are easy to access when they need them.

The overview below outlines exactly what carers asked for as we developed our 2022 – 2025 strategy and the direct, practical actions we took to deliver on those needs.



WHAT CARERS ASKED FOR	KEY ACTIONS WE HAVE TAKEN IN RESPONSE
Stronger digital access & communication	Improved our website, made more effective use of social media and launched targeted email updates and regular newsletters for carers. Recruited a staff member responsible for communications and engagement.
Welcoming, accessible spaces	Reviewed our office space to make it feel more inviting and expanded our use of community spaces so that support is easier to access across East Lothian.
More practical support & connection	Expanded volunteer-led support to help reduce carer isolation via our telephone befriending service, as well as developing new volunteer-based support. We have piloted our Hospital Link Service on wards 3 and 4 and expanded this support to Wards 5 and 6. We have introduced male carers walking sessions and developed our group support for parent carers and carers of people living with mental health issues.
Clearer information about local care and support	Developed resources to promote our support and inform carers of their rights. Extended our suite of leaflets to promote our range of services. Completely refreshed our website. Included an events calendar, a community newsboard and a page specifically offering information for bereaved carers on our website. Launched a newsletter shared three times a year. Increased our email communications with carers.
Support that recognises different caring situations	Strengthened tailored support for parent carers. Strengthened tailored support for carers supporting someone with mental health difficulties. Developed new programmes of events for carers directly informed by carer engagement. Collaborating with local partners, explored how carers of people living with dementia could benefit from education and learning and co-developed a programme of support and learning opportunities.
Better support during transitions	Improved the bridge between young and adult carer services through *Time for Me* grants, shared intergenerational events, and partnership working.
Responsive and flexible services	Reviewed our Carer Support offer so that support can better reflect carers' needs. Sourced funding for and recruited for two exciting new posts: An Innovations and Improvement Manager and a Carer Support and Caseload Manager.
A better Adult Carer Support Plan experience	Collaborated with local partners to make the Adult Carer Support Plan process simpler and more meaningful for carers.

About Carers of East Lothian

OUR MISSION:

"To support all adults in a caring situation in East Lothian to get information and services to help their individual caring role, enhance their own wellbeing and strengthen their collective voice to improve services."

Carers of East Lothian (CoEL) focuses on supporting the thousands of unpaid carers in the county who look after family members, friends, and neighbours, who often put other people's needs before their own.

We provide individual support and advocate for carers to ensure their lived experience is heard and influences local policy and practice. We will continue a person-centred approach that treats every carer as an equal partner in care, ensuring local services are flexible, compassionate, and tailored to individual needs.

Our Areas of Focus

From our experience supporting unpaid carers in East Lothian, and through the conversations that have shaped this strategy, we have identified three key areas that will guide our work, services, and investment over the next five years.

1. Carer Health, Wellbeing and Support

We know that caring can have a significant impact on mental health. In our most recent organisational survey, 92% of respondents reported that their mental health had been directly impacted by their caring role. Concerns about carer wellbeing also remain the most common reason carers are referred to, or seek support from, our service.

This is reflected in national research. Carers UK's *State of Caring in Scotland* 2025 found that nearly three-quarters (73%) of carers reported feeling stressed or anxious because of their caring role, while more than a third (37%) said they felt depressed.

Taking a break is a critical but unmet need for many carers, with 44% of carers citing cost as a major barrier to taking a break.

When carers do seek help, we understand that navigating complex systems can be stressful for carers.

OUR COMMITMENT: We will continue to deliver one-to-one emotional support, check-in calls, peer support opportunities, practical support to help carers navigate services and access the help they need and counselling for carers. Relationship-based, person-centred support will remain at the heart of everything we do. We will champion carers' right to quality breaks and we will maintain financial support initiatives such as our *Time for Me* grants. We will continue to provide trusted, accessible welfare rights advice. We will also explore opportunities to offer specialised training that helps carers develop knowledge, skills, and confidence in their caring role.

2. Earlier Identification, Community Access, and Inclusion

Too many carers remain hidden. Nearly half (49.5%) of carers responding to our 2025 organisational survey had been caring for over five years before accessing our support, and 62% of our referrals are self-referrals.

Male carers account for only 23.6% of referrals to our service, despite national data suggesting that around 42% of unpaid carers are male. This suggests that male carers may be underrepresented in accessing support.

Research has consistently shown that some carers face additional barriers to accessing support and are less likely to engage with services. Factors such as geography, language, culture, stigma, discrimination, digital exclusion, financial circumstances or not recognising themselves as carers can all make it harder for people to access the help they need.

