

MULTIPLE AND COMPLEX NEEDS INITIATIVE

VSA Male Carers Project

“A carer is someone, who, without payment, provides help and support to a partner, child, relative, friend or neighbour, who could not manage without their help.

This could be due to age, physical or mental illness, addiction or disability. Carers come from all walks of life, all cultures and can be of any age”

31 DECEMBER 2008

HEADLINE ACHIEVEMENTS

The difference we have made

- **Identified, engaged with and directly supported men in a caring role**
- **Identified personal, cultural & structural barriers to accessing services**
- **Established sustainable carer-led project Advisory Group**
- **Approached support, training & respite in innovative ways**
- **Raised awareness across sectors**
- **Influenced training programmes and professional practice**
- **Maintained mainstreaming agenda throughout**
- **Published reports, learning & progress globally through webpage, reports & newsletters**
- **Conducted major cross-sector survey**
- **Worked in close partnership with NHS and Local Authority to coordinate outcomes**
- **Secured further funding to publish, distribute & promote learning points from project**

Carers' Services across Aberdeenshire & Aberdeen City



CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION TO OUR PROJECT

Introduction

Our project

The 2001 UK Census was the first to include the “Carer’s Question”. For the first time, accurate figures were compiled regarding the extent to which people across the UK provide unpaid care. The census identified over six million unpaid carers (1 in 10 of the UK population). A subsequent study carried out by the University of Leeds and Carers UK suggested that the value of unpaid care equates to an annual saving to the UK Treasury of £87bn per year. In amongst the Census figures was the startling revelation that around *40% of unpaid carers are men*. Not only did this figure confound widely-held cultural stereotypes about who carers are, but experiences from Carers’ Centres across the UK indicated that this figure was not reflected in the demographic who regularly access available carers’ services. The implication being that there are a huge number of men across the UK (around two million) with a caring role who do not seek or receive support from existing services. When these figures are linked to the growing body of evidence which shows that the caring role is associated with increased incidence of poor health, financial difficulties, relationship breakdown and mental health issues, the consequences of not supporting this group become potentially catastrophic. MCN funding was sought to further explore this issue.

MCN funding has been used to develop and evaluate services for male carers in Aberdeenshire. In addition to this, a funding stream for a separate post was secured

through *The Princess Royal Trust for Carers* (PRTC) to provide direct support services for male carers across Aberdeen City. Both post-holders have worked together under the joint-title of *VSA Male Carers Project* to develop a range of services for male carers in the North East of Scotland.

The MCN lead project worker was appointed on the 4th September 2006. The project was originally scheduled to run for two years from that date but extended MCN funding was secured to take the project up until end of December 2008. Further funding was subsequently identified from NHS-Grampian to take the project into 2009.

The core responsibilities of the post were to identify and explore the needs of males in Aberdeenshire who have a caring role. Specifically, how they become aware of available services, how & why they access available services and to record their thoughts on what would make services more meaningful for them. A particular emphasis has also been placed upon raising awareness and promotion of male carer issues in both professional and wider-community contexts. Male carers in Aberdeenshire are further disadvantaged by the geography and predominantly rural nature of the area, and transport issues. Aberdeenshire has a population of around 230,000 people spread over an area of 2,437 square miles. The Census identified a figure of 6,387 men who were providing unpaid care in Aberdeenshire in 2001. This amounts to 7 ½ % of the adult male population of the area. One in every 14 men.

Project rationale

Aberdeenshire was a particularly interesting place to undertake this project for a number of reasons. Around the time of the funding application, there was already an established network of services specifically for carers across the area. Services are delivered from local centres by a number of agencies. The Census figures indicated that 39% of the total population of carers in Aberdeenshire were men, providing a highly typical representation given a national average of 40%. In addition to this, the Council of Voluntary Services (CVS) responsible for covering *central* Aberdeenshire, Gordon Rural Action (GRA), was already employing a part-time male carers' support worker and significant work had already been done by the VSA North Aberdeenshire Carers Support Team with direct regard to male carers.

Rather than attempt to provide direct support work for thousands of hard-to-reach clients, from a single post covering an area of almost two and a half thousand square miles, the project intended to explore and develop *existing* services and resources with a view to mainstreaming all learning into core-funded teams. This approach compliments the MCN focus on mainstreaming. In light of the Census figures, and given that services were already established but very few men were accessing them, a significant aspect of the project would be to explore the barriers to "getting in" to services. Just what is stopping men from accessing existing carers' services?

The project was based, not within Aberdeenshire itself, but alongside the other male carers support worker at VSA Carers' Centre in Aberdeen City. This was the first dedicated Carers' Centre in Scotland (opened in 1994) and is the operational base for all VSA Carers' Services. The peculiar geography of the area means that the City (despite being a completely separate local authority) finds itself in the geographical centre of the

area covered by Aberdeenshire. Aberdeenshire Council has its headquarters in Aberdeen City for similar reasons.

Project aims

- To explore & identify male carers' relationship with existing carers' services
- To learn, develop and implement innovative ways of engaging with male carers
- To raise awareness across sectors
- To mainstream project learning points through publication & promotion

Our project goals

- To make services more accessible to men
- To evaluate existing service delivery methods to gain insight into "*what works*" for male carers (and "*what does not work*" from current approaches)
- To learn from feedback and subsequently try new ways of delivering services
- To establish male carer issues within the mainstream carers' services agenda
- To establish a carer-led advisory group to outlast pilot funding
- To optimise long term impact on mainstream practice through widely publishing project findings

CHAPTER TWO OUR PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Our Activities

- Inception and facilitation of monthly carer-led project advisory group
- Development of high-profile Male Carer Awareness Days
- Inception and facilitation of regular male carer-specific events (day & evening)
- Direct involvement in larger scale generic carer events
- Project leaflet inclusion in 5000 Carer Information Packs
- Co-facilitation and development of existing inter-agency support group for male carers – Male Carers United
- Mainstreaming of project learning throughout VSA services
- Development of male carer input in mainstream carer-awareness training programme
- Inter-agency work and networking to improve cross-sector response to male carers
- Workshop facilitation at national & local conferences
- Planning, implementation, analysis and report publication from Douneside Respite & Training weekend
- Regular publication of Male Carers Newsletter
- Regular articles for Carers News (circulation ~ 5000) and other newsletters
- Web-based report promotion & distribution
- Board member of cross-sector national research group “Partnership for Carers Research”
- Strategic involvement through membership of Aberdeenshire Council-led Carers’ Strategy Implementation Group
- Direct involvement with North & South Shire Carers Forums
- Dual purpose questionnaire (awareness-raising & service evaluation) distributed across health, voluntary & social-care sectors (first quarter 2009, funded by additional monies)

Our Targets

- Engage and consult with hard-to-reach male carers
- Explore and record the expressed needs of male carers
- Develop and establish appropriate services for male carers
- Develop and establish training for professionals
- Publish and distribute learning to encourage and inform cross-sector mainstream take-up

CHAPTER THREE OUR PROJECT OUTCOMES

What our Project has Achieved

This project has engaged in a broad range of activities. For the purposes of project and programme evaluation, evidence has been collected from a cross-section of project activities. In some cases this was the professional community, in others, carers themselves.

