



## Mike's Story

**I'm Mike and I'm one of the Unpaid Carers Representatives for the Regional Partnership Board. I'm an unpaid carer for both my elderly and disabled parents, they've both got a range of illnesses and disabilities between them and it's a pretty full-time job.**



### Life Before Caring

I previously worked in IT as an IT trainer at a firm called Learn Direct. They provided online training with a variety of courses from IT through to basic skills and language courses. I worked in a sort of cyber café but we also provided our own training as well. We had people coming in who were 80 years old and had never used a computer before and their family had moved away so they wanted to be able to keep in touch with them. So, it was working with the community too. You get used to speaking to a wide variety of people and talking to people in general so it's helped with this role. I stopped doing it because there wasn't a way for it work while doing full-time care at the same time.

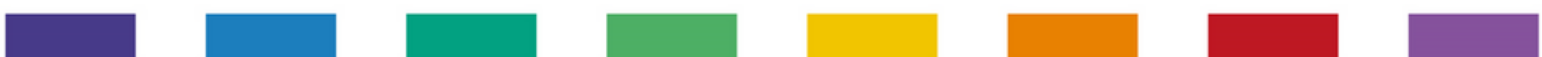
### Becoming an Unpaid Carers Rep

I've been campaigning on social media since the pandemic for unpaid carers' rights in Wales and petitioning Welsh Government to do things to get carers more recognised in Wales. One of the carers I'd connected with on Twitter pointed me in the direction of the advertisement of the RPB Unpaid Carers Rep and I had a look at the role and the description and thought 'yeah, I'll have a go at that,' and here I am today!

I filled out an expression of interest and then I got an email to say I'd been shortlisted for interview. I then had the interview in Cardiff and it was like a panel interview. The interview was informal in some ways and formal in others, I thought I'd messed it up with the first question when they asked me if I knew what the RPB does! Then a week or so later I got a phone call to say I'd been selected to be on the board.

I had meetings with some of the RPB staff and they explained how it all works. After I got appointed it was a bit daunting because a few days after I was appointed we had the first RPB meeting. I logged onto Teams and there was this wall of faces looking at me and I thought 'what have I let myself in for?'

There's another unpaid carers rep too, because after the interviews they couldn't decide between us so they said we'll have both. So, there's two of us which works out quite well because I'm in the Vale and Bobby-Jo is in Cardiff so we've got both areas covered and we regularly talk between us and discuss things. Cardiff and Vale is quite a big area for one person, so to have two unpaid carers reps it makes things a bit easier. We have different experiences and backgrounds as well.



## What is it like being an unpaid carer's rep?

I attend the RPB meetings and I'm also on the Unpaid Carers Board, which I attend every six weeks, and I've been involved in the RPB's Area Plan workshops. There is coproduction involved, for example, the Short Breaks Fund\*. Everybody on the Unpaid Carers Board were all involved in giving input with how we thought it could work and what we thought needed to be done. It feels like I have got a voice on the board and people take in what I've got to say rather than it just being a tick box exercise.

For me, I'm living as unpaid carer everyday so it's easier for me to put the voice of other people forward and I've connected with a wide range of carers on social media so I'm always getting their views. A lot of groups closed due to the pandemic and a lot are yet to start up again because of funding. But a lot of it is just talking to people on social media or talking to people on email about various topics around unpaid care.

### The Challenges

It can be hard at times to be an unpaid carers rep alongside caring for my parents, like when there are RPB meetings and workshops. The RPB team have said from the beginning that they'll be flexible and understanding if I can't make it meetings or if I have to rush off halfway through an RPB meeting or something. You get around it by doing other things before or if there's an afternoon meeting I can put stuff off until after. It's things like getting everything sorted at home at about 5 o'clock in the morning so that I could get to Cardiff for 9am.

The biggest challenge was getting my head around all the acronyms! In the first RPB meeting, there were acronyms like RIF being thrown at me and I was like 'what is that?!' but one of the team kindly sent a glossary with all the various acronyms on so if someone says one I can look it up. But now I've found that I'm using the acronyms too!

### Lived Experience as an Asset

You can't beat lived experience, it's alright for people to say 'unpaid carers need this' but a lot of the time without that lived experience you end up with a one size fits all scenario. The Short Breaks Fund, for example, if they'd said it's just for going away for a few days, you might have found that many carers wouldn't have applied for the funding because to go away they might need people to come in and cover for them and provide care for their elderly parents or they might need to put your child into respite centre for a few days so they can go away. But because there is that lived experience you can say that to unpaid carers a short break might mean not having to cook a meal one night a week or being able to go out and buy some books and then knowing that they can put half an hour or an hour aside for a day and read. It's having that lived experience and being innovative with that lived experience and the knowledge.

I'd like to see more lived experience roles within RPBs and also within Welsh Government as well. Welsh Government have got ministerial advisory groups but not all the people on those groups have actually got lived experience. So, there should definitely be more lived experience within Welsh Government and carry on with the lived experience in the RPB.

**\*The Short Breaks Fund is funded through Cardiff and Vale Regional Partnership Board in partnership with Cardiff Third Sector Council (C3SC) and Glamorgan Voluntary Services (GVS) and supports unpaid carers with short breaks from their caring role.**