We recognise that improving access is not only about helping carers identify themselves and connect with support. It also means considering how our services are designed, communicated and delivered, seeking to reduce barriers and improve accessibility for carers from different backgrounds, circumstances and communities across East Lothian.

OUR COMMITMENT: We will work to ensure carers are identified sooner and connected to support at the earliest opportunity by strengthening referral pathways with health, social care, and education professionals. Through focused outreach in rural and community settings, we will help more carers find support earlier. We will place focus on engaging carers who are underrepresented or less likely to access services, reducing barriers and creating more inclusive, accessible support for carers from all backgrounds.

3. Recognition and Equal Partnership

Carers are equal partners in care, yet nearly 60% of those surveyed do not consistently feel respected, supported, or included by professionals.

OUR COMMITMENT: We will campaign to influence professional practice, ensuring carers have a seat at the table in care planning.



Our Core Aims (2026-2031)

To influence our work over the next five years, we have established the following five clear, strategic aims:

- **Reaching Carers**: Identify "hidden" carers who are not currently accessing support and connect them with the support they need.
- **Supporting Carers**: Deliver tailored, flexible support so carers can maintain their own wellbeing, build confidence, and make informed choices.
- **Partnership Working**: Collaborate with primary care, hospitals, wider health, and social care services and the third sector to strive for the best outcomes for carers.
- **Influencing Change**: Work with health and social care services, community partners, and the wider public to ensure unpaid carers are recognised, valued, and included as equal partners in care across East Lothian.
- **Financial Sustainability**: Diversify our income to secure our financial position.

People

At Carers of East Lothian, our people are at the heart of everything we do. Much of our vital daily work is delivered by our staff team, supported by a fantastic team of volunteers and a dedicated Board of Trustees that provides governance and strategic direction for the organisation.

We will develop our workforce, both staff and volunteers, through robust recruitment, retention, and succession planning. We will ensure our teams are appropriately resourced and structured to deliver the services we provide. As we enter this next chapter, we are committed to investing in our people, protecting staff wellbeing, and ensuring everyone has the clarity, tools, and support they need to deliver high-quality support for unpaid carers.

Our Core Values

Our values guide how we interact with our carers, our partners, and each other every single day:

- **Friendly**: We create a warm, welcoming environment where carers instantly feel at ease.
- **Knowledgeable**: We continually develop our skills and stay deeply informed about carers' needs and local services.
- **Trustworthy**: We protect confidentiality and remain honest, reliable, and consistent in every interaction.
- **Professional**: We demonstrate clear communication, maintain respectful boundaries, and deliver high-quality practice.
- **Compassionate**: We listen with genuine empathy and respond to every situation with kindness and care.
- **Inclusive**: We treat every carer with fairness, dignity, and respect, celebrating diverse backgrounds and needs.
- **Accountable**: We take full responsibility for our actions, seek feedback, and continually improve so carers can depend on us.

East Lothian Adult Carers Services

Carers of East Lothian has been the trusted provider of advice, information, and support services for unpaid carers in East Lothian for many years. In 2025, the charity was once again awarded the contract to deliver this service, building on previous contract awards, and reflecting its longstanding experience and established reputation in supporting carers across East Lothian.

Through the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, local authorities have a duty to provide an information, support and advice service for people caring for others within their county borders. This service is commissioned by East Lothian Health and Social Care Partnership utilising funds provided from the Scottish Government.

This contract is for 6 years and subject to review every 2 years. This long-term commitment provides organisational stability.

Through this contract, we will deliver activities and support that contribute to the following agreed outcomes:

OUTCOME 1: *Adult and Young Adult Carers are identified and can access support.*

OUTCOME 2: *Carers are well informed and have access to tailored and age-appropriate information and advice throughout their caring journey.*

OUTCOME 3: *Carers are supported to maintain their own physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing.*

OUTCOME 4: *Breaks from caring are timely and regularly available.*

OUTCOME 5: *Carers can achieve a balance between caring and other aspects of their lives.*

OUTCOME 6: *Carers are respected by professionals as partners in care and are appropriately included in the planning and delivery of both the care and support for the people they care for and services locally.*

OUTCOME 7: *Local communities are supported to be carer friendly.*

Context and Environment

Through the engagement process, carers shared the real-life challenges and key factors that affect how we do our work every day.

They told us:

- Caring is often a 24/7 responsibility.
- Caring can be emotionally exhausting.
- Caring can be isolating.
- It is difficult to balance caring with employment, family life, and personal wellbeing.
- Caring can be difficult and overwhelming.

