

# Supporting unpaid carers in local communities

Local government election manifesto 2023



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## Introduction

There are over **220,000** people providing some form of unpaid care for a sick or disabled family member or friend in Northern Ireland. At least **one in ten residents** in every local council area is an unpaid carer, <sup>[1]</sup> and together they save the public purse **£4.6bn** in care costs each year. <sup>[2]</sup>

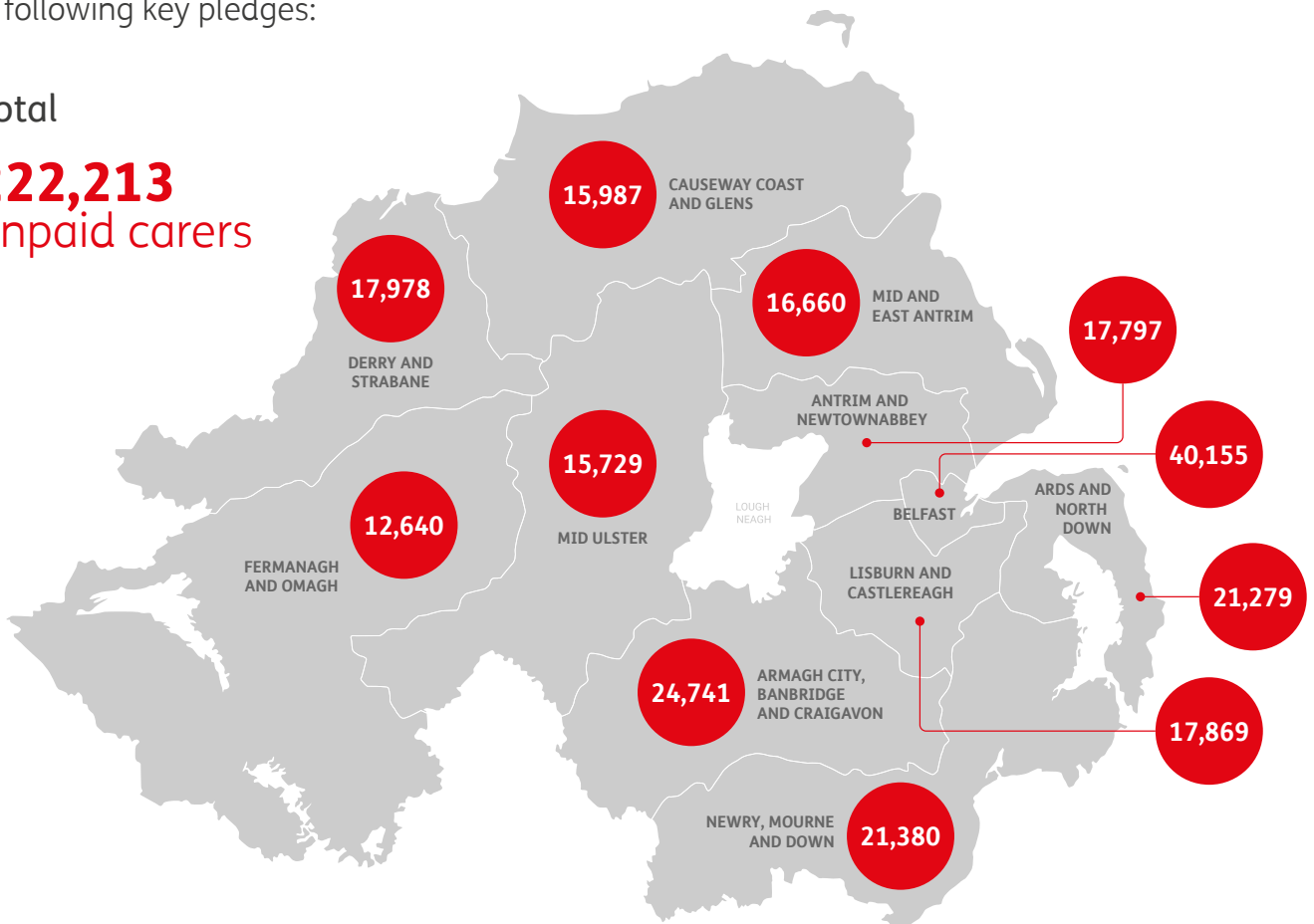
Despite that massive contribution, too many carers don't get the help they need to look after themselves and maintain a good quality of life while caring, **including from their local councils**. The local government elections in May 2023 offer an opportunity to put that right, and Carers NI is calling on all candidates and parties contesting the election to support the following key pledges:

1. Deliver bespoke cost of living or hardship grants for people providing unpaid care.
2. Introduce concessionary rates for council leisure services for unpaid carers.
3. Implement carer-friendly workplace policies and support for council staff with unpaid caring roles.

This manifesto is based on the views and experiences of members of Carers NI's Carers Policy Forum – a carer-led campaigning group made up of over 140 carers from all council areas in Northern Ireland.

Total

**222,213**  
unpaid carers



Source: NI Statistics and Research Agency (2023). Census 2021: Unpaid caring.