Many activities have been undertaken but not formally evaluated in this phase. Some core activities (such as awareness-raising work, non male-carer-specific work conducted within teams, input to training programs and network building) will not yield noticeable outcomes within the limited life of the project itself. It is hoped that the learning points from this project will go on to shape the services of the future. These issues will be considered in the *Longer Term Outcomes* section, below.

Further evaluative information, including the findings of a cross-sector questionnaire, will be published through VSA in Spring 2009. For an overall project evaluation within the wider context of the MCN programme, please refer to the Cambridge Policy Consultants document due for publication mid-2009.

This section will not attempt to detail all activities undertaken by this project (see bullet list in previous chapter for these). It will contextualise those that produced evaluation-specific data which indicate, to some degree, short-term impacts.

What differences have we made?

Given the long-term rationale of this project, the question which we would ideally like to answer is “What differences *will* we make?” In the absence of this information, evidence can be provided from project activities to show the foundation, justification for and direction of proposed future changes in service delivery.

Historically, male carers have constituted a tiny minority of those accessing Carers’ Services across Aberdeen City & Shire. From contact with service providers in other areas, this is a common experience. The Census 2001 figures clearly indicated the existence of many thousands of male carers across the area (6387 adult male carers in Aberdeenshire alone). Whilst it is acknowledged that only a small proportion of the total number of carers will access Carers’ Services at any one time, the estimate from Carers’ Support Workers as to what proportion of service users were male, was nowhere near the 40% suggested by the census. There is no national database of carers and recording practices differ across agencies and areas. This information, if held, is not necessarily shared across agencies. The first question to be asked would be, “What do male carers want from carers’ services?” with an additional question, “how does that differ from what’s already on offer?”

As described more fully in the *Barriers to Achieving Outcomes* section, Carers’ Services entered a highly unstable period around the time of the inception of the MCN project, resulting in diminished or non-existent services in all local areas except for a pocket of relative stability in the North East corner of Aberdeenshire. The worker in this area had already experienced significant successes in engaging with male carers and, given the

almost total loss of services everywhere else, the initial MCN work was done in and around the Peterhead area.

Evaluation of work directly undertaken with carers (groups & events)

It was never the intention to provide a traditional support work service through MCN funding for reasons discussed in the *Project Rationale* section. Aside from the resource and geographical limitations, to replicate existing support work services but simply change one factor (i.e. the gender of the post-holder) would produce very limited results. In fact, evidence from events (below) has indicated that male carers consider the gender of a support worker to be less important than other factors. In the very short time-scale (it can take years to establish a successful Carers' Service), this MCN project was intended to explore and develop existing services to find out why men aren't using those services and what they say they need. Therefore, individual male carers are not considered the core client-group of this project per se, but the information they have provided has been invaluable in directing how the project has developed. However, some evaluative evidence is available from groups of male carers.

The senior support worker in the North (Moira Sinclair – now in post for 8 years) has found that the vast majority of identified male carers in her area choose not to attend support groups but will turn up to male-carer specific events. October 2006 provided an opportunity for the MCN worker to attend and facilitate the third annual male carer event. The full report from the event is available for download from www.vsa.org.uk/carers-info.html. A morning workshop was devised whereby the 24 men in attendance would have an opportunity to form smaller group discussions around a pre-prepared set of 17 questions, facilitated and recorded by volunteers. The facilitators encouraged the men to discuss a wide range of relevant issues which focussed around what it is like to be a man in a caring role.

This event generated a huge amount of data and the resulting report has reached a global audience. Many of the questions were asked to evaluate the need, from the men's point of view, for the MCN project. Several key learning points were taken from this session which informed the development of the MCN project thereafter.

- All of the respondents welcomed the existence of the project and felt that male carers did have some different needs from female carers.
- A particularly interesting point raised across the groups was that the gender of the *support worker* makes little difference as to whether they would choose to access a service. As one respondent put it, "*Doesn't need to be a man – just must be able to do something!*" Moira has evidenced success in enabling a considerable number of male carers to access the service in her geographical area. Successes with male carers in other areas of the UK have often, but not exclusively, been led by female workers due, in part, to the predominance of all-female teams. However, the men at the event also welcomed the appointment of a male to post. Discussions went on to clarify that what the men wanted most from a service was *choice* i.e. access to male *and* female workers. *Note:* Every man at this event was successfully engaged with local carers' services, delivered by a female worker. In this instance, there is no way to record the views of those who have not engaged, for whatever reason, as they would not be present.
- The groups consistently identified a *social focus* as being important to what they valued in carers' services. This informed and guided much of the approach of the

subsequent MCN activities. Feedback indicates that the success of the Advisory Group is largely due to the regular social meetings which have enabled the men to build trust with the service and each other, thus allowing them to feel more comfortable when choosing to share sensitive personal information about their caring role.

- The men acknowledged that other men with a caring role were unlikely to self-identify as *carers* and therefore more resources need to be put into awareness raising.
- Feedback indicated that this event in itself had been an enjoyable break from caring, a good opportunity to meet with like-minded people and many of the carers declared their intention to attend future events.

In subsequent discussion Moira was able to explain that a significant amount of effort and relationship building had gone into creating this sort of event. The male carers on her database were sent individual invitations, received personal phone calls and the event was advertised in the local carers' newsletter. The MCN worker was able to build on these positive, established relationships and communicate directly with the men thereafter. Several events have been held in that area over the length of the project (Burns' Supper – 14 men attended, three fish supper nights – 4, 4 & 5 men attended respectively, presentations to carer groups, Carers' coach trip – 37 carers mixed group, Carers' Christmas meal – 50 carers, mixed group).

In October 2007, a similar event was held in the neighbouring town of Fraserburgh. This event was again facilitated by the MCN worker and followed a similar overall format with a discussion workshop, guest speakers from the local authority, a presentation/discussion on relationship issues, a good meal and a humorous ending to the day. 22 men from the Fraserburgh area attended this event. The workshops on this occasion generated data more relevant to the ongoing needs of male carers and not specific to evaluation of the MCN post. However, the repeated success of these events indicates an ongoing need to continue this format which meets the needs of at least some of the male carers in the area. Access to ongoing support-work is vital for meeting immediate and crisis needs but a schedule of events appears to support the relationship between carer and service provider. VSA North Aberdeenshire Carers Services have also established a regular newsletter ("Carers in Touch") which all of the men receive and, feedback would suggest, keeps them linked-in with the service even if they are not making regular use of the direct support services (i.e. support groups & drop-in).

