

# **Carers NI response to proposed Health and Social Care Trust's Savings Plans**

## **Context**

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Without carers, Northern Ireland's health and social care system would completely fall apart. As our population ages and people live longer with illness and disability, carers are becoming more and more important. Far too many carers are stretched to the limit looking after loved ones, while also having to worry about making ends meet. We want a world where carers are supported not only to cope with the challenges of looking after someone, but to build a life of our own too. A life which includes caring but is not overwhelmed by it. This matters to all of us. At some point, we will all care for family or friends who are older, ill or disabled, or we will need that care ourselves. At that point, we will realise how important it is to make a better world for carers. For there is nothing more human than looking after loved ones, and no more pressing social issue than making that care possible.

Carers NI are here to make life better for carers. Working as part of Carers UK, we give expert advice, information and support to carers across NI. We connect carers so no-one has to care alone, we campaign together for lasting change and we innovate to find new ways to reach and support carers. Our key strategic priorities over the next 5 years are to battle for greater understanding of carers and support for carers in our society, be there for carers with information and advice from the start and build a network of carer positive employers.

According to the 2011 Census (NISRA), there are around 220,000 carers across all Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland plus many more who, despite carrying out regular caring responsibilities, do not see themselves as carers.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation given the reliance of carers on a quality and supportive health and social care system. However, we are concerned that the timeframe to respond to this consultation was so limited and whilst we did attend several consultation events alongside carers, there was not enough time to have a full conversation with carers about the potential impact of these proposed savings plans on their daily lives.

## **Main points**

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We are concerned that there does not appear to be any joint strategic approach to these Savings Plans across and between the Health and Social Care Trusts and, with that in mind, we need to enquire as to whether the Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together Strategy (Dept of Health NI, 2016) and the Review of Adult Social Care and Support have been taken into account when these plans were developed? The Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together identified carers as “equal partners in care” and “in need of our support” yet these proposed savings cuts will undoubtedly put more pressure on carers who are looking after an ill, elderly or disabled family member or friend.

Some of the proposed low impact suggestions on each of the Trusts Saving’s Plans offer valid suggestions for being more economic in relation to reducing the number of agency staff used, managing staff absence etc. But even they will ultimately impact on the patient and those looking after them. To reduce locum/agency staff, for example, will undoubtedly result in the closure of beds/care spaces across medical and elderly wards and will increase waiting times, especially if a robust recruitment strategy for permanent staff is not in place or there is poor uptake due to salary scales and benefits offered.

The “major impact proposals” will undoubtedly impact on not just patients across the Trusts but on those unpaid family members who care for them and who are already at breaking point.

28% of carers in our annual State of Caring survey (carried out in April 2017) were worried that the practical support they receive or might get in the future, could be reduced. This was even before the recent announcement of potential cuts as part of the Trusts Savings Plans (Sept 2017) yet it already appears to ring true.

Rather than a health and care system which values and supports carers, our 2017 survey suggests that too often carers are being pushed into poor health through lack of access to practical support and breaks which will be compounded even more if some of these proposed cuts go ahead.

### **Reducing provision of Domiciliary Care and Residential/Nursing Home Care packages**

All Trusts proposed reductions to domiciliary care and or residential/nursing home care. This would have a detrimental impact on family members providing care to loved ones who are already at breaking point and rely on practical support from domiciliary care staff and regular short breaks/respice. According to our State of Caring Survey (2017), 1 in 5 carers in NI said they hadn’t had a day off caring in over 5 years and 1 in 3 hadn’t had a day off from caring in over a year. As a result, 57% said their physical health has

worsened and 71% said they had suffered mental ill-health (eg stress or depression) as a result of their caring role. To reduce services that carers rely on in order to continue in their caring role will only exacerbate the overall impact of unsupported caring.

By consolidating services as proposed by some Trusts, including Day Care Services, family members with loved ones in residential homes or who attend day care services will ultimately suffer given the current lack of available appropriate services for many.

### **Closure of hospital beds and rehabilitation units**

Similarly, the closure of hospital beds and rehabilitation units proposed will result in a backlog of patients in need of support and the unsustainability of community-based health services unable to deal with the increased demand. All of this means patients may be discharged too early in order to free up hospital beds or are moved from one hospital to another to accommodate the closures. According to our State of Caring report (2017), many carers providing care for someone who had been discharged from hospital in the last year said they were discharged too early (42%) stating that the patient was not ready to go home or that the support was not available for them to be at home. 7% of carers then stated that the patient was discharged from hospital too early and was then readmitted within the following couple of months.

A number of carers also described people having to stay in hospital longer than was necessary as a result of appropriate care and support in the community not being in place or as a result of poor care management in hospitals. 17% of carers in our survey reported that the person they cared for could have come home much earlier. It has been well documented that staying in hospital longer than necessary can be detrimental to a patient's wellbeing.

Closing beds/units in geographically larger areas, such as in the Western Trust, will mean patients and those who look after them may have further to travel in order to access appropriate services. This can mean an increase in costs for travel and car parking etc but also time.

### **Reducing Access to Services and Natural Delays**

By significantly reducing access to services such as routine elective care, waiting lists for treatment will grow meaning patients and those looking after them will be forced to continue to struggle on for longer, further increasing the negative impact a condition has on their lives.

The "natural delays" in implementation or roll out of some services (eg. Enhanced Care at Home service in the South Eastern Trust) may also mean that patients are unable to

avail of services and supports which could make a difference to their daily lives and overall wellbeing.

## **Conclusion**

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We cannot stand by and watch carers in Northern Ireland be put under further pressure through these proposed Savings Plans and we therefore call on the UK government, elected MLA's and senior officials to do what is necessary in order to secure funding for a Health and Social Care system here that meets the needs of the people it serves.

## **Contact us**

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