

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- The vast majority of unpaid carers (83%) in Northern Ireland are of working age.¹
- Many carers want and need employment opportunities. However, providing unpaid care can be a significant barrier to participation in the labour market.
- For many carers the pressure of juggling caring, and employment unsupported is too great to manage, and one in three people with caring roles have left employment because of caring in Northern Ireland.² In addition to the impact on individual carers this represents a significant loss of skills to the Northern Ireland economy.
- Barriers to employment are a significant driver of financial strain among unpaid carers - being unemployed is the single strongest predictor of carer poverty with more than half (55%) of local carers who are out of work living below the poverty line.³
- Supporting unpaid carers to remain in employment is dependent on the interplay between social and economic policies. However, flexibility in the workplace and policies to support carers to balance employment with their caring role are one of the key pillars and Carers NI welcomes their inclusion within the employment rights bill.
- Providing flexible working and carer’s leave on a statutory footing is critical to ensure equity of provision across Northern Ireland.
- To ensure no carer is financially disadvantaged for caring and to give all unpaid carers the opportunity to take up this vital support, carer’s leave needs to be delivered as a statutory paid right with the cost covered by government. The benefit should be paid at an employee’s full wage.
- International evidence provides a strong case that supporting carers via the provision of paid carer’s leave would not only improve carers’ own wellbeing and finances but would also bring far-reaching benefits to government and the economy.
- Increasing the number of unpaid carers able to enter or remain in the labour market will result in higher tax revenues, lower benefit spending, and increased GDP alongside lower costs to business through improved retention and savings in recruitment.⁴

¹ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: Census 2021

² Carers NI. State of Caring survey 2023.

³ Carer Poverty Commission NI. Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland. October 2023

⁴ Carer Poverty Commission NI. Policies to address unpaid carer poverty: an evidence review. August 2024

- Evidence from large businesses across the UK who currently offer paid carer's leave as a voluntary benefit suggests uptake rates much lower than 100% and that carers use on average 2.5 – 3.5 days of paid carer's leave per year.⁵ These figures would indicate that the cost of implementing a policy of five days paid carer's leave in Northern Ireland would be much less than the estimate of £60 million per year in the consultation. Our modelling uses an uptake rate of between 23 and 34% and assuming carers take 3.4 out of the 5 available days per year suggests a cost to the Executive of £10.3-£15.2 million per year.
- We believe the cost of implementing paid carer's leave would be more than mitigated by the economic benefits.⁶ We have commissioned modelling to look at this and have invited the Department for Economy to a pre-launch roundtable on 6th November to hear and discuss this modelling.

⁵ Carers UK. Taking the next step for working carers. Introducing a new right to paid Carer's Leave. August 2024

⁶ Carers NI. Delivering carer's leave in Northern Ireland. Policy options and cost modelling. April 2024

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.

CARERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

There are over 220,000 unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, representing one in eight of the population. These unpaid carers support the personal, practical and emotional needs of family members, friends or neighbours who are ill, disabled or older.⁷

The majority (83%) are of working age (16 – 65 years) with 56% aged between 40 - 64 years.⁷ Nearly 60% are women,⁷ with women more likely to care earlier in life and to provide more high intensity care.⁸

Almost one in three (31%) unpaid carers currently provide more than 50+ hours of care per week.

BALANCING EMPLOYMENT AND CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

Many carers want and need employment opportunities. They cherish the careers they've spent time working toward. And they rely on their wage packets to meet the high costs of supporting someone during an ongoing cost of living crisis. Employment also offers opportunities for time away from caring and social connections all of which are important to carers' wellbeing.

However juggling employment with a caring role unsupported is difficult and too often providing unpaid care can be a significant barrier to participation in the labour market. While nearly two-thirds (60%) of all adults in Northern Ireland are in some form of employment, the rate is just 39% among those with unpaid caring roles – and the difference in full-time employment rates is even starker (47% vs 28%).⁹

Understandably, many people with caring roles find it a massive challenge to provide hands-on practical, emotional and personal care for someone around-the-clock, manage their appointments, maintain the home and hold down a paid job – particularly a full-time one – at the same time. For some carers who provide care for over 30 hours per week in addition to undertaking employment they are essentially undertaking two jobs.

Many carers report a lack of support within the workplace to help them balance their caring role with employment and a disparity of support both across employers and within workplaces.¹⁰

⁷ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Census 2021

⁸ Carers UK. Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life. November 2019

⁹ Department for Communities. Family Resources Survey 2022/23

¹⁰ Carers NI. Career or care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland. February 2024

For many the pressure is too great to manage, and Carers NI's research shows that:

- 1 in 3 people with caring roles have left employment because of caring
- 26% have cut their working hours
- 16% have taken on less qualified jobs or turned down promotion.¹¹

In addition to the impact on individual carers this represents a significant loss of skills to the Northern Ireland economy.

