Luminus
Home of Healthwatch Surrey

healthwatch Surrey

Caring for the carer

Carers' experience of general practice across Surrey

October 2026



Shining a light on what matters to people.

Caring for the carer

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Background

An unpaid carer is anyone who cares for someone who is ill, disabled, older, has mental health concerns or is experiencing addiction and is not paid by a company or local authority to do this. Often this is a family member or friend (Carers UK).

For this project our Healthwatch Surrey service partnered with our Giving Carers a Voice service to explore carers' experience of accessing primary care for themselves and for the people they care for, to uncover areas of best practice and, conversely, to identify where improvements could be made. We allowed carers to talk openly, agenda free, about any aspect of their experience of primary care but were particularly interested in communication, the benefits or otherwise of being registered as a carer and where and how support could be improved.

This report will be shared with those responsible for oversight and commissioning GP services as well as those delivering them. It will also be shared with the commissioners of the Giving Carers a Voice service.

Our approach

We heard from carers in person in community settings across Surrey and provided a survey for those we didn't speak to in person. The survey enabled us to reach a larger number of people and thus to strengthen the depth and breadth of our insight.

We identified a number of themes based on what people told us which we explore throughout the report:

- Lack of flexibility can be a barrier to care
- Listening to and involving carers
- Carers would like to feel more cared for
- Registering as a carer: what's the benefit?
- The benefits of signposting.

Where possible we have suggested ways in which support can be improved for carers and these suggestions can be found throughout the document. This report recognises that an improved situation for carers benefits general practice in a number of ways. These include protecting the health of the carer and thus reducing demand on general practice, and preventing avoidable appointments and crisis situations as supported carers are better able to manage the health needs of those they care for.

Who did we speak to?

192 unpaid carers shared their experience with us.

We spoke to **55** unpaid carers face to face.

137 unpaid carers completed our survey.

We reached these carers at **19** different venues across Surrey.

An Action for Carers hub in **Runnymede.**

An Action for Carers hub in **Elmbridge.**

An Action for Carers hub in **Epsom and Ewell**.

2 x venues in **Surrey Heath**, including a memory café.

2 x venues in **Reigate and Banstead**, including a food bank.

3 x venues in **Guildford**, including a dementia support group and a young adult carer event.

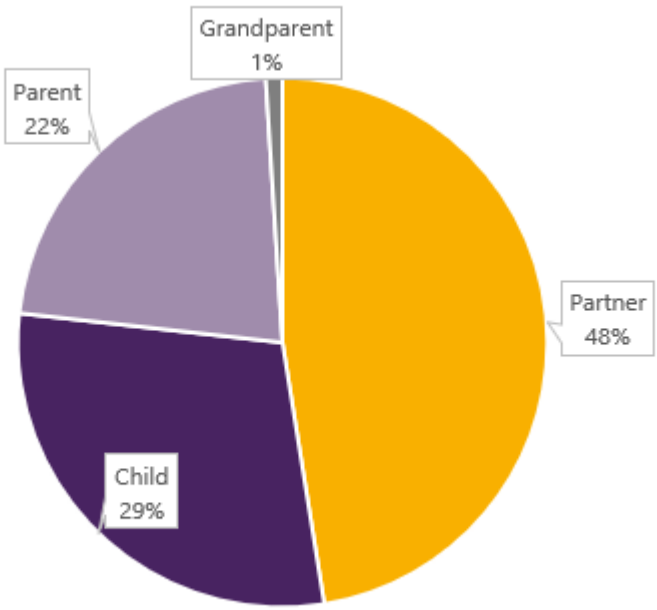


4 x venues in **Waverley**, including an Action for Carers hub and a Parkinson's support group.

3 x venues in **Mole Valley**, including a Planning for your Future awareness day and a stroke support group.

2 x venues in **Tandridge**, including a Fibrowarriers group.

Who are people caring for?



