

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 concerned at the Department's budget for 2024/25. Health Trusts cannot currently meet the existing community care needs let alone respond to the increasing demand for care driven by Northern Ireland's demographic and health trends.
- This unmet demand for care does not disappear. It falls directly on the shoulders of family members or friends who step in to meet these gaps in care on an unpaid basis.
- The unpaid carer population has propped up the health and social care system for years, saving the health and social care system billions of pounds in care costs¹. But the unrelenting pressure to fill in the ever-increasing gaps in services with little or no support is resulting in a population of carers who are burnt out, living in poverty and suffering ill health.
- Transformation of our services is essential. We need to change how social care is organised, funded, and delivered. The reform of adult social care provided a pathway to achieve this and, whilst we acknowledge and commend the work which the Department has undertaken to further develop some of the proposals, it is a source of great concern and frustration that funding is unavailable for yet another year to progress many of the initiatives. Reforming and growing social care and expanding the roll out of multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) is not funded within the current allocations and it seems likely that the initiatives specific to unpaid carers within the adult social care reform agenda will remain unimplemented in 2024/25.
- The options for additional cost savings will have a significant detrimental effect on unpaid carers, further limiting their ability to access social care services for the cared for person, breaks for themselves and support for their own health and wellbeing. We would oppose these measures in the strongest possible terms.

¹ Valuing Carers 2021 Northern Ireland. Carers NI and the Centre for Care. November 2023

TRANSFORMATION OF SERVICES

1. It is deeply concerning to Carers NI that the Department's 2024/25 budget settlement will not allow for progress to be made in the reform of adult social care.
2. We are disappointed to see no funding allocated to reform and grow social care and to expand initiatives such as the multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs).
3. The Department has put forward a number of recommendations which would make a significant difference to the lives of unpaid carers, such as, a new carers' register, and enhanced information and advice services. Whilst we acknowledge and commend the work the Department has undertaken in 2023/24 to develop detailed proposals for some of these it seems unlikely there will be sufficient resources to begin implementing those proposals and carers will continue to wait for meaningful change. Other recommendations - review of the NI Carers strategy and an independent Carer's Champion have yet to be taken forward.
4. The carer population is exhausted, burnt out, living in poverty and suffering from ill health as a result of the unrelenting pressure they face with little or no support.
5. We would ask that the initiatives to support unpaid carers be prioritised with additional funding made available via any further monies received during monitoring rounds.

OPTIONS FOR COST SAVINGS

1. The options outlined for additional cost savings are harsh and would undoubtedly have a severe detrimental effect on unpaid carers.
2. The reduction of over a million hours of domiciliary care and 500 care home beds will significantly reduce capacity within social care services. Health Trusts cannot currently meet the existing community care needs let alone respond to the increasing demand for care driven by Northern Ireland's demographic and health trends, so the effect of this will be severe.
3. This unmet demand for care will not disappear. It will continue to fall directly on the shoulders of family members or friends who step in to meet these gaps in care on an unpaid basis.
4. A further reduction in availability of community social care services will limit carers' ability to take on and maintain employment as these services are essential to allow carers to participate in the labour market. This will have significant implications for carers, pushing more into financial hardship. It will also increase the pressure on carers, without doubt leading to greater amounts of ill health.
5. Carers already struggle to access support to look after their own health and wellbeing. A reduction in GP enhanced services, including services for carers' health, will further deplete the support carers can access and increase the pressure they face.
6. The unpaid carer population has propped up the health and social care system for years, saving the health and social care system billions of pounds in care costs². But the unrelenting pressure to fill in the ever-increasing gaps in services with little or no support is resulting in a population of carers who are burnt out, living in poverty and suffering ill health themselves.
7. Continuing to rely on unpaid carers to fill in the ever-increasing gaps in social care provision whilst failing to address the support needs for carers themselves cannot

² Valuing Carers 2021 Northern Ireland. Carers NI and the Centre for Care. November 2023

continue. Repeated failure to progress transformation and development of services and support through lack of funding will lead to system collapse.

