



Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas

Response to: Make Work Pay: employment rights for unpaid carers and parents of seriously ill children

Issued by: Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, Department for Business and Trade, Kate Dearden MP and The Rt Hon Peter Kyle MP

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Prepared by: Siobhán Harding, Women's Support Network
Email: policy@wsn.org.uk



Women's Regional Consortium: Working to Support Women in Rural Communities and Disadvantaged Urban Areas

1. Introduction

1.1 This response has been undertaken collaboratively by the members of the Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas (hereafter, either the Women's Regional Consortium or simply the Consortium), which is funded by the Department for Communities and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

1.2 The Women's Regional Consortium consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion.¹ The seven groups are as follows:

- ♀ Training for Women Network (TWN) – Project lead
- ♀ Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA)
- ♀ Women's Support Network (WSN)
- ♀ Northern Ireland's Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)
- ♀ Women's TEC
- ♀ Women's Centre Derry
- ♀ Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

¹ Sections 1.2-1.3 represent the official description of the Consortium's work, as agreed and authored by its seven partner organisations.

1.3 The Consortium is the established link and strategic partner between government and statutory agencies and women in disadvantaged and rural areas, including all groups, centres and organisations delivering essential frontline services, advice and support. The Consortium ensures that there is a continuous two-way flow of information between government and the sector. It also ensures that organisations/centres and groups are made aware of consultations, government planning and policy implementation. In turn, the Consortium ascertains the views, needs and aspirations of women in disadvantaged and rural areas and takes these views forward to influence policy development and future government planning, which ultimately results in the empowerment of local women in disadvantaged and rurally isolated communities.

1.4 The Women's Regional Consortium appreciates the opportunity to respond to Make Work Pay: employment rights for unpaid carers and parents of seriously ill children. This is particularly the case given that care is a gendered issue which impacts disproportionately on women who are the main providers of both paid and unpaid care work.

1.5 Throughout this response the Consortium has sought to ensure the voices of women are represented. We believe that it is essential for policy makers and Government to listen to the voices of the women and for whom caring has such significance in their lives. We have attempted to include throughout this response some of what local women have said in relation to unpaid care.

1.6 We wish to endorse the response made by Carers NI and by the Women's Policy Group (WPG) on which the Women's Regional Consortium is represented.

2.0 General comments

Census figures show that in Northern Ireland approximately 12% of people are providing some form of unpaid care (222,000 people).² Research by Carers NI and the Centre for Care estimates that these carers save the Northern Ireland economy £5.8 billion in care costs each year – representing £16 million per day, or £0.7 million per hour.³

There are a number of characteristics of the Northern Ireland economy which make addressing the issue of care more complex. Northern Ireland has a large rural population with more than a third of the population (36%) living in rural areas.⁴ Research by the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) shows that rural women are under increasing pressure from the economic climate: *“Historic underfunding of rural women's activities and underinvestment in rural areas; centralisation of service support; lack of infrastructure, and the burden of caring responsibilities is leaving rural women experiencing more poverty and social isolation than ever before.”*⁵

Rural carers face additional barriers compared with their urban counterparts. Carers NI⁶ research found that 39% of unpaid carers in Northern Ireland live in rural areas and experience particular difficulties accessing social care, healthcare, respite services and support for their own wellbeing due to transport barriers, workforce shortages, longer travel distances and poor digital connectivity. These additional challenges can increase social isolation, reduce opportunities for employment and add to the financial pressures experienced by unpaid carers.

² Support for Unpaid Carers in Northern Ireland: a preliminary consideration, NI Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, April 2024
<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2022-2027/2024/economy/0824.pdf>

³ Valuing Carers 2021 Northern Ireland, Carers NI and the Centre for Care, November 2023
<https://www.carersuk.org/reports/the-economic-value-of-unpaid-care-in-northern-ireland/>

⁴ Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2025, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-05/26.27.022%20Key%20Rural%20Issues%202025.pdf>

⁵ Rural Women's Manifesto, NIRWN, September 2015
<https://www.nirwn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/NIRWN-Rural-Womens-Manifesto.pdf>

⁶ Social Care in Rural Areas: A Carer's Perspective, Carer's NI, September 2024
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/ixvl32sw/social-care-in-rural-areas-a-carer-s-perspective-september-2024.pdf>

Rural carers may be particularly affected by fluctuating earnings due to the prevalence of seasonal, part-time and flexible employment in sectors such as agriculture, tourism, hospitality and retail. Limited employment opportunities in many rural areas and greater likelihood of places of employment being based in larger urban areas combined with the travelling time can mean that carers often have fewer options to find work that fits around their caring responsibilities. Some end up giving up employment as they are unable to juggle employment, travelling time and care.

In addition, Northern Ireland is a small business economy. In NI, 89% of registered businesses are micro-businesses (less than 10 employees), 5% have 10-19 employees, 3% have 20-49 employees and 2% have 50-249. NI is dominated by a small business population with just 0.4% of businesses having 250+ employees.⁷ It can be more difficult for small businesses to provide flexible working opportunities and to provide enhanced leave for carers as they can experience more problems with disruption to their business.