Almost half (48%) of those we spoke to were caring for a partner. The majority of the remainder were caring for parents (22%) or children (29%). We spoke to two people who were caring for grandparents. Several people we spoke to were caring for more than one person e.g. both an elderly parent and a child with additional needs.

What did people tell us?

Lack of flexibility can be a barrier to care

A key concern for carers is the perceived lack of flexibility in GP practice processes and procedures. One person described them as "unhelpful and unsupportive to carers." Carers feel that practices do not accommodate, or even consider, their specific needs and those of the people they care for, particularly when booking appointments, managing complex medical histories and arranging proxy access. This lack of flexibility can create a barrier to accessing care.

Appointment booking

Issues with appointment booking, from not being able to get them to not understanding the systems in place, is a common theme people talk to us about. These issues can be amplified for carers, who noted that the processes in place for booking appointments can pose a particular challenge.

> "The initial contact form is online which is great but follow up forms can require me to 'pop in' to the surgery to collect them. I don't pop anywhere anymore - it takes me an hour to leave the house with my disabled son. I don't appreciate the assumption that comes with the word pop - it implies it's no problem and tells me they have no idea what I go through day to day."
> **50-64 year old female. Epsom and Ewell resident. Carer for child.**

> "I am expected to contact when they open at 8am like everyone else, I've explained I am getting my disabled child in a taxi at that time but there is no allowance made. It is really hard to access the doctor, this is a barrier."
> **50-64 year old female. Woking resident. Carer for child.**

When it works

This person told us how the availability of digital access outside core hours made a difference for them:

"They have implemented the NHS online system in a fairly comprehensive way so I can put requests in early in the morning. This is important because I spend 4 hours a day on the school run for my disabled daughter, there is no way I can be available at 8am to sit in a phone queue."
50-64 year old female. Guildford resident. Carer for child.

Complex medical needs

Carers told us that their cared for, can have complex medical histories. They find it frustrating to have to communicate a full medical history at each appointment request.

> "I find that I face the same issues every time I telephone and the staff do not understand the issues that my ex-husband faces and I have to repeatedly have the same conversations."
> **65-70 year old female. Reigate and Banstead resident. Carer for ex partner.**

> "No one seems willing to help, all consults done by telephone and with a different GP every time and no one reads the notes beforehand."
> **50-64 year old female. Waverley resident. Carer for partner.**

Many carers talked to us about the lack of flexibility regarding appointment length and noted the challenges of a 10 minute appointment, which is often not long enough to address these complex needs.

> "Not useful [to be registered as a carer] at all. They don't care. They only give you 10 minute appointments and they only let you discuss one thing. How can my son with multiple conditions and problems manage in a 10 minute appointment? It takes over 10 minutes for us to go through his extensive medical history as it's a different GP every single time. We don't bother anymore. I've given up on the GPs."
> **65-79 year old female. Epsom and Ewell resident. Carer for child.**

People expressed frustration with online forms, which it is felt don't give "the whole picture" where complex medical needs are concerned.

> "Can't clarify issues with a set questionnaire, which often makes the experience frustrating, protracted, and leaving me questioning the response… I found it much quicker and easier to book appointments and get to required information by speaking to a well-informed receptionist, than the rigid 'tick box' online arrangement which fails to acknowledge complexity of issues."
> **50-64 year old female. Surrey resident. Carer for parent.**

> "You have to try to fit in what you want to say into a box with. It's like a test in itself."
> **50-64 year old female. Tandridge resident. Carer for grandparent.**

Proxy access

A particular concern is what is seen as a procedural requirement to speak to or liaise with the person who is cared for, when they may not have the required capacity.

"They tell me my husband has to make any request himself. Even though he has poor executive function due to brain injury."
65-79 year old female. Epsom and Ewell resident. Carer for partner.