In response to the findings of these large events, a series of smaller-scale events (fish supper nights) were undertaken to explore whether or not the MCN project could begin to provide appropriate opportunities for carers to meet on a social basis. Two were held in the North, one in the South (with the newly regenerated services there) but the arrangements for an event in Central Aberdeenshire fell-through due to difficulty engaging with the male carers' worker there and the abrupt departure of the latest GRA carers' support worker. All the men who attended these events provided positive feedback and would consider attending further events. In addition to feedback given during the events themselves, three male carers, from the three separate events, phoned or wrote to the project to convey how much they had appreciated the opportunity to get out of the house, enjoy lively discussion and, for a change, have a meal cooked for them. A caring role can considerably reduce social opportunities and all of the men who have attended these events have enjoyed the social element. A common theme arising from all of the fish supper events, from other event feedback and from the Advisory Group, is the perceived focus of existing services on the *struggles associated*

with the caring role. Men, and in particular older carers, in contact with this project have often expressed a need to discuss anything *but* their caring role. Whilst such issues will arise naturally in conversation amongst peers, this is facilitated by removing any pressure or expectation to do so. This information has directly influenced how services have been provided by both workers within the VSA Male Carers' Project.

Evaluation of work undertaken in association with VSA Male Carers' Support Worker (Chris Sojka)

The part-time Male Carers' Support Worker in Aberdeen City provides a direct service to male carers. He works closely with the MCN project worker on a number of joint ventures and from the same office. Recent figures from his arm of the project indicate that, since his appointment to post in December 2006, he has worked directly with 142 male carers and maintains a circulation database for Newsletter purposes of 48 (40 carers, 5 professionals and 3 organisations). The Advisory Group, Male Carers United and *Dads at Douneside* are all projects carried out in partnership with the MCN worker and include male carers from Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire.

VSA Male Carers' Advisory Group

Event information and feedback received over the first 6 months of the project was indicating a need for men to meet but not as a traditional support group. Chris had setup and advertised a Friday afternoon support group but, despite some expressed interest, had not attracted any men to attend. Carers' services have a strong tradition of being *carer-led* so the decision was made to form the VSA Male Carers' Project Advisory Group. Some men were in regular contact with the project by this point and, following a city-based fish supper night in June 2007, were approached to attend the inaugural meeting. Invitations were also sent out to male carers who had attended the north events. Alan Nicholson (Scottish Executive civil servant assigned to our MCN project) was able to attend the first meeting in July 2007 and the group has run on the first Tuesday of each month since. There are currently 14 members who regularly attend, all of whom are male carers. The meetings alternate between social events at local restaurants and agenda-led meetings at VSA Carers Centre in Aberdeen. The groups are co-facilitated by both workers and, despite containing some project advisory element, are essentially support groups.

The strategic aim of the Advisory Group is primarily to include male carers in the planning and development of the project whilst also offering the opportunity for a short but sociable break with their peers.

Whilst there is much anecdotal feedback from the groups available, a simple, anonymous evaluative exercise was carried out in December 2008. The men were asked to write something to follow on from "VSA Male Carers Project is important to me because..."

A selection of the responses appears below:

- *It is interesting to hear from other carers & swap stories with them. It is encouraging to hear from carers who are worse off than you, so*

things get into perspective. The social evenings are enjoyable, even listening to Billy's jokes!

- *The opportunity to "get off your chest" problems, or apparent problems, with others is rewarding. A resolution to your own problems can sometimes be attained.*
- *The meetings are informal and relaxed which gives a sense of fellowship - (and fun, even in debate)*
- *It has rid me of self-pity, as I have met men - now colleagues - which has made me realise that I'm not the only one who has been separated from their partner in life*
- *Information can be obtained by having discussions. What to do and where to go can be helpful, going towards relieving stress. I am surprised more do not take part in these discussion groups.*

Whilst these responses are gratefully received and valuable in identifying some of the reasons men engage with the project, to undertake a more in-depth evaluation with each member may jeopardise future attendance. The Advisory group is still a relatively recent addition to the project. Some of the men find it very difficult to speak openly about their caring role and the wide range of ambivalent emotions that accompany it. They have avoided other support groups for precisely that reason. A key aspect of our purposefully developed approach is that we do not make people feel obliged to discuss their caring role. The content of past groups would not suggest that men exclusively attend the group to speak openly about how caring makes them feel. On occasion they do and they receive support and advice from their peers, but it's not compulsory. Perhaps the most telling success is that *they turn up*, which, in itself is evidence that this delivery works for these men on some level.

Male Carers United

The development officer with the Aberdeen branch of Alzheimer Scotland formed a support group for men in the Spring of 2006. The group comprised of four regular members who held facilitated meetings at one member's house on a monthly basis. When the MCN post was filled, the worker was invited to co-facilitate with a view to taking over management of the group, as it was no longer within the remit of the development officer. This was done and the MCN worker took over the group which is still running now. Under the management of VSA Male Carers Project, the group has secured a regular meeting place at a local conference facility and is regularly advertised in the *Carers News* and *Male Carers' Newsletter*. Outwith the meetings, the members attend awareness-raising events, social events and promote VSA Male Carers' Project. Unfortunately, due to illness and changing caring roles, the group does not currently have any members from Aberdeenshire. With the end of MCN funding, facilitation duties have passed on to Chris and a support worker from Alzheimer Scotland. Two of the original members remain in the group and see it as a valuable source of support, learning and companionship. There are development plans to expand the group in 2009.

Douneside Respite & Training Weekend – Dads at Douneside

Over the past few years, VSA Carers' Services have developed an innovative way of delivering respite and training to carers. The frequency depends upon funding and venue availability but they generally run once or twice a year. VSA Male Carers' Project took the opportunity to fund, plan and co-facilitate one of these events in an attempt to engage meaningfully with particularly hard-to-reach male carers.

Whilst significant project successes had been evidenced with some groups of male carers, they were predominantly with older men. Very few parent-carers were accessing the project or the organised events. The VSA parent-carers' worker (Sue Barnard – Development Officer for Families of Children with Disabilities) suggested that a Douneside event for parents may provide an opportunity for us to discuss the support needs of fathers and step-fathers. An event was planned, advertised and eventually ran successfully in February 2008.

Seven couples from across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, all unpaid carers for at least one child of school age with a disability, attended a two-day residential event at Douneside House, Tarland, Aberdeenshire. The weekend began at 11am on Friday and ended at 4pm the following day. The couples all stayed overnight within the main house and had exclusive use of the luxury facilities, gym, swimming pool and beautiful grounds throughout their two-day stay. All meals were provided to a very high standard and all places were fully funded by VSA Male Carers' Project.

The programme for the weekend consisted of a mix of training workshops and relaxation opportunities. The Friday evening was spent in the lounge with live music, a quiz and chat by the fire.