2.1 Caring and Women

Women are more likely than men to provide care. Figures show that women are more likely to provide unpaid care with women making up 59% of all carers and those carers of working age in Northern Ireland.⁸ By the time they are aged 46, half of women have been a carer. Men have the same 50:50 chance by age 57 – eleven years later.⁹

Prevailing gender norms mean there is often the assumption that women will provide care. In more traditional, patriarchal societies like Northern Ireland providing care is often seen to be “*women’s work*”. This leaves many women out of work, under-

⁷ Enterprise Dashboard, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, June 2025
https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1741516/User-Briefing-Issue-2-June-2025-Accessible.pdf

⁸ Tackling poverty amongst unpaid carers, Carer Poverty Commission Northern Ireland 2023 – 2025, July 2025
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/rjiboesm/carers-ni-carer-poverty-commission-final-report-2025.pdf>

⁹ Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life, CarersUK, November 2019
http://www.carersuk.org/images/News_campaigns/CarersRightsDay_Nov19_FINAL.pdf

employed and struggling to juggle their caring responsibilities with work often with little support.

Caring is a feature of many women's lives and typically happens at a younger age for women than men. This means that women are more likely to find themselves in a caring role at an age when they would be expected to be in paid work. Women are also more likely than men to be forced out of the labour market by caring responsibilities. Caring affects their participation in the workforce and ultimately reduces their earnings over their lifetime. This has clear implications for gender equality.

An International Labour Organization (ILO) report¹⁰ concluded that:

"No substantive progress can be made in achieving gender equality in the labour force before inequalities in unpaid care are first tackled through the effective recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care between women and men, as well as between families and the state."

"The value of care, care work and all the stuff normally done within the home. It is at the root of everything and why women can't participate properly. Caring work is not valued in society and is the bedrock of everything. There is a circular relationship between not valuing care work and undervaluing women. It is undervalued because it is something that women do – there is underlying misogyny."

"There is a need to value what women do. Women are always the add on at the end and it's totally frustrating."

"Caring mostly falls to women, it's a big issue for women."

"It is just expected that a daughter will take on a caring role."

"There is still the assumption that it is women who will provide care. If there is care needed it is assumed that women will provide it whether for parents,

¹⁰ Care work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work, International Labour Organization, 2018 https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40dcomm/%40publ/documents/publication/wcms_633135.pdf

children or grandchildren. Women are expected to care yet there are not the services there to support them.”

“Care always falls to the mother. I had a job share when I had my son but when he was 6 I had to take a career break as he had that many doctor’s appointments. I ended up giving up the job and haven’t worked since. It all does fall to the mother.”

“How much do women save the economy? If we priced it the figures would be scary. We need to value this unpaid care.”

“My sister was a carer for my parents and ended up looking after my dad and her own grandchildren. Her GP described her as the ‘sandwich generation’ whose parents are living longer so women are looking after their own parents as well as their grandchildren. That has just become acceptable yet the services haven’t risen to support these women.”

“My sons have Asperger’s and they are 43 but there is no support available for them. I worry about them every day. It’s always the women who have to pick up the pieces.”

(Participants at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Events)

2.2 Caring and Work

Providing unpaid care can affect a carer’s ability to work particularly where they are providing increased levels of care. As highlighted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, carers who care for someone 35 hours or more a week are much less likely to be in work than people who are not carers. Just over half of carers caring full-time are not in employment (52%) and just 24% work full-time.¹¹ According to JRF research, unpaid carers lose an average of £414 each month in earnings, rising to £628 per month after 6 years of unpaid care (Jitendra, Woodruff and Thompson, 2023).

Statistics show that many carers are balancing their caring responsibilities with paid work. Of all adult carers, full-time employee/self-employed was the largest group

¹¹ Poverty in Northern Ireland 2025, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, December 2025
<https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-northern-ireland-2025>

(38% in 2024/25).¹² However, the figures also show that carers were more likely to be economically inactive due to sickness/disability or other reasons than the adult population overall.

For rural women carers, remaining in employment can be particularly challenging due to limited local job opportunities, longer commuting distances, inadequate public transport and difficulties accessing replacement care services. These barriers combine to restrict labour market participation and increase financial insecurity.

Many carers want to stay in paid employment alongside their caring role and to continue their careers. Modelling the benefit of policies to support unpaid carers to enter or remain in employment by WPI Economics for Carers NI¹³ provides support for a number of key policies which could help carers better balance employment and caring responsibilities. They estimate that a combination of flexible working and paid carer's leave could increase the number of unpaid carers in employment by between 6,800 and 14,700 people. This increase would come about by both helping unpaid carers remain in employment and supporting out-of-work carers to return.