Carers highlighted:

- Fear about the future.
- Anxiety about what will happen if they can no longer care.
- Difficulty navigating fragmented systems and services.

Governance and Statutory Accountability

Carers of East Lothian (CoEL) operates under a robust governance framework overseen by our Board of Trustees, ensuring total transparency, fiscal responsibility, and strict compliance with Scottish charity regulations. The Board works in tandem with the leadership team to manage capacity limits, protect workforce wellbeing, and drive a culture of continuous improvement.

We actively recruit trustees with lived experience of unpaid caring to ensure that carers' voices, experiences, and insights help shape the governance and strategic direction of our organisation.

We embed carers' voices in decision-making through the CoEL Carers Panel and service co-design, ensuring that the views and experiences of unpaid carers help shape the development and delivery of our services. Many members of our staff team also have lived experience of unpaid caring, bringing a deep understanding of carers' realities, challenges and needs to the support we provide every day.

Operational Plan

Our contract with the East Lothian Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) gives us a strong, steady base. It allows us to plan our day-to-day work across East Lothian with confidence. As we move forward, we will focus on achieving our seven outcomes linked to this contract and hitting our key targets to ensure that every service we deliver supports adult carers. Our operational plan will be shaped by three key influences: the outcomes and requirements set by East Lothian Health and Social Care Partnership, our strategic aims and objectives, and the changing needs of unpaid carers. Success depends on these three elements working together.

Out of our main organisational strategy we will develop our:

- **Funding and Fundraising Strategy**
- **Digital and Technology Strategy**
- **Communications and Engagement Strategy**
- **Volunteer Strategy**
- **Wellbeing Strategy**

Quality Assurance & Evaluation Framework

To maintain our high standards and remain accountable to our Board, funders, and the communities we serve, we will track our progress using a combination of service data, direct feedback, and annual reviews. Building on the systems already in place, we will continue to develop new and innovative approaches to measuring and demonstrating the impact of our work.

Resourcing Our Strategy

A large proportion of our planned work is funded through our core contract with the East Lothian Health and Social Care Partnership to deliver Adult Carers Services across East Lothian. However, to truly flourish at a local level, we cannot rely on a single income stream. We must identify and embrace both local and national opportunities for additional funding. Our structured, proactive approach to securing these extra resources is fully detailed in our standalone Funding and Fundraising Plan.

Risk Management

Carers of East Lothian (CoEL) maintains a comprehensive Risk Register to manage risks proactively at an organisational level, complementing the day-to-day operational risks managed within the staff team.

The Risk Register sits with the Board of Trustees and is reviewed regularly at their meetings, with any changes reported directly to the full Board.

Our Top 6 Strategic Risks

To ensure the long-term stability of Carers of East Lothian, we actively track and mitigate these six core strategic risks:

1. **Changes in government policy, legislation and regulation across health and social care**
2. **The Social Care Staffing Crisis**
3. **Unsustainable Growth in Demand**
4. **Funding Stability**
5. **Recruitment and Retention**
6. **Cyber & IT Security**

Carers Voice

Many people have contributed to the development of this strategy, helping to shape our plans for the future. We end, however, with the voices of carers themselves. The reflections below, shared in response to the question, "What support has made the greatest difference to you?" in our 2025 organisational survey, provide a reminder of the purpose behind our work and some of the ambitions set out in this strategy.

"Firstly, being given the number for CoEL by someone who identified me as a carer, a role I didn't recognise as mine initially. The ongoing support of the staff to rationalise, to demystify the maze of rules and regulations and to make me feel more like a person again."

"Having someone to talk to when things felt at their hardest."

"Professionals being honest and truly understanding what it is like."

"Knowing I am not on my own."

"Help with claiming benefits."

"A grant to start going to the gym – for me time!"

"CoEL listened to me."

"Validation and signposting."

"Relaxed and supportive activities."

"CoEL has really helped me to stay sane and keep interested in other things. You really listen. Professional and compassionate service- always!"

Conclusion

This strategic plan is built directly from a yearlong consultation process which started at our AGM in October 2025, and continued throughout the year with our staff, Board, carers and volunteers, ensuring our future direction is shaped by the lived experiences and collective expertise of our community.

Acknowledgements

Carers of East Lothian would like to thank everyone involved in developing this strategy, who gave their time, energy, and ideas to ensure we continue to grow as an organisation and meet the changing needs of Carers locally as we do.

Carers of
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