The full report is available from www.vsa.org.uk/carers-info.html and contains comprehensive and colourful analysis of the rationale, methodology and content of the weekend. To optimise recorded evidence for this project, within the program we included a 90-minute discussion workshop exercise conducted in two rooms, one with the men and one with the women. Information gathered from this exercise in conjunction with the evaluative exercise carried out on the second day of the event, elicited information not only about the weekend itself but also about "what works" with regard to support services for the men present:

"I don't think a meeting week in/week out would work because what would eventually happen with a meeting would become just another meeting, what with the situation we've got with our kids, yet another meeting"

"I think having the support [is important]. If you imagine having the opportunity to come together once a year and swap your stories over the year or whatever the development has got a value because it's "Let's have a right good session, let's see how well the support's working". If the frequency's too regular you sometimes feel you have to generate something to go with (firm agreement from rest of group) that's a bit false. Knowing that exists. To be able to underline it with this kind of

meeting [Douneside weekend], now and then, face-to-face with like-minded people...it's just great, it's super, it's a way of reinforcing how we feel and how it's going and I think it's just excellent. Personally, I wouldn't like to see it much more than that. If we needed it, we'd go to the centre and get some help and support and knowing how to do that, but now and again I think this is great"

The feedback exercise produced a volume of positive comments from the male and female carers alike:

"I would recommend it to others"

"Found it useful being around some like-minded people who are dealing with similar difficulties on a day-to-day basis and finding out how different people come up with different coping strategies"

"Enjoyed sharing ideas, hopes, experiences & laughs"

"Everyone took part with enthusiastic honesty. Learned how much common ground we share. Great atmosphere to relax and unload views"

"I've really enjoyed this weekend"

"We will be more open with each other. Take time for each other and both have separate time"

"It really helps to put things into perspective and know you're not alone"

"Relaxing and getting away from everyday stress"

"I have enjoyed everything about this weekend. The setting and the house are outstanding. A breath of fresh air! Thank you to everyone involved, greatly appreciated. It needs to reach a far wider audience for other parents to be able to gain better knowledge"

One central aim of the weekend was to encourage, value and facilitate communication between couples. This feedback, from one of the female carers, illustrates the impact of this exercise:

"I found my partner has opened up more emotionally than he has done in a long time through having a separate male workshop"

Amongst the wide range of topics covered, this event generated much discussion about *caring and employment*, particularly amongst the male carers. Sue Barnard reports that she is receiving an increasing number of enquiries from male parent carers regarding

advice on how to pursue flexible working hours. This has been highlighted as an area deserving further exploration in the *learning points* section of this report.

Promotion of this event created a clear demand for a similar event for lone-parents. Funding was secured by the Carers' Services team and the 6th Douneside ran in April. There was no input from the male carers' project in this instance and no lone-parent male carers applied to attend.

The MCN project worker was invited to co-facilitate a further Douneside in November 2008 (for carers of adults on this occasion) as there were three men from Aberdeenshire signed up to take part. Prior to MCN involvement, the previous 4 Douneside weekends (and the 6th for lone parents) had been predominantly or exclusively attended by females. All three male carers due to attend the 7th Douneside had already made positive links to the MCN project, having attended at least one previous male carer event. Feedback from the men following the event was wholly positive with a common focus on how helpful it had been to be able to share experiences, knowledge and learning with people who understood.

Evaluation of work undertaken with professionals

To maintain the mainstream agenda and secure sustainability, all learning from interactions with male carers has been fed back into training and publications designed for professionals. The key to sustainability is ensuring that health & social care professionals are made aware, and understand the value of, carers' services and, more specifically, of the needs of male carers.

Information & Publications

VSA Carers' Centres have always produced and distributed Carer Information packs which detail the services provided in each area. These colourful packs are widely distributed to professionals and are available from Carers' Centres. The latest edition of this pack (Summer 2008) contains the VSA Male Carers' Project leaflet. The 2008 print run was for five thousand packs.

The male carers' newsletter is not the only publication to contain regular articles about the project. The *Carers' News* is a quarterly publication with a regular page for the MCN project's news. Seven thousand copies are printed and distributed to carers and professionals every quarter. There is also an additional email circulation list and it has recently been made available on the NHS-Grampian Intranet. Exact circulation figures are not available.

Articles have also appeared in the area-specific local newsletters. In addition to this, the MCN worker has been approached to write a series of articles by the author of a regular web-based quarterly journal with a direct email circulation of ten thousand per publication. The site contains information for parents of children with disabilities and the author is particularly interested in the VSA Male Carers' Douneside report. The articles are expected to be published in the New Year.

The VSA website now hosts a number of freely downloadable reports from the MCN project. This will continue beyond the length of this project and is expected to receive further traffic after the publication of the articles in the journal.

Workshops & presentations

This MCN project recognises the value of incorporating learning into training opportunities. This has happened on several levels. On one level, the worker has given presentations to groups of carers all over Aberdeenshire to introduce the project or provide development updates. This has always been done in ways tailored to meet the needs of each group. The worker has also presented at national conferences to much larger numbers of professionals and carers. Whilst informal feedback has always been offered, one such conference allowed for a detailed evaluative exercise to be carried out. The “*Who Cares?*” conference for carers and professionals was held in July 2007. 90 people attended the event which had a selection of workshops available. 28 people attended the two VSA Male Carer workshops (15 morning & 13 afternoon) resulting in 26 completed feedback forms. Participants were asked to score content and presentation on scales of 1 to 6 but also given opportunities for written comment. The style of presentation (PowerPoint, informal and small mixed-group discussions) consistently scored between 5 and 6 with comments like;

Clear, concise & friendly presentation

Articulate, warm and well-judged

Very informal and accessible

Small group was helpful

Good balance of information & participation

The content of the workshop was also positively received and gained these comments from professionals:

I run a carers group and feel the workshop has increased my awareness of men's issues

Why male carers may not access services - consider and apply what I have learned in my current role

Reinforced the issues I am already aware of but greatly focused on the issues that are clearly different for men

I learned that marketing is an issue as it's mostly tailored to females (sometimes unconsciously)

We need to deliver and provide services & information differently

Carers and professionals alike expressed particular praise for the small discussion-group format where they had the opportunity to swap ideas and listen to each other.

Training

Whilst workshops and conference attendance have provided unique training opportunities for professionals, a more comprehensive format has been developed

within Carers' Services for generic awareness training. This off-the-shelf PowerPoint/leaflet-pack combination package is available for all staff to use when presenting to groups or individuals about Carers' Services. VSA Male Carers' Project has ensured the inclusion of its data, statistics and findings within this package. At the time of writing it has only been used on one occasion but with positive feedback from recipients (carers of people in a local residential home) and staff alike. It is anticipated that this package will be used extensively across Aberdeen City & Shire in the future to train professionals and students in every sector.

Shona Robison (MSP) launched the NHS Carer Information Strategy in 2008, which took place at VSA Carers Centre, Aberdeen. She took time to speak to the MCN project worker and meet male carers. She also announced a considerable funding package that accompanied the publication of the strategy. Some of this money has gone to create a post within NHS Grampian for a Carer Awareness Trainer, responsible for putting carers on the agenda for all of NHS-G's 16,000 staff. The MCN worker has worked closely with this recently appointed (Aug 2008) staff member to ensure the inclusion of male carer concerns within NHS training delivery.

