

ABOUT CARERS NI

Carers NI is Northern Ireland's membership body for unpaid carers. We work to represent and support the over 220,000 people who provide unpaid care for ill, older or disabled family members or friends – fighting for increased recognition and support for all carers and to ensure they have a voice in policymaking.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Carers NI is extremely disappointed that no funding has been allocated in the Department's budget for 2024/2025 for a Carer's Allowance Recognition Payment. Whilst we recognise the difficult financial position the Department is working in, 28% of unpaid carers are currently living in poverty, resorting to cutting back on food, essentials and mounting up debts^{1,2}. Delivering a social security benefit which prevents them living in financial hardship should be a priority.
- We would ask the Minister to reconsider the lack of welfare mitigations to support unpaid carers within the budget and to make the delivery of a Carer's Allowance Recognition Payment a priority area for any additional funding from monitoring rounds or other sources. Whilst delivering this policy will not address all of our concerns around Carer's Allowance it would be an improvement on the current situation and give more unpaid carers a better chance at avoiding financial hardship.

CARER'S ALLOWANCE AND POVERTY

1. **More than one in four (28%) unpaid carers in Northern Ireland are living in poverty** – significantly higher than the non-carer population (17%) and higher than the carer poverty rate in the rest of the UK (24%)².
2. The causes of carer poverty are multi-faceted, but one of the single biggest drivers is the inadequate support carers receive through the social security system. **Nearly half (46%) of local recipients of Carer's Allowance are living in poverty**².
3. Carer's Allowance is currently worth £81.90 per week and is only available to those providing unpaid care for a minimum of 35 hours per week – meaning the payments are worth around £2 per hour.
4. The punitive earnings threshold, where one penny earned over £151 per week means an unpaid carer losing their entire Carer's Allowance payment, represents one of the harshest cliff-edges in the welfare system and is a significant barrier to carers taking on meaningful employment.

¹ Carers NI: State of Caring 2023. The impact of caring on finances in Northern Ireland. November 2023.

² Carer Poverty Commission NI. Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland. 2023

5. Implementation of a Carer's Allowance Recognition Payment, which was recommended in the Independent Review of Welfare Mitigations in 2022³ would immediately lift 3,400 unpaid carers out of poverty⁴. A similar Carer's Allowance Supplement policy has been in place in Scotland since 2018 and has been shown to help carers pay for essentials and clear debts⁵.
6. Reform of the eligibility criteria for Carer's Allowance, ensuring it includes young carers and carers in receipt of their state pension, would alleviate the financial strain being experienced by many carers.

DISCRETIONARY SUPPORT GRANT / COMMUNITY & VOLUNTARY SECTOR

7. The commitment to top up the department's Discretionary Support Grant and to recognise the pressure on the community and voluntary sector with some increased funding is welcome although more is needed in both these areas.

AFFORDABLE WARMTH SCHEME

8. We welcome the commitment to the Affordable Warmth Scheme but are concerned that the budget allocation is reduced by 50%. Carers often experience additional extra costs due to the needs of the cared for person. These include additional costs for heating⁴.

SECTION 75 IMPACTS

9. The failure to provide additional welfare mitigations to support the 220,000 people in Northern Ireland providing unpaid care for ill, disabled or older family members or friends within this budget will have a significant effect on those with dependents, failing to address the desperate financial situation many are currently living in.
10. Nearly 60% of unpaid carers in Northern Ireland are women. Women are more likely to become a carer earlier in life and to leave the workplace to care⁶. The lack of welfare mitigations to support unpaid carers in this budget will therefore have a disproportionate impact on women.

CONCLUSION

11. Carers NI recognises the difficult financial situation the Department is operating under. However, with nearly 1 in 2 recipients of Carer's Allowance living in poverty it is clear the benefit is inadequate and urgent action is required. We would urge the Minister to acknowledge the invaluable contribution that unpaid carers make to society, not just in words but in actions, and prioritise support for unpaid carers from any additional funding from monitoring rounds or other sources.

For more information, please contact.

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³ Welfare Mitigations Review - Independent Advisory Panel Report. October 2022

⁴ Carer Poverty Commission NI. Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland. 2023

⁵ Scottish Government. Carer's Allowance Supplement: Evaluation. 2020

⁶ Carers NI. Career or Care. 2024