"They always want to talk to my husband but as his hearing is so poor he gets very flustered and hands the phone back to me. He also gets confused and tells me what he thinks they might have said to him not what is actually said so I end up with wrong information and have to ask them to tell me separately anyway. Time consuming and unnecessary if they could just realise he can't cope with direct communication."
65-79 year old female. Guildford resident. Carer for partner.

What would help?

Where possible, GP practices should ensure processes are person centred:

- Offer flexible appointments and booking processes for registered carers, including requests outside core hours. Double appointments, where the needs of the carer and the person they care for make this necessary or appropriate, would be more efficient for both carer and GP practice than two separate 10 minute appointments.
- Review relevant medical notes, communication needs and recorded carer information before contacting or seeing a person with complex needs. This would mean carers are not required to repeat the same history at every appointment request or consultation, and consultations remain more focussed clinically and efficient.

Listening to and involving carers

Many carers told us that they don't feel listened to, even though they are the ones who know the people they care for best. Others told us about issues with communication from their GP practice, with some feeling that this led them to feeling excluded from the care of the person they care for.

The latest GP Patient Survey data (2026) for Surrey and Sussex Integrated Care System found that 92% of carers felt involved as much as they wanted to be in decisions about care and treatment. The disparity here may be explained by those completing the GPPS survey being more engaged, and therefore more positive, about their experience.

> "I find that the GPs do not understand my husband's condition and they do not do house visits. Communication is usually by phone and different clinicians are sent if necessary. I do not think they really listen to the carer who knows the person better."
> **65-79 year old female. Tandridge resident. Carer for partner.**

> "[I want the surgery] to listen, and act on my instructions. I have had to remove the patient's phone number from the records as they repeatedly send texts to make appointments or surveys which the patient deletes before read by a carer or causes stress as he does not understand the content."
> **50-64 year old female. Reigate and Banstead resident. Carer for ex partner.**

This causes particular issues when a child with additional needs turns 18. One carer asked for more understanding that their children "are different and can't communicate."

> "Listen to me as the only person my son talks to. I have a wealth of information to support you to support my son. He has medical needs which require attention but your refusal to engage with me ensures that you are not prepared to best help if/when you see him."
> **50-64 year old female. Waverley resident. Carer for child.**

Improving communication

As well as not feeling listened to, less than half (41%) of those who completed our survey said that they find it easy to communicate with and get the information they need from the GP practice of the person they care for. Being kept informed about communications going directly to the people they care for would make a significant difference to their experience.

> "He rarely engages with the GP and can get easily frustrated with the changes in how to make appointments etc which are now in place. I would like to be kept in the loop for when he's called for vaccinations (he refuses the flu jab) and any regular check ups for over 60s which he claims he never receives and would refuse them anyway."
> **65-79 year old female. Runnymede resident. Partner.**

Carers would like to feel more cared for

Not feeling listened to is one of the factors which can make carers feel that they are forgotten; they feel neither cared about themselves nor supported in their caring role. They'd like more proactive, practical support and regular check ins.

One carer told us that there is "no regular contact" and another that the GP practice "don't care or understand at all." A large number of carers mentioned feeling very stressed due to their caring role and one talked about not having "the energy to try and look for other forms of support for myself."

> "Everything seems a struggle. Maybe they don't know I'm a carer, but I find dealing with them an additional stress."
> **50-64 year old female. Elmbridge resident. Carer for child.**

> "My husband was diagnosed with Parkinson's over 30 years ago. He was recently in a care home but now he's home. He is very difficult. He won't get dressed, he's incontinent and just sits all day and watches the TV. A community matron came this week to assess him and also to look at his mental health. No one from the surgery has contacted me. I updated them on his condition and that he is now home and haven't received any communication from them at all. Not to check on him or to check on me as his carer. I am registered with the GP as his carer. Pointless."
> **50-64 year old female. Tandridge resident. Carer for partner.**

> "I get nothing as a carer from the surgery… No text to check in on me as a carer either. Absolutely nothing. When he has his check up, why don't they also take the time to ask how I am as his carer. They should communicate more with me and ask how I am doing. I referred myself to Action for Carers as there is a sign in the surgery. The GP didn't suggest it."
> **65-79 year old female. Waverley resident. Carer for partner.**

Although there might be designated carer support at the practice in theory, this isn't always effective or appropriately implemented.