Strategic

Training opportunities, conference attendance, leaflet distribution, published articles and questionnaires have all been used to mainstream the learning of this project at the *operational* level, but it is acknowledged that without change at a *strategic* level, then the impact of this MCN project may lose some long-term sustainability. There are four levels at which this takes place:

- Carers' Strategy Implementation Group (CSIG)
- Carers' Forums
- Team Meetings
- Male Carers' Advisory Group

CSIG - The project worker has sought and accepted invitations to join a wide-range of strategic groups which directly influence the delivery and/or funding of services for carers. The most influential of which is the CSIG. The workings of which are explained in more depth in Chapter 4 of this report. This has resulted in a close working relationship with the local-authority post-holder responsible for carers across Aberdeenshire (Sheena Swinhoe). Sheena has been interviewed by CPC for project evaluation purposes. Through regular attendance at meetings over the last two years, alongside other VSA representatives, the MCN postholder has secured a direct input to decisions made about the future of carers' services in the area. One tangible achievement is that a male-carer page has been submitted and accepted for inclusion on the soon-to-be-launched Aberdeenshire Carers' Website.

VSA Carers Forums – Attendance at the long established forum in North Aberdeenshire and the recently re-established (June 2008) forum in South Aberdeenshire has enabled the MCN worker to influence and participate with service change at a local level. This has served to forge stronger relationships with carers and professionals who attend these meetings. There is no forum currently operating in Central Aberdeenshire.

Team Meetings – Direct strategic input at a team level in North, South & City teams is achieved by way of attendance at regular team meetings.

Advisory Group – The formal meetings of the Advisory Group explore future opportunities and overall direction of the MCN project. This ensures strategic planning and input at a project level.

In a separate strand of strategic influence, the MCN worker is also a committee member of the Partnership for Carers Research which undertakes and guides health-focused research work relevant to carers. The chair of the PCR has been closely involved with the MCN project, in the role of consultant professor, when designing, distributing and analysing the result of the cross-sector survey.

Barriers to achieving our outcomes

Whilst this project has achieved significant levels of success in terms of projected outcomes, a number of factors have contributed to a reduction in the scale of that success over the timescale to date. The core outcome for this project would be to enable more men to access more appropriate carers' services. There are many reasons that men with a caring role do not access services. For the purposes of learning from this project, some key identifiable barriers will be explored here using Thomson's PCS model (Thomson 1997).

Personal barriers

The word "Carer" - Many of the men in touch with the project have advised they have a difficulty with the ambiguity of the term "Carer" i.e. they associate it with the title used by *paid care workers*. This means that many male carers, as with many female carers, fail to self-identify themselves and thus do not respond to Carers' Services as being something for them. To illustrate this, VSA MCN project has publicly advertised events for male carers through posters, leaflets and articles in newsletters. This does not appear to have increased attendance beyond those already personally invited even when incentives are offered or all costs are paid. There is a clear issue with supporting carers to identify themselves as carers. This is ongoing work for all carers' services but, from the evident gender imbalance in users of existing services, male carers appear to be less likely to self-identify. There is also an issue of *trust* to consider (below).

Choice & the caring role – People do not choose to become carers. It is something that *happens to* them, sometimes for a short while, sometimes sporadically and in many cases, for life. Carers (male and female) have reported feelings of guilt, inadequacy and anxiety about their caring role. This may explain the relatively tiny numbers of overall carers who approach services, resulting in so many carers remaining "hidden" whether the need help or not. Men have spoken to the MCN project worker about feelings of *stigma*, *shame* and *failure* associated with not coping. It is possible that many men do not come forward for support as this may be perceived as a public *acknowledgement of their vulnerability* and, ultimately, an *admission of failure*.

Past experience – Male carers who have attended "generic" support groups (prior to the piloting of male-only groups by this project) have reported that they have often been the only male in attendance. Whilst made to feel very welcome, men have also reported feeling uncomfortable at these meetings and chosen not to go back. Carers' services, in

Aberdeen City and Shire at least, predominantly comprise of female staff and existing support groups are almost exclusively attended by female carers. Local support workers have identified a need to offer a choice to men (of workers, groups and facilitators) but are not resourced sufficiently to do so. Where this has happened, every effort has been made by this project to provide at least one local opportunity for male-only groups to form. Whilst this has been possible through MCN funding, it will not be continued where workers are not resourced to do so.

Service perception – Even when male carers identify themselves as carers, many do not identify the existing services as being appropriate to their needs. The concept of a “support group”, for some, has negative connotations. One male carer said, “Support group? Isn’t that where you sit in a circle and social workers try and make you cry?” Whilst this may or may not be the reality of support groups, it appears to be a common perception amongst men who have spoken to this project worker. This can be further compounded by a belief held by some that any money being spent on carers would be better spent on the cared-for. As one father said, “Spend money on my boy and once he’s sorted, I’ll maybe come to your groups”. This perhaps ties in to feelings of guilt widely experienced by carers, male and female.

Trust – Service perception barriers are indicative of a wider issue. For someone to want to access a service, they need to *trust* that the service will not expose their vulnerabilities, will be of some practical use to them and will not make their situation worse. Building this relationship can take a significant amount of time and effort on an individual basis. The relative success of established events in North Aberdeenshire may be due, at least in part, to the work that the existing support worker has put in through home-visits, phone calls and personal event invitations to the male carers on her database. The feedback from men at these events would suggest that their relationship with the service provider plays a key role in whether they choose to access services or not. The launch of the MCN project in September 2006 coincided with a string of unfortunate circumstances (detailed below in *structural* section) which served to significantly diminish or totally remove opportunities to connect with existing Carers’ Services in South, Central and North-West Aberdeenshire. The rationale of the MCN approach was to develop *existing* services. The lack of the opportunity to develop these relationships has presented a significant barrier to achieving some of our original targets i.e. the setting up of sustainable mainstream services for male carers within existing teams.

Cultural barriers – It has taken many years and is an ongoing struggle for mainstream carers’ services to gain legitimacy despite national campaigns, pro-carer legislation, governmental support and an ever-expanding network of services. There are identifiable cultural barriers in both the professional and public arenas.

