

ust Carers Centres are about to criss-cross
she opened the first one in Scotland,
en, the Princess spoke exclusively to
N of the Press and Journal about the lifeline
a provide to millions of 'hidden' men, women
ople who are caring for relatives at home

Caring for carers



MOST people associate the Princess Royal with her long-standing work for the Save the Children Fund, which has taken her to Third World countries to see at first hand how poverty, disease and wars have blighted the lives of the young.

However, her name is now set to become synonymous with another project which affects every community in the country, from big city to remote village, but which, up until now, has remained very much behind closed doors.

The people to whom the work of her Trust is dedicated could be described as the Cinderellas of society — the women, men and young people who look after relatives at home, often at enormous personal and financial cost.

There are estimated to be around 6.8million of these carers in Britain, from a vast variety of backgrounds, covering all ages and groups.

There are husbands or wives looking after spouses, sons or daughters caring for elderly parents, children tending disabled parents, mothers and fathers a handicapped child, as well as friends or neighbours.

The new Trust Centres aim to harness the existing voluntary and statutory help available for these people, as well as adding their own expertise and manpower, to come together in a pivotal unit of practical advice and support which can be tapped into anywhere, any time.

In a rare, face-to-face interview, the Princess spoke enthusiastically and at length about the project. Her down-to-earth understanding of the carers' problems and obvious admiration for their role confounding her old reputation for being slightly hard and aloof.

"In the past the needs of the sufferers have been the thing on which funds and individual groups have concentrated, for example the specialised needs of a Multiple Sclerosis patient or someone with Alzheimer's Disease," she explained.

"Now we are seeking to put the needs of the carers themselves into the equation, to find out what type of help is needed and how it can be provided. Up until now they have not even identified themselves as being a particular group with particular needs."

The Trust's ambitious target is to have a centre to cover every social services area in Britain.

"At the moment we have agreements for 20 — our target is 25 by the end of the year. This one in Grampian is one of the first because much of the network of help was already in place through Voluntary Service Aberdeen and other agencies, all of whom have been only too keen to become involved.

"In other areas, more persuasion of the statutory bodies may be necessary where they are eager to carry on with their own control of what they provide at present."



Photographs:

said the Princess, giving a knowing smile which suggested she was delighted to take on the role of persuader.

"Obviously, there are particular problems in setting up our centres where a large geographic area has to be covered, like the Highlands and Islands.

"This is where British Telecom has a special role to play in helping us set up mobile advice units and home helplines, where one number accesses a whole range of services and individuals. In fact, the Highlands is already well advanced in networks of satellite communications."

The Princess emphasised there was no one 'type' of carer: "They are all different and all their needs are different. The support and information for looking after someone with a degenerative illness, for example, can be very different from someone looking after an accident victim.

"Society also tends to think of carers as being the women — mothers or daughters. But, in fact, around 40% of those looking after people are men. We must also realise there are young people with the very difficult role of looking after a parent.

"Young people do care more than people imagine. As a mother of teenagers, I know they will adopt a certain stance with their peer groups, but in fact our young men and women are caring individuals who are not always portrayed that way in the media.

"They can also have a vital role to play in helping to look after grandparents. I think it has always been true that the bonds between grandchildren and grandparents are very special and very strong."

The Princess believes the availability of suitable respite care accommodation is something which people who look after someone at home find particularly valuable.

"At the moment several agencies provide this, but we would see our centres as helping to knit them all together so that the right type of facility is found for individual needs."

Obviously, the success of each Carers

Centre will be dependent on support. The Trust receives grants from local authorities as well as donations from other bodies, but has also been backed from a number of sources throughout the country.

On Wednesday evening, the Princess attended a private dinner with the North-east's top business people. She explained how the centres are to play an increasingly important part in their operations.

"Around one third of carers are in working age and it is immensely important to carry on the dual role of carer.

"In some degree businesses are aware of themselves losing some of their best people and they won't know how to work together we can find solutions to this social problem which will help old people live longer.

"There is sometimes a feeling that men and women who can no longer work for themselves at home, should be supported after by the experts.

"But there are thousands of families who desperately want to look after their loved ones and this is where they need extra support society can give. This is what the carers' community is all about."

Above all, the Princess is determined to ensure that her Trust develops a high profile, not just to attract financial support but to ensure that all those who need to find out about, and come forward to use, the help available.

"We are still at the early stages of involvement of others is essential. We are building up a network of carers' volunteers, many who have been caring for relatives themselves in the past.

Pointing out of the window, she pinpointed all those 'hidden' carers. "But we must hear from the carers themselves. They have to shape what they want and shape the way in which our centres can provide."

- The Princess Royal Trust Carers Centre in Belmont Street, Aberdeen is designed to provide help and support for around 40,000 Grampian people who care for people at home.
- Staffed by Voluntary Services Aberdeen with support from Grampian Regional Council and Grampian Health Board.
- A joint initiative between the Trust and BT which gave £200,000 support.

- Offers practical help with things like shopping, transport and laundry.
- Access to respite care and attendance schemes.
- Mutual support through self-help groups and informal meetings.
- Information on all aspects of caring, including benefits, aids and adaptations.
- Counselling to alleviate isolation and stress.

20 PLUS 20th ANNIVERSARY