> "The current person who is assigned to be carer support is not interested. Also she is often used elsewhere in her carer time."
> **65-79 year old female. Guildford resident. Carer for partner.**

> "A named contact would be helpful, or a dedicated email address where you could get help without queuing in a queue of 38 people."
> **50-64 year old female. Waverley resident. Carer for partner.**

The latest GP Patient Survey data (2026) for Surrey and Sussex Integrated Care System found that only 36% of carers are able to speak to their preferred healthcare professional 'a lot of the time or always'.

Carers would like more proactive and practical support

Carers told us how useful some more practical help would be (one person requested "direct, tangible support rather than information leaflets.")

> "Get involved. Find out what I'm doing to care for my wife. Advise me on what I'm doing right and what I'm doing wrong and what more help is available both 'people' help and mechanical or implement help."
> **65-79 year old male. Guildford resident. Carer for partner.**

Most told us that they would not turn to their GP for advice/support in their caring role and instead would seek out organisations such as Action for Carers and other support groups.

What would help?

"That they acknowledge and show support for me as a carer."
65-79 year old female. Reigate and Banstead resident. Carer for parent.

"Empathy for our situation."
50-64 year old female. Elmbridge resident. Carer for husband.

"To have more care and attention from them."
80-89 year old female. Woking resident. Carer for partner.

A specific carers' group or carers' representative in the PPG would ensure one single route for carer feedback and questions, reducing administrative time answering multiple queries.

If, where possible, carers could be linked with relevant social prescribers the GP Practice could focus on medical need.

A named, dedicated contact who acknowledges carers' situation when they speak to their GP practice would reduce demand on other practice staff.

Resource allowing, GP practices could consider specific engagement activity to co-design a flexible support offer for carers.

When it works

In this example a proactive GP has had a really positive impact on a carer who feels she has "back up".

"Yes I'm registered as a carer. My husband has a lot of depression. The GP came out and saw us when I contacted them. She talked to us about Action for Carers then and she arranged

the £300 carer break payment for me then too. That was two years ago. The GP was very good. Last year I was struggling and I made an appointment with my GP. She referred me for counselling and then she checked in with me after it a couple of times. She was very good. I am always able to see my own GP. I request it when I fill in the online form. Anytime I want to see my GP, I can see her. I don't mind online. It's ok as long as I write my requests clearly. Because of my GP, I do feel like I have back up."
65-79 year old female. Tandridge resident. Carer for partner.

"The GP is excellent. They call once a month to check in on my husband."
65-79 year old female. Surrey Heath resident. Carer for partner.

Annual check ins

Many carers told us how their own health needs get forgotten as they prioritise their cared for. Their main request is for regular physical and wellbeing check ins with their GP or a health professional for carers, one suggesting "regular contact without having to request it myself."

> "When you're a carer, your wellbeing isn't a priority, you put things to do with you and your health to the back. More GPs should be aware of carers and how caring affects us, not only physically but mentally too."
> **65-79 year old female. Reigate and Banstead resident. Carer for child.**
>
> "More communication from the surgery to check if you're still alive and ok would be good."
> **50-64 year old female. Waverley resident. Carer for child.**
>
> "[I would like my surgery to] check in now and again to offer any support or guidance. To contact carers for carers breaks when the funding is there rather than being told consistently there is no funding."
> **25-49 year old female. Epsom and Ewell resident. Carer for child.**
>
> "It would be good to have someone at the practice nominated to check in with me from time to time. Sometimes it is nice to have some reassurance that you are doing the right things and to be able to discuss any changes."
> **50-64 year old female. Tandridge resident. Carer for parent.**

Protecting carers' health reduces the risk of their own physical or mental health deteriorating and creating additional demand on primary care.