A host of evidence collected by this MCN project from carers across Aberdeenshire is indicating that the caring role, in many cases, is perceived as being associated with stigma and low status. Many men have indicated that not only is the caring role at odds with their existing skillbase and personal life-experience, but also with widely-held, culturally reinforced beliefs concerning male roles. Some have commented that this may be changing for the better as the roles and values of each successive generation develop. There are many barriers to male carers accessing services but, feedback would indicate, that a significant barrier lies within the men themselves and the cultural

values of the society they have been raised within. One male carer described his situation thus “*I was always brought up to paddle my own canoe, you could say the water was up past my neck when I finally had to ask for help*”. The other men at that particular event expressed unanimous empathy with this position. Feedback from the male carers who have engaged with this project over the longest period (i.e. the Advisory Group members, over 18 months or so) continues to reinforce this observation. In an anonymous evaluative exercise, all submitted responses consistently described personal ongoing involvement in terms of “helping others” and “realising there are others in a worse position than you” which minimises the needs, feelings and experiences of each individual, and continues to diminish the overall legitimacy of seeking support. If this attitude is widespread amongst male carers, then a core challenge for service providers will be how to enable more men to make an informed choice about services based on their support-needs rather than whether or not “it’s the done thing”

It is acknowledged that very few people are completely unaffected by cultural stereotypes. The specific remit of this project was to explore the needs of *male* carers. It is hoped that learning points from all aspects of the project will be available to affect mainstream services to enable more carers, male and female, to access services. One notable success of this MCN project is the *re-branding* of “support” in such a way as to successfully engage with men and deliver a service over a sustained period whilst meeting (or even building upon) their needs for self-respect and dignity (discussed elsewhere in this report).

The cross-sector questionnaire (2009) will explore reasons for the concerning low rate of referrals experienced across Carers’ Services from certain aspects of the professional community. Despite offering a free, dedicated, carer-led and accessible service, referral rates are very low or non-existent from some health and social care service providers who deal directly with carers in crisis. The questionnaire seeks to address this in two ways. First, by providing an anonymous platform to enable professionals to submit their views on why this is and, second, by ensuring that the questionnaire itself, even if unreturned, serves as an awareness-raising document containing a comprehensive list of locally available Carers’ Services.

Structural barriers – Massive structural change in (and almost total collapse of) Carers’ Services across Aberdeenshire during the lifespan of this post has had perhaps the most considerable impact on achievement of outcomes over this timescale. The core rationale of this MCN project was to link-in with existing networks and work alongside them to develop established relationships and services.

Within weeks of coming into post, long-term illness & injury removed VSA Carers Support work provision across all of South Aberdeenshire and the North-West, respectively. Around the same time GRA Carers Service in Central Aberdeenshire lost their longstanding Inverurie support worker and admin staff. This post was eventually filled but, unfortunately, the post is again vacant at the time of writing (and has remained so for several months). This impacted negatively on making meaningful connections with the only locally established Male Carers’ postholder (GRA, part time - contracted to 15hours per month).

The VSA North-West post was not re-advertised due to retirement and, after review, an alternative service was instead created. Despite selecting a successful candidate, a

number of administrative issues kept this new post (now in Turriff) vacant for a further six months. The South Aberdeenshire part-time post was also eventually filled and the worker there is successfully rebuilding the service in that area. This part-time service has been hampered by the huge geographical spread of the area (it's nearly sixty miles from Stonehaven to Braemar). However, funding was successfully identified for an additional part-time support worker, based in Aboyne to cover the West, at the beginning of 2008. Although the recruitment process is now complete, we are waiting for the preferred candidate to take up post. The service is not yet operational at this time (December 2008).

Whilst Carers' Services are now looking much stronger across Aberdeenshire with many more Carers' Centres and wider coverage than ever before, the loss to this MCN project over its timescale due to ongoing restructuring, recruitment delay and personal misfortune, cannot be underestimated. This was entirely unforeseen as, at the time of the original application for MCN funding, Carers' Services were enjoying a period of steady growth and overall stability throughout the area.

It is worth mentioning that this MCN project has benefited from strong working relationships with NHS Grampian and Aberdeenshire Council, both of whom have been proactive in mainstreaming the learning from the Male Carers' Project. More inconsistency has been experienced in inter-agency working within the voluntary sector. Some practitioners have been highly sympathetic towards the project whilst others have remained disengaged despite significant opportunity to become involved and remit suggesting clear benefits from joint working. Some of this may be simply down to perception of the MCN project by individual post-holders, but must also be influenced by the chronic under-resourcing of this sector with regard to insufficient, short-term and diminishing funding whilst working with growing client-groups with increasingly complex needs.

Long term outcomes

Carers' Services are a relatively new concept, predominantly emerging as a result of community care legislation in the late 1980's, early 1990's. Despite the carer population in the UK amounting to over six million people (Census 2001), the Aberdeen Carers' Centre was the first of its kind in Scotland and opened as recently as 1994.

The focus on male carers is an even more recent phenomenon. It is expected that the continuing post of VSA Male Carers *Support Worker* (currently externally funded by PRTC for three years) will be able to measure longer-term impacts of the MCN-funded post. A significant amount of time on this project has been dedicated to report-writing and publication to ensure that lessons learned are widely distributed in an accessible and informative format. This ensures that there remains a body of work, within a mainstream carers' service but also on the internet, available to any interested party who wishes to further explore and develop services for male carers.

The MCN project worker has secured the inclusion of male-carer-specific information within the mainstream Carer Awareness training program. The Carers' Services Team will roll out this program in 2009 by taking this presentation to community groups, university students and teams of health and social care professionals. In addition to this, the inclusion of the Male Carers Project leaflet in 5000 locally distributed Carer

Information Packs is intended to keep male carer issues firmly on the agenda beyond the lifespan of the MCN project itself. A broad evaluation of this activity will be possible through future annual service evaluations conducted by the generic Carers' Services team.

Added Value of our Project

Recent research undertaken by the University of Leeds and Carers UK (September 2007) estimated that unpaid care equates to annual savings to the UK Treasury of £87bn. To provide a perspective, this figure is significantly more than the annual cost of all aspects of the NHS in the year the study was completed (06/07 £81.678bn). The formula used only gives a baseline figure for unpaid care and the real cost is almost certainly far higher. If, as Census figures suggest, around 40% of unpaid carers are men, then the monetary value alone of supporting male carers is clear. Given that few male carers are accessing existing support services, the learning from the MCN Male Carers' Project may prove to be integral in shaping the future delivery of inclusive and effective mainstream carers' services. The consequences of failing to support 40% of an expanding carer population will lead to considerable negative impacts across sectors and across society as a whole.

The learning gained from this MCN project will contribute to the knowledge and skill-base of existing support workers and practitioners. For example, the inclusion of male-carer specific information in the generic VSA carer-awareness training pack will ensure that the *male carer agenda* is maintained and supported by core staff. The forthcoming publication of lessons learned (due early 2009) will inform future practice across the board at no additional cost to existing training commitments.

The very existence of this project is sending out a message that the contribution made by male carers is being acknowledged and valued, not only at a local level but on a national scale.

