

Policy Briefing: Loneliness amongst Unpaid Carers

April 2024

Unpaid carers' experiences of loneliness

1. There are over 220,000 people providing unpaid care to ill, disabled, or elderly family members or friends in Northern Ireland (NI) - 1 in 8 of the populationⁱ.
2. For many this caring role is a significant driver of loneliness and social isolation. **Half of carers in our State of Caring survey said they felt lonely some of the time, with nearly a third (29%) saying they felt lonely always or often**ⁱⁱ. Testimony from unpaid carers is shown below.

“I am rarely out of the house, as it is not safe to leave my husband on his own.”

“I have lost contact with friends as I can't socialise often.”

“I am completely isolated from family, friends...”

“You lose a lot of your social circle and learn that you are your own support system.”

The causes of loneliness amongst unpaid carers

3. Loneliness amongst carers can be caused by a range of circumstances, many of them outside of an individual carer's control.
 - For many the intensity of caring can be so demanding they are left with little time or energy to see friends or family with the focus largely on the needs of the person they care for whilst neglecting their own hobbies and interests.
 - A lack of availability of short breaks and respite care means carers can find it difficult to take a break from their caring role. As a result, the pressure can be relentless with no time to meet with family and friends.
 - Caring can cause significant financial hardship due to the additional costs of caring and the difficulties juggling work and care. Work by the Carer Poverty Commission has shown that 1 in 4 local carers are living in povertyⁱⁱⁱ. This financial strain leaves many carers unable to afford the social activities they enjoyed before.
 - When a person takes on a caring role they can find that their relationship with the person they are caring for changes significantly as the dynamic moves from husband and wife, parent and child, or brother and sister into carer and cared-for.

The Impact of loneliness on unpaid carers

4. Loneliness can impact carers' mental health and wellbeing. In our State of Caring survey carers who experienced loneliness were more likely to describe their mental health as bad or very bad compared to those who didn't feel lonely. They also reported higher levels of depression, stress, anxiety, hopelessness and low mood. (Table 1)ⁱⁱ.

Mental Health Outcome	Carers who always, often or sometimes feel lonely	Carers who never or hardly ever feel lonely
Mental health was rated bad or very bad	28%	8%
Feel depressed	57%	15%
Feel stress or anxious	89%	64%
Feelings of hopelessness	76%	36%
Continuous low mood	88%	45%

Recommendations for policy and practice

5. NI lags behind the rest of the UK in tackling loneliness being the only jurisdiction without a dedicated loneliness strategy. We need to see a cross departmental loneliness strategy developed within this mandate.
6. Reliable, good quality replacement care is essential to allow carers to take a break from their caring role and participate in social activities, hobbies and visit friends and family. Adequate replacement care must be provided within reform of the social care system.
7. It is unacceptable that so many local carers are living in poverty. Route and branch reform of Carer's Allowance is needed to allow our carers to provide for themselves and those they care for and lead a fulfilling life with the resources to access activities that protect their own health and wellbeing.
8. Support for carers' mental health and wellbeing is essential. The Mental Health Strategy 2021-31 must be fully funded and implemented.

Carers NI

9. 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.
10. 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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ⁱ NISRA. Census 2021.

ⁱⁱ Carers NI. State of Caring 2023. The impact of caring on health in Northern Ireland. November 2023.

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