Registering as a carer: what's the benefit?

Many carers don't know if and when to register with their GP practice, and those that have they've seen very little benefit to doing so.

Make registering as a carer easier

Some carers we spoke to didn't know if, when or how to register; many assumed that the GP practice would simply recognise them as such and that nothing further was needed from them. We were told that GP practice staff didn't always encourage or support their patients to register.

> "I'm not registered as a carer there, as I'm not sure at what stage of being a carer that I have to do that. They see me come in with my husband, so I assume that they know but I suppose I shouldn't assume that. I did mention once that I was a carer for my husband to one of the GPs and she just said 'oh dear' but didn't mention anything about registering as a carer."
> **65-79 year old female. Woking resident. Carer for partner.**

Let carers know what difference registering as a carer makes

Although over three quarters of those who completed our survey were registered as a carer; of those, only 36% found it useful. Most carers have not seen any benefits or changes to their treatment at their surgery as a result of registering as a carer, with one carer describing it as "pointless".

> "Haven't noticed any particular support. I emailed them to say my husband now uses a wheelchair and they simply put that note on my NHS App, I've no idea if it's on his notes."
> **65-79 year old female. Runnymede resident. Carer for partner.**

> "I'm a carer for my wife. I am registered as a carer at the practice but I can't say I've ever seen any difference because of it."
> **50-64 year old male. Tandridge resident. Carer for partner.**

Many carers told us that - though practices may be ensuring carers are registered - nothing happens as a result of this registration as records aren't looked at.

> "I've seen no benefits, no-one uses my record to identify me as a carer."
> **59-64 year old female. Reigate and Banstead resident. Carer for parents.**

"Their records seem chaotic. We get passed around to different people and they ignore the flags on my daughter's file."
59-64 year old female. Elmbridge resident. Carer for husband and daughter.

"You tick the box and register as a carer but when you get an appointment I don't think they look on your record and note that you are a carer or take into account your medical conditions either. They just give me an appointment when it suits them not when it suits me as a carer. I can fill in when I'd like an appointment and say not between these times but they just give you whenever suits them."
65-79 year old female. Epsom and Ewell resident. Carer for child.

One person questioned whether young carers are adequately acknowledged in their GP practice.

"Both my sons [18 and 23] are registered as carers for me at the surgery and I'm also registered as a carer as I am a parent carer. Although they are both registered as carers and they are young adult carers, the surgery doesn't acknowledge them as such and they don't get any benefits or recognition as carers."
25-49 year old female. Runnymede resident. Carer for child.

When it works

This carer praised her GP practice for recognising her carer status and adapting their approach because of it.
"[I am registered as a carer] I think I get more understanding because of it when I phone up. I think they listen to me more."
65-79 year old female. Epsom and Ewell resident. Carer for husband and daughter.

In this example, registration allowed a carer proxy access and helped him to get the support he needed.

"It has enabled me to be able to talk to the GP directly about my wife's health and they have been able to assist me in getting the correct support."
59-64 year old male. Woking resident. Carer for partner.

What would help

- GP practices should clearly explain when and how patients can register as carers, what support registration may provide and how their information will be used.
- Practices should routinely check and act on recorded carer status when arranging appointments, communicating with patients and reviewing support needs.

Awareness of carer needs from the practice, and awareness of carer benefits from the carer, should help to reduce frustration and confusion, and therefore time spent dealing with questions and concerns.

The benefits of signposting

Whether registered or not, most carers have told us that they are not often directed to third party support by their GP practice; people talked to us about 'stumbling' on things themselves.