CHAPTER FOUR EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Our Evaluation Methodology

Carers are not a homogenous group as they span all aspects of society. Whilst being a subgroup of carers clearly demarcated by gender, the project quickly identified significant differences in the needs of male carers across the demographic. For example, the needs of a man in his eighties caring for his wife with dementia are, in many ways, markedly different from a man in his twenties caring for his three-year old autistic son. The diversity of the client group was further complicated by the diversity of the cross-sector professional stakeholder group. This MCN project has undertaken a wide range of activities with a broad client base (of carers and professionals) and does not lend itself to any single, comprehensive evaluative method. In addition to this, the relatively short time span of the pilot project did not allow for meaningful longitudinal studies given the lack of baseline data, the dramatic changes in local Carers Services and the caring role in many cases being a life-long experience which can change significantly over time.

The evaluation data has been collected from two broadly identifiable groups:

Work with *carers* and work with *professionals*.

Carers

Given the lack of an existing network of male-carers' services, and therefore comprehensive baseline data, it was decided that the most effective evaluative approach would be to take representative examples of work carried out with individuals and groups, and evaluate interventions on an individual, group or event-specific basis. The only relatively long-term intervention available to the project was to examine the impact of advisory group membership on the male carers involved over the 18 months it has successfully run to date (as of Dec 08). Some longer-term data was available through consultation events with men already accessing services in North Aberdeenshire. It had been hoped to learn from the experience of the existing male carers' worker in central Aberdeenshire but this was less productive than initially anticipated for reasons outlined in *Barriers to Achieving Outcomes* section.

To target male carers effectively and also for the purpose of highlighting gaps in provision, a broad, but not exclusive, list of groups of male carers was generated;

Parent carers (i.e. carers of children with disabilities)

Carers of people with mental health issues

Older carers

Carers who all care for someone with a specific condition (e.g. dementia)

Male carers already using existing support services

Carers looking after parents

**Carers in same-sex couples*

***Young carers*

****Carers of people affected by substance misuse issues*

*****Black Minority Ethnic (BME) carers*

At least some meaningful work was able to be undertaken with the groups in **bold**. The most success was evidenced in engaging with older carers. The groups in italics would

benefit from further, targeted attention (see asterisks for explanations, below). Given the resources, timescale & geography not all of these groups could be effectively worked with within the timescale of this project. In addition to this, significant structural changes in local carers' services (detailed in *Barriers to Achieving Outcomes* section, above) had a considerable impact on how we were going to identify and access these groups.

Evaluative data was collected from carers in a number of ways. Large scale carer-events provided an opportunity for individual client stories, feedback/comment sheets and workshop discussion groups based around themes relevant to evaluation. The Advisory group produced longitudinal data which could evaluate this new service over a period of up to 18 months. This was done through a simple written template.

Events and groups tended to attract older male carers and/or those looking after someone with a specific condition. Male parent-carers were particularly difficult to attract to the more traditional forms of service provision (i.e. groups & events) so a *Douneside Respite and Training Weekend* was set up to seek the views of this client group. Evaluation data from this group was sought through a written multi-page feedback sheet and also through a recorded focus-group workshop. As with the vast majority of this client group, this was their first (and possibly only) experience of the Male Carers' Project thus disallowing any form of evaluation beyond this specific event. However, to optimise the impact and learning from this rare opportunity, all data from this weekend was analysed and published widely (also available for download from www.vsa.org.uk/carers-info.html)

A large-scale questionnaire exercise is currently being undertaken with male carers but also a cross-section of health & social care professionals. This is discussed further in the "Future Evaluation Activity" section.

** Strong, ongoing working relationships have been built up with the team from Terrence Higgins Trust (Grampian). To date, this has not resulted in any identifiable referrals to the VSA Male Carers' Support service.*

***The VSA Male Carers Support Worker post has a split remit between adult and young carers. The postholder is responsible for exploring the needs of young male carers.*

**** No carers from this group were identified during the pilot timescale. However, there may be a need for future work to be carried out in conjunction with appropriate partner agencies e.g. Drugs Action.*

***** Carers services would benefit from an exploration of BME carers and their relationship with services. Census figures suggest that 2.5% of the total population of Aberdeenshire consider themselves to be from an ethnic group other than White British. This is an important minority and requires further study but was beyond the scale of this MCN project.*

Professionals

The vast majority of men with a caring role do not currently access local carers' services. They are considered to be "hidden" or "hard-to-reach" carers. The reasons for this are explored elsewhere in this report (e.g. unaware of services, ambiguity of "carer" label, perception of current services, cultural stereotypes, etc.). For this MCN project to achieve genuine sustainable change given the timescale and resources, a considerable amount of time and effort was directed at raising awareness across the professional

community. The rationale was to bring about change at a strategic level which would filter down through organisations to work with individuals and groups, in a sustainable manner beyond the life of the MCN post. This was done in several ways with mixed evaluation methods appropriate to each approach:

Training, presentations and workshops: Over the period of the pilot, the project worker attended and spoke at a number of carer-relevant conferences, some on a national basis. Where possible, direct written feedback (through feedback sheets) was sought from attending professionals. On a more local level, the views of smaller groups of professionals and community groups have been sought in an informal manner during and after presentations.

Carer-awareness training programme: For the first time in VSA Carers' Services history, a comprehensive awareness programme for professionals and community groups has been developed (in PowerPoint format). The MCN worker played a key role in the development of this generic tool and ensured that key statistics and information relating to male carers received appropriate attention. Whilst the training package has only reached completion at the end of this MCN project, this tool will be used routinely in the future and feature strongly in ongoing service evaluation.

Strategic Groups: The project worker has become an active member of the CSIG, a group which meets regularly and directly shapes local carers' services (including VSA Carers' Services) with responsibility for an annual budget approaching £500,000. The MCN worker has been asked to provide information and present to this group, resulting in a greater knowledge of male-carer issues across local authority, health and social sector managers. The Strategic Development Officer with a responsibility for carers from Aberdeenshire Council took part in an interview with Cambridge Policy Consultants for project evaluation purposes.

Future Evaluation Activity

A further evaluative exercise is currently underway and due to be complete by end of March 2009. It had been originally hoped to undertake this exercise earlier in the project but a number of factors delayed this (i.e. Ethics committee clearance, academic consultant illness, ongoing structural change in partner agencies, building up adequate database of male carers).

The first phase of a cross-sector questionnaire was completed at the beginning of December 2008. 84 GP Practices across Aberdeen City and Shire were invited to participate in a survey evaluating carers' services, including male carers' services, with a view to engaging more effectively with Primary healthcare services. The second phase (early 2009) will invite the views of Social Care professionals and the voluntary sector. In tandem with this survey, all male carers on our database will be invited to provide feedback via their own questionnaire.

The information gathered will be combined with existing project learning, analysed and published widely. Separate funding has been secured to provide for this. The learning will be applied locally to inform the ongoing development of VSA Male Carers' Project, but also in a wider context through training and awareness initiatives. The information (in booklet format) will be distributed directly to stakeholders but also made available

globally to ensure that the work of this pilot project continues to have an impact on individuals and organisations.

Partner agencies have been extensively interviewed by a representative of Cambridge Policy Consultants for the purposes of MCN programme evaluation. Anonymous feedback from these interviews will be made available in the New Year for inclusion in the next publication.

