

Briefing: The case for paid carer's leave

June 2022

KEY POINTS

- Carers NI supports the introduction of 5 days paid carer's leave for those providing unpaid care in Northern Ireland, with a staged increase to 10 days.
- Providing care can create severe barriers to engaging in paid employment, with many carers having to reduce their hours or leave work entirely. Carers faced high additional costs even before the current cost of living crisis made household bills less affordable, so the inability to work is pushing many into greater financial hardship and poverty.
- Introducing paid carer's leave in Northern Ireland will not eradicate the financial pressures facing all carers, but it would be a valuable tool in helping more people to juggle work with unpaid care and maintain vital household income.

FINANCIAL PRESSURES AND POVERTY AMONG CARERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Carers faced severe financial pressures even before the current cost of living crisis made things worse. To name just a few of the challenges, carers will often spend a larger proportion of their income on energy costs to keep the person they are caring for warm and manage their condition; face higher food bills due to the person's nutritional needs; have to spend significant amounts of money on equipment and home adaptations so that the cared for person can remain at home and enjoy a good quality of life; and meet higher transport costs for travel to medical appointments.
2. In 2019 – before the COVID-19 pandemic or the recent rise in living costs – nearly 40% of carers in Northern Ireland said they were struggling to make ends meet, having to rely on credit cards, overdrafts and cutting back on essentials like food in order to get by. ^[1]
3. Since then, the situation has only deteriorated for many local carers. In a February 2022 survey of the financial pressures facing carers during the preceding six months:
 - **67%** said their financial situation had gotten worse.
 - **96%** reported that their energy bills had increased.
 - **85%** were spending more on food and drink.
 - **65%** had seen the cost of care services increase.
 - **47%** were unable to afford their monthly expenses. ^[2]

“The money I have coming in is less than what I pay out for heating, food, car expenses. It is very worrying indeed.” – carer

JUGGLING WORK AND UNPAID CARE

4. In the context of the financial pressures detailed above – and the entirely inadequate support available to carers through the social security system – paid employment can be a lifeline for carers. It is estimated that over 40% of local carers are in some form of employment – 20 percentage points lower than the general adult population. ^[3]

¹ Carers NI (2019). State of Caring 2019: A snapshot of unpaid care in Northern Ireland.

² Carers NI (2022). Under pressure: Caring and the cost of living crisis in Northern Ireland.

³ Department for Communities. Family Resources Survey report 2019 – 2020.

5. In many cases, caring is a round-the-clock job, and carers often find it difficult to provide practical and emotional support for their loved one, manage appointments, maintain their home and go to work all at the same time. This may force them to reduce their hours or leave work entirely. We estimate that, in 2019, nearly **130,000** people in Northern Ireland either gave up work, or reduced their hours to part-time, in order to care for someone. ^[4]

“Due to my caring commitments, I can’t work, and I am falling deeper into debt. The stress of living in poverty, whilst trying my best to care for two people, is ruining my mental health.” – carer

“I am about to cut my working hours due to caring. I don’t know how I’m going to manage financially.” – carer

“I will shortly have to stop working because of increased demands for me in my caring role and [I’m] no longer able to balance work and caregiving.” – carer

6. Those who are able to stay in work are pushed even quicker to exhaustion and burnout as a result of juggling the two. Some carers are using unpaid leave or holiday entitlement to manage their caring responsibilities, compounding the financial pressures they face and making it even harder to have a proper break and look after their own health and wellbeing.

“I have to take unpaid leave frequently for all her [the carer receiver’s] hospital appointments and therapy appointments.” – carer

7. This situation has been exacerbated by the reduction and closure of day centres and respite services since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has put an even greater caring burden on unpaid carers and made it more difficult for them to find time to work. Nearly a-third of working carers in Northern Ireland say they’d have to reduce their hours or leave work entirely if the care services they used to rely on do not return. ^[5]
8. When carers are forced to leave work due to the demands of caring, it can be much more difficult to re-enter the labour market afterwards – especially if they are in older age groups – so the scarring effect may continue even after the caring role has ended or reduced.

THE CASE FOR PAID CARER’S LEAVE

9. The introduction of paid carer’s leave is warmly supported by local carers. They say it would make it easier to juggle work and caring and support them to stay in work for longer, helping to maintain vital household income. It would also allow carers to use their holiday leave for its intended purpose – to take time for themselves, have a break and recharge their batteries. ^[5]
10. Providing paid carer’s leave also makes business and economic sense. Employers face significant costs associated with absence, lost productivity and recruitment whenever their staff’s ability to work is impacted by caring responsibilities. Overall, evidence suggests that the impact of staff turnover, absence and stress as a result of juggling work and caring unsupported could be costing UK businesses over £3.5bn every year. ^[6]

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⁴ Carers UK (2019). Juggling work and unpaid care: A growing issue.

⁵ Carers NI (2022). State of Caring 2021: A snapshot of unpaid care in Northern Ireland.

⁶ Carers UK (2020). Carers UK’s response to the BEIS consultation on Carer’s Leave.