

Peter May  
Permanent Secretary  
Department of Health

Correspondence to:  
craig.harrison@carersni.org

Via email

14 April 2023

Dear Peter

**Re: A New Carers Strategy for Northern Ireland**

We are writing as the Health Spokespeople of the largest parties in the NI Assembly to urge you to immediately commission the design of a new Carers Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Our last Carers Strategy was published in 2006 – nearly two decades ago – and does not reflect the lives, challenges or priorities of the over 220,000 people providing unpaid care to sick or disabled family members or friends in Northern Ireland today.

Together, these carers save the public purse billions of pounds in care costs every year, keeping the Health and Social Care system, already under so much pressure, from certain collapse. They make an immense contribution to society, but in too many cases, what they get in return is a life defined by ill-health, extreme pressure, hardship and lost opportunities.

Recent research from Carers NI illustrates that unpaid carers are being pushed to breaking point by unrelenting caring duties, inadequate support from HSC services and severely limited chances for a break. <sup>[1]</sup> The pressure they're under leaves close to one in four local carers describing their mental health as bad or very bad, with one in five saying the same about their physical health.

This has knock-on effects on their ability to go to work – making it even harder to survive the cost of living crisis – enjoy a decent quality of life, and so much more.

Unpaid carers in Northern Ireland desperately need a new strategic policy direction. This should be led by the Department of Health, but with a cross-departmental scope, addressing the challenges carers face in the spheres of health and social care, welfare, housing, employment and beyond.

The Department set a clear precedent for beginning the development of new policy strategies without a Minister in place in 2019, when the new 10-year Cancer Strategy was commissioned. We believe the same approach could be taken with a new Carers Strategy, allowing critical policy development work to begin right away and ensuring the Strategy could be actioned as quickly as possible when the Executive returns.

Northern Ireland's unpaid carer populations deserve nothing less. They have spent too long being told how valued they are by government while consistently finding themselves at the back of the queue when policy priorities are being set or funding decisions made.

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<sup>1</sup> Carers NI (2022). State of Caring 2022: A snapshot of unpaid caring in Northern Ireland.

It is critically important to begin reversing that trend, and we believe an important first step would be the urgent development of a new Carers Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely

**Jemma Dolan MLA**

Spokesperson on Carers, Disability  
and Older People  
Sinn Féin

**Paul Givan MLA**

Health Spokesperson  
DUP

**Paula Bradshaw MLA**

Health Spokesperson  
Alliance Party

**Alan Chambers MLA**

Health Spokesperson  
Ulster Unionist Party

**Colin McGrath MLA**

Health Spokesperson  
SDLP