> "I was diagnosed with Fibromyalgia in January. I was just given a leaflet and prescribed some tablets and have had nothing since. No advice or signposting to organisations that could help me. I currently live at home with my parents as I have had to give up work because of the illness. I have a brother who is [in his 30s] and has ASD. He is in supported living. My parents are both in their 70's and none of us have been referred to any support services. I didn't know about Action for Carers. I'll get us all to register."
> **25-49 year old female. Tandridge resident. Carer to parent and child.**

When signposting is provided it's often hidden with an abundance of other information and is therefore lost.

> "When I registered as a carer with them, I was presented with a big pack of information. It was overwhelming. It would have been nice if someone had taken the time to go through all the information with me."
> **65-79 year old female. Waverley resident. Carer for parent.**

It also relies on carers recognising their own status, which many don't.

> "I am registered as a carer with the surgery but don't get anything as a carer. No text to check in, no signposting to other support. Nothing. There is a table with leaflets on but that's fine if you recognise that you are a carer but what if you don't. The GP has never mentioned these leaflets, I just saw them and referred myself to Action for Carers."
> **Waverley resident. Carer for child.**

People talked to us about the value of signposting.

> "I haven't been provided with any. But yes, I think signposting to things could have been useful. I guess with dad as things progress as he gets older, I'm going to

need different things and different support so signposting could help me prepare for that to know where I can go for different sorts of help."
50-64 year old female. Mole Valley resident. Carer to parent.

Conclusions

From listening to carers' experiences we have found that though some GP practices are responsive and compassionate, this is inconsistent and more can be done to ensure carers feel listened to and appropriately supported.

A key concern is a perceived lack of flexibility, with GP practice processes not taking account of the realities of caring. Many associate this with not feeling listened to or understood, and consequently not feeling cared for themselves.

The findings point to several priorities for improvement, including: better communication around carer registration and an increased focus on how carer status should impact dealings with patients; making consent and proxy-access arrangements workable for people with different needs and levels of capacity; really listening to carers as partners in care and improving signposting.

We appreciate the increasing pressure GP practices are under but small changes really can make a big difference for patients. Also, consistent action in these areas would not only reduce barriers to care and improve the experience and wellbeing of carers and the people they support across Surrey, but it would also offer benefits to general practice. Listening to carers and offering appropriate flexibility can make consultations more efficient, reduce repeated contacts and help prevent problems from escalating into crises. Supporting carers' own health and wellbeing may also reduce future demand on primary care and help sustain the vital care they provide.

Appendix

Survey promotion

Our survey was available online via the Smart Survey platform and paper copies were made available for those who needed them.

The survey was sent to the following organisations to promote to their members/users; National Autistic Society; Waverley Family Centre; White Lodge; Challengers; Mary Frances Trust; Younger people with dementia; Rethink Woking; Sunflower café, Guildford; Sunflower café, Farnham; Dementia First and Age concern, Banstead. It was also included in the Healthwatch Surrey newsletter and Insight bulletin, and the newsletters of Adult Social Care, Action for Carers, and Surrey Coalition of Disabled People. It was also promoted via our social media channels.

About Luminus

Luminus is a Surrey based independent community interest company which exists to empower people to have their voices heard. We are an enterprise driven by social value, that invests in the local community. We help organisations provide equity of access, and the best services possible, through the inclusive involvement of local people. We achieve this through bespoke projects, co-design, contracts, mentoring, research, and training. Our vision is to create a society where everyone's voice is heard so we all receive the support we need for our wellbeing.

The lived experiences quoted in this report are in people's own words and therefore reflect their personal perspective and perception, not the views or opinions of Luminus as an organisation. When we are engaging with people and the individual has incorrect information about a provider or service, we endeavour to provide them with up to date, correct information. We also offer signposting for other local support services and organisations where relevant and appropriate.

We check in with the group leader if someone has said something we are unsure of or concerned about to ensure that the person is being supported and not alone. We also ensure that support services are aware of appropriate treatment pathways and local support available. If we hear a case of concern regarding a person's safety, we immediately signpost the sharer to the appropriate body and escalate the case with the provider/commissioner.