8. Carers NI would oppose the above cuts in the strongest possible terms.
9. Whilst we welcome the Department's commitment to maintain core grant funding at the same level as last year (50%) we remain concerned about the overall decrease in core grant funding for the community and voluntary sector and the impact this continues to have on the provision of services.
10. We would be happy to engage with the Department further on the development of the proposals for a new core grant funding scheme which the Minister has outlined will be operational by April 2025³.

PAY SETTLEMENTS FOR STAFF

11. We note the potential limitations within the budget allocation to provide for pay settlements for staff.
12. Whilst it is beyond our remit to comment on what pay settlements are appropriate for staff we would highlight that it is important staff are paid appropriately and with parity across the UK to enable Northern Ireland to retain high quality, experienced workers.
13. We are concerned about the impacts any industrial action over pay would have on the delivery of services and the impact this will have on unpaid carers and the people they care for.

PROPOSALS FOR ADDITIONAL FUNDING ALLOCATIONS

14. Whilst we recognise the difficulties in allocating funding within a constrained budgetary position, we are disappointed that there is no proposal to allocate additional funding from monitoring rounds to progressing transformation of the social care system and for support for unpaid carers via progression of the carer specific proposals within the reform of adult social care agenda.
15. We note with concern that the proposal to allocate additional funding to the increased demand for domiciliary care packages and direct payments for services for older people may be affected by the requirement for funding restrictions to manage the overall budget.
16. Unpaid carers are currently facing unrelenting pressure, caring for friends or family members. They face long waiting times for community care packages, multidisciplinary assessments and support. Levels of respite provision remain below pre-covid levels with many carers unable to access respite services. This is having significant impacts on carers physical and mental wellbeing, employment opportunities and finances⁴.
17. Carers NI would ask that unpaid carers are prioritised within monitoring rounds with funding allocated to support social care provision and reform and implementation of the carer specific proposals within the reform of adult social care.

³ Department of Health. Ministerial Announcement. July 2024 <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/core-grant-funding-allocated>

⁴ State of Caring 2023. The impact of caring on health in Northern Ireland. November 2023

MONITORING

18. Unpaid caring has been recognised as a social determinant of health. Currently unpaid carers in Northern Ireland face inequity of opportunity in access to education, employment, services to look after their own health and wellbeing and to build financial security for older age.
19. Resulting health inequalities between those with caring roles and those without are significant. The poverty rate amongst carers in NI is 28% considerably higher than the poverty rate amongst those who do not have caring roles (17%)⁵ and carers have high rates of poor physical and mental ill health and loneliness⁶.
20. Carers NI would ask the Department to make the inequality in health outcomes between unpaid carers and those without caring roles a monitoring target to ensure that attention is focused on this often-forgotten group and ensure that Departmental policy and budgetary allocations work to reduce this inequality.

CONCLUSION

21. Funding for health needs to be put on a sustainable footing with adequate, multiyear budgets to allow the implementation of the transformation agenda. Social care needs to be transformed and developed within the clear and widely supported pathway set out in the Reform of Adult Social Care.
22. Unpaid carers are currently propping up a system that is at the point of collapse, but this is often at the expense of their own opportunities and health and wellbeing. They need supported, both by an adequate social care system and via support for themselves, including regular respite provision.
23. Carers NI is extremely concerned about the detrimental effect this budget will have on those providing unpaid care, increasing the pressure they are under and pushing them further into poverty and ill health.
24. We would ask that the Department reviews its proposals for the allocation of additional funding from monitoring rounds and prioritises reform of social care and support for unpaid carers.

For more information, please contact.

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⁵ Carer Poverty Commission. Policy measures to tackle poverty amongst unpaid carers in NI. October 2023.

⁶ State of Caring 2023. The impact of caring on health in Northern Ireland. November 2023