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## Cost of living/hardship grants

Our carer population has been among the hardest hit by the cost of living crisis in Northern Ireland. Even in ordinary circumstances, carers already faced above-average bills for the likes of energy, food and travel as a result of their caring role. With the price of daily essentials skyrocketing over the last year, carers are being plunged into poverty.

Our research <sup>[3]</sup> shows:

- **1 in 4** carers are cutting back on essentials like food and heating
- **27%** are struggling to make ends meet
- **19%** are using credit cards to get by and **16%** have experienced debt.

Faced with these pressures, carers are forced to make desperate decisions to get by – telling their children that they’re dieting when in reality there isn’t enough food to go around; falling into housing arrears so they can pay other bills; and much more.

**“The cost of food and energy in Northern Ireland has increased so significantly over the last 12-18 months that we are still in shock and trying to readjust. We have had to cut back on pretty much everything. If something doesn’t give soon, I am not sure we will survive.”** – unpaid carer

We’re calling on every local council to deliver bespoke cost of living or hardship grants for unpaid carers – providing greater financial support to ensure no carer is forced to sit in the dark, go hungry or cut back on other essentials to get by.

## Concessionary rates for leisure services

Unpaid caring is a massive driver of poorer health outcomes, with **nearly a third** of carers describing their physical and mental health as bad or very bad. <sup>[3]</sup> In that context, it is vital that we support people to better protect their own health and wellbeing while caring.

Access to exercise and leisure facilities can make a big difference, but just **7%** of unpaid carers in Northern Ireland use local leisure services often. When asked about the barriers that prevent them from using these facilities more frequently, **more than one in three** carers said it’s because they are too expensive. <sup>[3]</sup>

**“I was a [gym] member for six months, but it was too expensive.”** – unpaid carer

**“I can’t afford the entry fee.”** – unpaid carer

The Carers Policy Forum has written to every council in Northern Ireland and uncovered a postcode lottery of support. Some councils already offer concessionary rates for unpaid carers, but this is not universal. We’re calling on all councils to introduce a carer-specific discount for leisure services as part of future contractual agreements with leisure service providers.

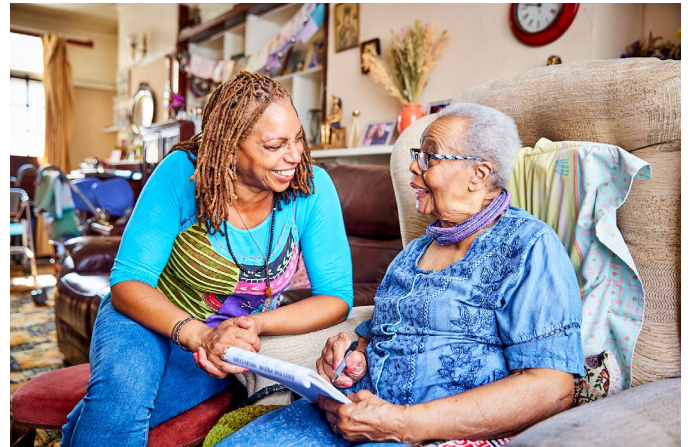
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## Carer-friendly workplace policies and support for council staff

Local councils have a considerable role as employers across Northern Ireland, and with over 40% of carers here also in full or part-time employment, <sup>[4]</sup> a significant number of those people employed by local government are likely to be performing unpaid caring roles when they go home.

For many carers, paid work offers a financial lifeline that they couldn't afford to live without, as well as a welcome break from caring. However, juggling the two can be very difficult, and lack of employer support is linked to more unplanned absences and lower retention of staff who are carers. Indeed, **nearly 130,000 people** in Northern Ireland either reduced their hours or left work entirely in 2019 because of the demands of an unpaid caring role. <sup>[5]</sup>

**“As an employed carer, I feel that I am being financially, mentally and physically punished for working. Employed carers need greater support and recognition of the added difficulties of caring and working. I shouldn't have to make a choice between working and caring effectively.”** – unpaid carer



Carers have identified a number of priorities to help them better juggle work and unpaid caring, including:

- Paid carer's leave
- Flexible working options
- Peer support networks at work
- Greater understanding from managers
- More opportunities to work from home.

We're calling on all councils to adopt these kinds of carer-friendly workplace policies, to better support staff who have unpaid caring roles.

## References

1. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2023). Census 2021 data.
2. Buckner, L and Yeandle, S (2015). Valuing carers: The rising value of carers' support.
3. Carers NI (2022). State of Caring 2022: A snapshot of unpaid caring in Northern Ireland.
4. Department for Communities (2021). Family Resources Survey report 2019-20.
5. Carers UK (2019). Juggling work and unpaid care: A growing issue.



Carers Northern Ireland is part of Carers UK. Carers UK is the national membership charity for carers. We work to represent and support the 6.5 million people in the UK who provide unpaid care for ill, older or disabled family members, or friends.

We will continue to fight for increased recognition and support for all carers, and to ensure they have a voice. Our mission is to make life better for carers by delivering lasting change.

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