For those who stay in employment the demands of juggling their caring responsibilities with paid work often leaves them struggling to maintain their own physical and mental health and becoming increasingly burnt out. Carers often resort to using annual leave to fulfil caring duties leaving them no time for a proper break to recharge their batteries. Just over half (59%) of carers report having had a break from caring in the last 12 months.¹¹

These barriers to employment are a significant driver of financial strain among Northern Ireland's unpaid carers. Research from the Carer Poverty Commission shows that being unemployed is the single strongest predictor of carer poverty with more than half (55%) of local carers who are out of work living below the poverty line, compared to 28% of the carer population as a whole and 14% of carers who are in work.¹²

Supporting unpaid carers to remain in employment is dependent on the interplay between several social and economic policies. However, flexibility in the workplace and policies to support carers to balance employment with their caring role are one of the key pillars

A supportive employer that understands caring, the ability to take carer's leave and flexible working arrangements, including part time work and working from home, are highlighted by carers as some of the workplace supports which would help them return to employment or increase their hours.¹³

Provision of these rights on a statutory footing is critical to ensure equity of provision across Northern Ireland. Leaving it to the discretion of employers would continue the lottery of support that currently exists.

FLEXIBLE WORKING

D1: Do you agree that an employee should be entitled to make up to two statutory flexible working requests within a 12-month period?

We strongly agree with this. The caring journey can fluctuate in terms of intensity of caring as the needs of the cared for person changes. The ability to make two requests for flexible working arrangements will improve carers' ability to respond to changes in their personal circumstances. Recognising that carers' situations are all different we would suggest that the definition of flexible working should be broad and encompass a wide range of options

¹¹ Carers NI. State of Caring survey. 2023

¹² Carer Poverty Commission NI. Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland. October 2023

¹³ Carers NI. Career or care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland. February 2024

including work from home, different starting and finishing times, job shares, compressed hours, term time etc.

D2: Do you agree that an employee should only make a second flexible working request when an employer has considered a previous request, including when an appeal against the outcome of that request has been made?

We agree with this however, it is essential these requests are processed as quickly as possible.

D3: Do you believe an employee should be entitled to make a flexible working request from the first day of their employment?

We strongly agree with this. It is essential carers have the ability to request flexible working from day one of employment. Caring responsibilities mean that a carer's need for flexible working is often present from day 1 of employment and they cannot wait a period of time before working flexibly. The ability to make a flexible working request from day 1 can be the difference between a carer being able to take on paid employment and not.

D4: Do you agree that an employee should no longer be required to explain the effect a flexible working request would have on their employer when making such a request?

We strongly agree with this. This requirement should not fall on the shoulders of carers.

D5: Additional Information

The Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023 granted carers in Great Britain the above rights from April 2024. Legislation in Northern Ireland has lagged behind contributing to carers in the province struggling to enter and remain in employment, often at the detriment of their own health and wellbeing and financial situation. Implementation of these rights in Northern Ireland will give local carers parity with their counterparts in the rest of the UK and should be implemented without delay.

CARER'S LEAVE

D6: We would welcome your views on whether carer's leave should be a paid right; and, if so, who should be responsible for making the payment and what the rate of pay should be. In answering these questions, we would be grateful if you would provide reasoning for your responses and identify any issues or benefits with your suggested approach.

To ensure no carer is financially disadvantaged for caring for an ill, older or disabled person and to give all carers the opportunity to take up this vital support without the fear of losing much needed wages, carer's leave needs to be delivered as a statutory paid right with the cost covered by government. The benefit should be paid at an employee's full wage.

Caring leave policies help balance employment and care. Dedicated short periods of leave for planned appointments, to provide personal care or to help with administrative or financial matters is very important to carers.

Carers say access to paid caring leave would:

- Help them to juggle work and caring without becoming burnt out and sick
- Allow them to use their holiday leave for proper breaks, rather than caring duties

- Foster a better work-life balance.

Among those who have left employment or reduced their working hours because of caring, 34% say access to paid carer's leave would help them to return to work or increase their hours.¹⁴

However, the provision of any form of caring leave from work is currently at the discretion of individual employers in Northern Ireland, resulting in a wide spectrum of experiences. Nearly two-thirds (61%) of unpaid carers here say their employer doesn't offer unpaid caring leave and 86% say their employer doesn't offer caring leave on a paid basis.¹⁴

Provision of five days paid carer's leave would address the gaps in current leave provision for dependents, which focus only on emergency situations. Providing it as a statutory right, paid for by government, will ensure equity of provision across all employers and reduce the burden on small businesses.