Contact us

Contact us through any of the channels below.
We'd love to hear from you:

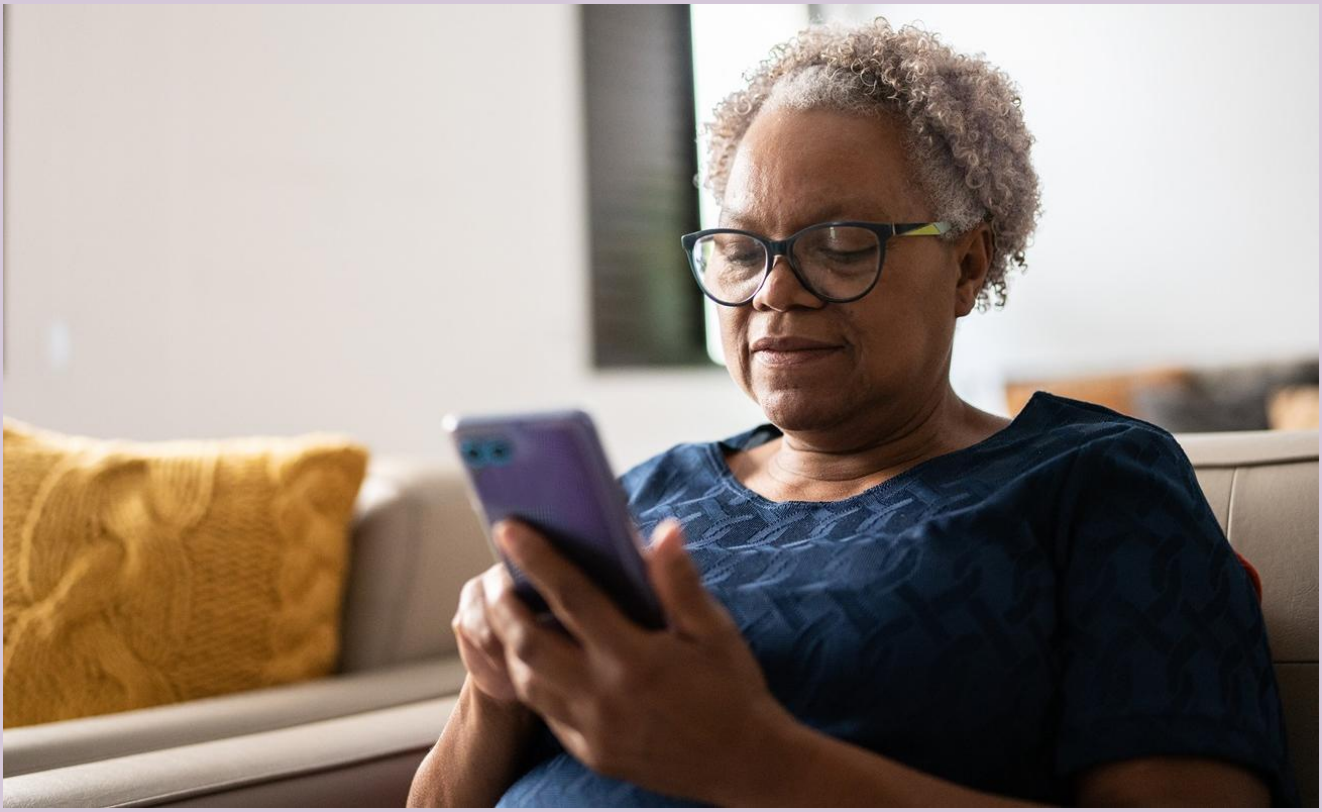
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Company number: 08737632. Registered in England and Wales.



This certification independently validates our commitment to strong cyber security, data protection, and trusted IT services.

We are proud to have signed up to the End Poverty Pledge.