

Policy Briefing: Social care reform and unpaid carers

October 2024

Social Care and unpaid carers

Unpaid carers and those they care for rely on the social care system. However, for many this system is failing to deliver accessible, reliable quality care for the cared for person and support for unpaid carers to maintain their own health and wellbeing.

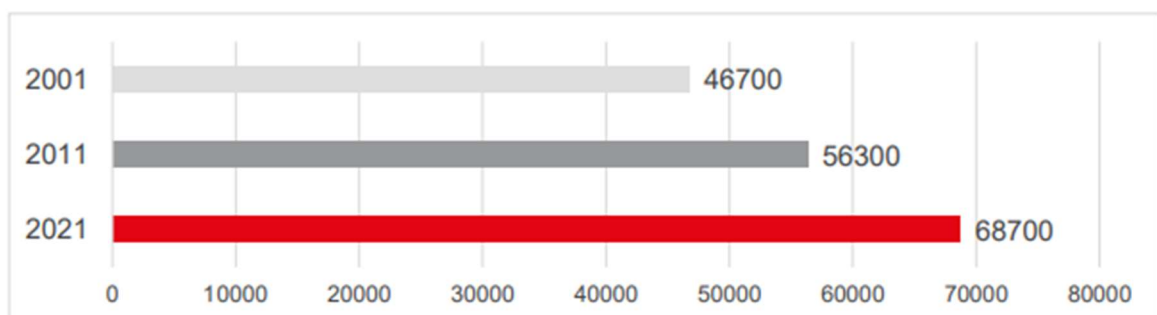
The reform of adult social care consultation provided an agreed pathway for transformation of social care services. However, whilst good work has been undertaken to further develop some of the proposals, progress to implement change has been very slow and to date has not resulted in tangible changes that would make life better for unpaid carers and those they care for.

It is essential the work of the social care collaborative forum moves at pace and is given ring fenced funding for transformation of social care services, including the development and implementation of a new carers' strategy.

Currently our unpaid carers are propping up the health and social care system. They save the public purse £5.8 billion in care costs each year¹. Yet they are continually being asked to take on more and more, filling in the gaps in statutory provision of social care.

Census figures show that the number of people performing the most intense unpaid caring roles has increased drastically in Northern Ireland in the last 20 years².

Chart 1: People providing 50+ hours of unpaid care per week in Northern Ireland ^[1]



¹ Carers NI 2021, Valuing Carers 2021

² Carers NI 2023, State of Caring 2023: The impact of caring on health in Northern Ireland

Carers' experiences of social care provision

Carers in Northern Ireland are reporting long waiting times for care packages, unavailability of some care packages (for example those needing two people), long waits for multidisciplinary services and poor reliability.

“Eight months ago we applied for a care package. It had come to breaking point. My [parent] wasn't getting on well. I didn't know there was problem getting a care package in a rural area. When I reached out and asked for help it came as a shock because the package wasn't there. We have been able to get through but the impact on the carer – I have really struggled.”

Unpaid carer – Social care in rural areas

Many are unable to avail of any support to take a break from caring or take time to look after their own health and wellbeing. Fewer than two-thirds (59%) of carers told our State of Caring Survey they had had a break from caring in the last 12 months³.

Carers are also struggling to maintain employment due to lack of adequate replacement care and entering cycles of poverty. One in four unpaid carers in Northern Ireland currently live in poverty⁴. However, 28% of women with unpaid caring roles told us that social services they could rely on would help them return to work or increase their hours⁵.

“I have only had one day off with my partner from our intensive caring role in 21 years and no break away.”

Unpaid carer State of Caring survey 2023

“I have never had a holiday and it does not look like I ever will. Why do I have to beg to get a week or two off?”

Unpaid carer State of Caring survey 2023

“Issues with domiciliary care are having a bigger impact on me. It means having to stay home and work from home more. The carers are not doing what I need them to do to let me be out of the house.”

Unpaid carer – Career or Care

Our hospitals are running at capacity, even during summer months, and there is increasing pressure to discharge patients back into the community despite a lack of care packages. Carers report being put under pressure to fill in the gap until a care package can be put in place and for many it is not days until a care package is provided, but weeks or months. For some no care package ever comes.

³ Carers NI 2023, State of Caring 2023: The impact of caring on health in Northern Ireland

⁴ Carers NI 2023, Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland

⁵ Carers NI 2024, Career or Care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland

“I had the social worker from the hospital ringing me to say my [parent] was medically fit for discharge. I explained I was dreadfully unwell myself. It felt like she was putting pressure on me to take my [parent] home and wasn’t listening to me.”

Unpaid carer – Social care in rural areas.

The impact of poor provision of social care on unpaid carers

The unrelenting pressure, the inability to access breaks or support and the struggle to juggle paid employment with caring responsibilities means providing a caring role for many carers comes at significant personal and financial cost.

One in four carers describe their mental health as bad or very bad. Over half (52%) of carers told us their physical health had suffered due to caring. Yet a large majority (76%) of carers said that they had continued to provide care despite feeling like they were at breaking point⁶.

“I don’t want to get out of bed in the morning to face it all again. I’m constantly stressed.”

Unpaid carer – State of Caring 2023

Conclusion

With an aging population and increasing rates of chronic health conditions and disability it is likely our health and social care services will come under ever greater pressure in the future. We will also see increased numbers taking on unpaid caring roles and indeed two in three of us will become carers in our adult life.

Carers NI commends the work of the social care collaborative forum however, it is essential this work moves at pace and is given ring fenced funding for transformation of social care services, including the development and implementation of a new carers’ strategy.

Without adequate support we fear many carers will reach breaking point and the system may collapse.

Carers NI

Carers NI is Northern Ireland’s membership body for unpaid carers. We provide carers with expert information and tailored advice through our fact sheets and helpline and opportunities to connect with carers in similar situations through our online Care for a Cuppa sessions and our Carers Connect forum.

We conduct research around issues concerning unpaid carers building up the evidence base to support change and we champion the rights of Northern Ireland’s 220,000 carers through our advocacy and campaigning work.

For more information, please contact

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⁶ Carers NI 2023, State of Caring 2023: The impact of caring on health in Northern Ireland