Unpaid caring is also a gendered issue, with women making up 60% of Northern Ireland's carer population.¹⁵ Evidence shows women are more likely to care early in life whilst at working age and are more likely to leave the workplace to care.¹⁶ This has a substantial impact on their careers, earning potential and financial situation, both now and in the future as they are unable to pay into pension pots.¹⁷ Delivering paid caring leave and helping more carers to remain in employment will support the Ministers vision to remove the barriers local women face to full participation in the labour market. This will help to close the gender gap in participation in the labour market, career progression and pay giving a more equal society.

International evidence provides a strong case that supporting carers via the provision of paid carer's leave would not only improve carers' own physical and mental wellbeing and finances but would also bring far-reaching benefits to the government and the economy.¹⁸

Increasing the number of carers able to enter or remain in the labour market will result in higher tax revenues, lower benefit spending, and increased GDP alongside lower costs to business through improved retention and savings in recruitment and training costs.

Estimates in the England show that the annual public expenditure costs of carers leaving work to be around £2.9 billion per year. This is made up of £1.7 billion in social security benefits paid to unpaid carers who have left employment and an additional £1.2 billion due to taxes not collected on foregone income.¹⁹

Obviously, there are costs to providing five days paid carer's leave and in the current financial situation these must be carefully examined. Modelling by Carers NI estimates that providing five days of fully paid carer's leave for employees in Northern Ireland would cost the Executive between £10.3–£15.2 million per year. Even if this reform had minimal impact on employment rates (only preventing 1% of carers from leaving employment), the Executive could still save at least £4.3 million per year in Carer's Allowance payments, while the UK

¹⁴ Carers NI. State of Caring 2023

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Census 2021

¹⁶ Carers UK. Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life. November 2019

¹⁷ Carers NI. Career or care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland. February 2024

¹⁸ Carer Poverty Commission NI. Policies to address unpaid carer poverty: an evidence review. August 2024

¹⁹ Picard, Linda, et al. Public expenditure costs of carers leaving employment in England 2015/2016. Health & social care in the community 26.1 (2018): 132 - 142

Exchequer could retain £5.9 million each year in income tax and National Insurance contributions. We believe this is a conservative estimate as the number of employees which could be prevented from leaving employment by this policy is likely to be considerably more than 1%.²⁰

We note the difference between our figures and the initial estimates from departmental economists. Department estimates suggest introducing carer's leave along the lines we have proposed could cost as much as £60 million per year. These costs are based upon 100% uptake of the benefit and assuming each carer would take the full five days per year.

However, evidence from large businesses across the UK who currently offer paid carer's leave as a voluntary benefit has been compiled by Carers UK and would suggest this is not the case. For example, TSB has offered employees with caring roles 70 hours of paid carer's leave per year (from 2020). Take-up rate has been 10% with an average of 3 days taken per employee per year. Phoenix group has offered 10 days paid carer's leave per year (from 2022). Take-up rate has been 6% of their workforce with an average of 2.6 days taken per employee per year. Centrica has offered 10 days paid carer's leave (from 2019) with an average of 3.4 days taken per year. These figures suggest the cost of implementing 5 days paid carer's leave would be much lower than departmental estimates.²¹

We believe the cost of implementing paid carer's leave would be more than mitigated by the economic benefits. We have commissioned modelling to look at this and have invited the Department for Economy to a pre-launch roundtable on 6th November to hear and discuss this modelling.

There is a strong moral case to support unpaid carers, who save society 5.8 billion per year in care costs in Northern Ireland however there is also a sound economic argument to do so with benefits extending far beyond individual carers finances and wellbeing.

D7: Do you agree that the definition of caring relationships for the purpose of Carer's Leave should mirror that used for dependant relationships?

Yes, we agree with this.

D8: Do you agree a carer providing care for an individual with physical or mental health problems likely to last for more than three months, or a disability, or who requires care for a reason connected with their old age should be entitled to Carer's Leave?

Yes, we strongly agree with this.

D9: Do you agree the reasons for taking Carer's Leave should be broadly defined?

Yes, we strongly agree that the reasons for taking carer's leave should be broadly defined. Every carer's situation is different. Carers will need to use this leave for a variety of reasons to enable them to balance employment and care, such as planned appointments, helping with personal care, assisting or managing financial matters or administrative tasks.

²⁰ Carers NI. Delivering carer's leave in Northern Ireland. Policy options and cost modelling. April 2024

²¹ Carers UK. Taking the next step for working carers. Introducing a new right to paid Carer's Leave. August 2024

D10: Do you agree that caring for a person with short-term care needs and childcare (other than where the child has a disability or other long-term caring needs) should be out of scope for Carer's Leave?