As this was the first project of its kind, no baseline information was available to provide comparative data. It is hoped that future projects, locally or otherwise, will be able to use the information generated from this project and build upon it. For example, the ongoing VSA Male Carers' Project staff will be able to use MCN-generated learning in analysing the future progress of the Advisory and Male Carers United groups.

Learning

Learning points have been comprehensively presented throughout this report. There follows a bullet list of the main points for consideration:

What have we learned?

- Whilst acknowledging that many experiences associated with the caring role apply equally to both sexes, men in a caring role do have specific needs that are not being met by existing mainstream services.
- Male carers are not a homogenous group and their needs vary greatly across generations and caring situations. Carers are busy people whose time spent engaging with services must be meaningful for them. Approaches targeted directly at identified needs work more effectively than generic ones e.g. older carers have responded well to social opportunities whereas fathers of children with disabilities have requested training opportunities, policy meetings and practical advice.
- We have endeavoured to involve and engage with services users regarding the strategic development of this project. This has led to a sustainable, client-led understanding of what meaningful services would look like.
- Juggling employment and a caring role can create particular challenges. Changes in legislation have provided the right to request flexible working for carers but this is an area where employees and employers can benefit from greater knowledge. This project would recommend further exploration of paid work and caring.
- The quality of initial service contact is crucial and, if successful and meaningful for the carer, will create positive foundations for future engagement. Building on this relationship is central to enabling further involvement (e.g. event or group attendance).
- Some approaches work better than others. Feedback would suggest that infrequent events with a social and/or training focus, combined with a regular newsletter, are an effective way of building a relationship between the service provider and the carer.
- Men would appreciate *more choice* in available services. Most notably, whilst the gender of a support worker is less important than their knowledge and competence, there is rarely any choice in the matter as most teams are exclusively female.
- Men who have chosen to attend generic support groups have found themselves very much in the minority. Some success has been evidenced using an all-male peer-

support group model which subsequently enables the members to attend generic groups and events.

- Experience from local carers' centres would suggest that there appears to be a great deal of confusion amongst the general public (including carers) and many professionals about what Carers' Services actually do. Awareness-raising and training are vital to enabling professionals and carers to make informed decisions about accessing Carers' Services.

Knowing what you know now, was your approach to the client group the right one?

Prior to this MCN project, men were not attracted to Carers' Services in any great numbers. Whilst numbers have increased to some extent within the life of the project, the core outcome was to gain some insight into why. This has been achieved. This was done, for the mostpart, by maintaining a carer-led approach which we firmly believe was the right one. By focusing on valuing the experience of carers and encouraging their involvement, we believe we have enabled male carers to have their say regarding how their services are delivered.

With the benefit of hindsight what would you have done differently?

The project was originally planned to run very differently. Considerable and unpredictable changes in carers' services across Aberdeenshire removed planned opportunities for obtaining localised work-bases within communities. Whereas some element of support work may have been an option, it quickly became unfeasible. The local picture is very different now and an MCN project would have many more opportunities available to it were it to begin in 2009.

Some activities were less successful than others. One initial strategy was to hold Male Carer Awareness days but, despite publicity and incentives, they were poorly attended. Some explanation for this is given in the *barriers to achieving outcomes* section. Similarly, the Generic Support group (piloted near the start of the project) failed to attract any members for reasons that later became clear as the project progressed and we discovered how men may view support groups. Also, a significant amount of time and effort by both workers was put into pursuing an online web-based forum facility for male carers. This was initiated following comments from some male carers that they would find this useful and accessible. This was seen as a potential, sustainable solution for carers in rural areas to access support. However, recent research suggests that there is a very low uptake in this sort of service amongst this client group. This is reinforced by experience of an online forum for fathers of children with disabilities, set up in Scotland in January 2007. The forum is free to join, easy to use, targets a particularly computer-literate client group, has a "pub" area for non care-related chat and is administrated by fathers who are affiliated to, and supported by, a major disability charity. It is also friendly, supportive and well-run. However, in the two years it has been available on the world-wide web, it has attracted a total of 65 posts from its 22 members (a number which includes site administrators and both of the VSA MCN workers). The site reports that usage peaked on Monday 5th November 2007 when 7 users were online at the same time. This method of service provision will undoubtedly become more important

as internet use increases but, regrettably, proved more complex than originally thought and, ultimately, beyond the scope of this MCN project.

There are carers and community groups who we have identified as being stakeholders but were unable to engage with due to time and resource restrictions. The carer groups have been discussed in the *evaluation & learning* section above. In addition to these client groups, we would have liked to develop our inter-agency working to further incorporate such voluntary community groups as the Rotarians and Lions Clubs. Not only have they been supportive of the MCN project where possible but appear to have a significantly high proportion of male carers amongst their membership. This has been an area highlighted and taken forward for development in 2009 by the VSA Male Carers' Support Worker.

Who will find your project learning useful?

From the inception of the MCN programme, project learning has been highlighted as a core outcome. VSA Male Carers Project has embraced the mainstream agenda and aspired to analyse, publish, distribute, promote and discuss learning from the project, across sectoral boundaries.

Individual - Benefit has been achieved on an individual basis locally through the ongoing direct support of male carers (i.e. events, groups and forums). Through articles and reports published on the web, it is hoped that a diverse range of carers and professionals across the globe will be able to benefit from this MCN project.

Organisational – On a local level, learning has been successfully applied within our own agency. VSA Carers' Services have welcomed and incorporated project learning into practice and training presentations. On a wider scale, all organisations who work with carers will have access to what we have learned. We hope we have gone some way to answering a question that Census figures raised but appears to have gone without widespread investigation, despite the numbers involved. Essentially, we are offering learning from 30 months' dedicated exploration of a client base which amounts to around 40% of the potential client-base of most carer organisations, and totals over 2 million people across the UK.

Societal – To fail to support carers will have a major social and economic impact on society (see *added value* section for figures). Recent figures suggest that more and more of us will become carers at some point in our lives. Prevalence figures indicate that this is currently 3 in 5 of the UK population. The learning from this MCN project, and the programme as a whole, will contribute fresh ideas and evidence to the emerging debate surrounding how to most effectively meet the needs of the hardest-to-reach client bases.

Annex: Finance Report

FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS

In accordance with the paragraph below, financial information will be submitted by 31 May 2009. This project has remained entirely within budget throughout. No overspend is forecast in the final audit.

“The financial conditions attached to the grant state that “At the end of each Financial Year, the Grantee shall prepare an account showing all expenditure incurred by the Grantee in connection with the Project during that Financial Year. Such account shall be audited and certified as true and accurate by a Registered Auditor and a copy of the external auditors report shall be submitted to the Scottish Ministers no later than 30 November in each year following completion of the audit.”

Given that projects are funded to 31 December projects are asked to submit end of project audited reports by 31 May 2009. Further information on financial requirements following the completion of the projects will be sent at a later date.”