Yes, we agree with this.

D11: Do you agree that the leave should be available to be taken as individual days or half days up to one whole week (both options to be pro-rated for part-time employees)?

Yes, we strongly agree with this. We believe the leave should be able to be taken as flexibly as possible. The ability to take the leave as whole, half days or even hours will make the policy as effective as possible. When taking time out, for example, to take a cared for person to a hospital appointment, a half day or several hours may suffice.

D12: Do you agree that an individual should be required to give their employer notice ahead of taking Carer's Leave?

We agree to this in principle where it is possible for the carer to give notice. However, there will be situations when it is not possible to give notice. Appointments for the cared for person can be at short notice and, given the current pressure on our health and social services, cannot be rearranged or altered. This inability to give notice at times must be recognised and appropriate protection built into the legislation to ensure this does not present a barrier to carers being able to avail of carer's leave.

D13: Do you agree an employee exercising their right to request or take unpaid Carer's Leave should have the same protections as those taking other forms of statutory leave?

Yes, we strongly agree with this.

D14: Additional Information

We note the statement (page 113) that two people can claim carer's leave for the same person. We see this as positive as the caring role can be shared and this will allow greater flexibility.

We would however ask that the Department reconsiders the situation where a carer is providing care for more than one person. For example, a carer looking after two children with additional needs. The number of appointments and other caring duties arising from this will be greater and we would suggest that carers, such as these, should be able to claim additional carer's leave reflecting the additional demand on their time.

We would also ask the Department to consider implementing a longer-term unpaid carer's leave policy – essentially a career break of one to two years with the guarantee of a return to previous employment once this “break” is over. This alongside the shorter five days paid carer's leave would cover two different aspects which carers need to balance employment and care. The short-term policy will provide caring leave in short blocks of a few hours or days to attend planned appointments or to provide temporary support. The long-term policy will allow for a leave of absence of months or years from employment to allow caring responsibilities to be met but retaining the right to return to employment. Both short term and long term carer's leave policies are in place in Ireland.

Additional Questions (page 149)

Legislation to support carers in the workplace currently lags behind the rest of the UK and Europe. We would ask that these workplace protections are progressed as a matter of urgency to ensure local carers have parity with their counterparts.

To ensure good awareness amongst carers and across business roll out of these rights should be accompanied by an information campaign.

CONCLUSION

Unpaid carers in Northern Ireland save our health and social care system billions of pounds per year in care costs.²² Yet this often comes at the detriment of their own health and wellbeing, careers, and finances as they try to juggle employment with their caring responsibilities unsupported.

But carers should have the same opportunities to participate in the labour market, progress careers and to financial security as everyone else in society.

Employment rights are critical to allow carers this opportunity. Two in three of us in Northern Ireland will become an unpaid carer in our adult lives. Carer's employment rights are therefore a major issue for many people today and they will also become relevant for even more people in the local labour market in the future.

Workplace supports, such as carer's leave and flexible working, are some of the most effective tools we have to prevent people from being forced out of employment because of the demands of caring and Carers NI welcomes their inclusion within the employment rights bill.

These supports will help address the Minister's vision for the economy, increasing the number of working age people in jobs and reducing the gender gap in participation in the workplace, pay and career progression.

However, to ensure no carer is financially disadvantaged by taking on a caring role, to enable all carers to take up the support and to make the policy most effective carer's leave should be delivered as a paid statutory right with the cost covered by government.

We believe the cost of implementing such a policy would be more than mitigated by the economic benefits. Carers represent a valuable skill set to the labour market. Supporting them to remain in employment will not only support individual carers' wellbeing and financial situations but will bring far reaching benefits to the government and business.

²² Carers NI and the Centre for Care. Valuing Carers. November 2023

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Career or care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland. February 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/ahxaiaj/career-or-care-women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-northern-ireland.pdf>

Delivering carer's leave in Northern Ireland. Policy options and cost modelling. April 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/344huunr/delivering-carers-leave-in-northern-ireland-policy-options-and-cost-modelling.pdf>

International Policies and Legislation on Caring Leave from Employment. May 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/ni/briefings/international-policies-and-legislation-on-caring-leave-from-employment/>

Policies to address unpaid carer poverty: an evidence review. August 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/u1wligs1/policies-to-address-unpaid-carer-poverty.pdf>

Taking the next step for working carers - a new right to paid Carer's Leave. August 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/0kbcma3z/carers-uk-taking-the-next-step-for-working-carers-introducing-a-new-right-to-paid-carer-s-leave-august-2024.pdf>

For more information, please contact.

Angela Phillips

Senior Policy & Engagement Officer

angela.phillips@carersni.org