Additionally, WPI Economics estimate that a combination of flexible working and paid carer's leave could increase the total hours worked by carers by between 3,280,000 and 4,000,000 each year. This would come about by carers moving from part-time to full-time employment and taking on additional overtime - equivalent to a total of between 410,000 and 500,000 days of full-time work.¹⁴

Together, these changes would bring an additional £103–£198 million in tax receipts and reduce benefit spending by between £40 and £86 million. At the same time, employers could make an additional £27 to £51 million of savings associated with

¹² Family Resources Survey: Northern Ireland 2024/25, NISRA & DfC, May 2026
https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/communities/FRS_report_2425.html

¹³ Making the case for change: supporting unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, Modelling the benefit of policies to support unpaid carers to enter or remain in employment, WPI Economics for Carers NI, October 2024
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/d0ddgfk/making-the-case-for-change-report.pdf>

¹⁴ Ibid

increased employee retention, as well as the additional benefits that flow from increased productivity of workers, and improved staff wellbeing.¹⁵

Given the disproportionate levels of unpaid caring responsibilities taken on by women and the negative impacts this can have on women's participation in paid work and earnings over their lifetimes this is a gendered issue which must be addressed in order to prevent further embedding of gender inequality.

Joint research by the Women's Regional Consortium and Carers NI¹⁶ on the impact of unpaid care on women's employment showed the following key findings:

- 1 in 3 (34%) women with unpaid caring roles have given up employment to care
- 1 in 4 (28%) women with unpaid caring roles have decreased their working hours because of caring
- 1 in 6 (17%) women with unpaid caring roles have taken on a less qualified job or turned down promotion to fit around their caring responsibilities
- Women "juggle" their caring role and employment often at the detriment of their own career, finances and health and wellbeing
- The financial impact of stopping or reducing employment to provide care is felt by women not only whilst providing the care but also throughout their life course
- Carer's Allowance in terms of monetary value and the low earnings threshold is inadequate to support women to balance caring and employment
- Support for carers in employment is often a lottery, dependent on individual employers and line managers
- Inadequacies in wider support services, including social services, healthcare, education and childcare, are stopping women with unpaid caring roles from staying in employment altogether or limiting the amount of work they can do

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Career or Care, Women, Unpaid Caring and Employment in Northern Ireland, February 2024
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

- For some women employment can be positive in terms of mental health and wellbeing and gives them a break from their caring role
- Women with unpaid caring roles believe that reliable, accessible, affordable support services, a range of flexible working options, carer's leave, and a change to the eligibility criteria for Carer's Allowance would help balance employment and unpaid caring
- A lack of support for carers in the workplace results in a loss of valuable and skilled individuals to the labour market.

The statistics outlined above show the importance of providing a supportive working environment to carers. Insufficient support for those providing unpaid care risks losing them to the workforce and the economy as a whole and Government needs to do more to ensure proper support for carers so that they can balance work and care if they wish to do so.

“I show up to my job every week, on time and do my job. Yet I feel like I’m begging for leave in relation to my caring role, it’s like I owe them a favour if I am off. That emotional side of it plays a part too.”

“Paid Carer’s Leave would really come in handy for many carers.”

“I would like to have my caring responsibility recognised at work and have a feeling that my job is secure.”

“I cared for my mum for a number of years. It’s hard trying to work full time and provide care. My sister and I took on the caring role but my brother only helped occasionally. Carers came to help. Each time she went into hospital there was a different social worker involved and you had to keep waiting on information to be transferred. Then when she came out of hospital there were new carers coming in. The system is a complete mess. I was burnt out.”

“You’re balanced on a knife edge – you never know what’s going to happen from one week to the next. If you have to leave in an emergency some employers just think you’re too much hassle.”

“I would like to be working. It’s just having enough hours in the day, it’s 24 hours a day. My daughter requires 24/7 care, she’s up during the night. She’s blind, autistic, non-verbal and has cerebral palsy. It’s never knowing when the needs are going to be. One day she’s OK then the next day she’s unwell. It’s just hard work at times.”

“At the minute work would add more stress to my life. With my son it’s so unpredictable. Some mornings he’ll come down and say ‘I’m not going to school’ and he won’t get dressed. I eventually get him in the car then he won’t get out of the car at school. I was working in [name of workplace] 18 months ago but before I even dropped him off and got into school I was completely stressed out because it took me half an hour and the principal of his school to get him into school in the mornings.”

“My mum got taken into hospital on Tuesday and still hadn’t got a bed on Wednesday, so I still had to sit with her. The guys that I work with were ringing me in the hospital saying ‘where’s my wages?’ I’d been in the hospital for 27 hours with no sleep then I had to go home and start sorting the wages to pay people because obviously they’re depending on their money.”

“I want to work and if the support is good then I can.”

“I know there’s a lot of staff really struggling and don’t want to admit to caring impacting on their job because they’re afraid of being overlooked, not being involved in things, being seen as not pulling their weight or losing their jobs.”

“There are so many carers out there in organisations that just grin and bear it and get on with it. I went to a job interview recently and care came into the conversation and I just kept my mouth shut about my caring responsibilities because I thought if I say anything I won’t get the job.”

“I ended up having to take redundancy because they wouldn’t accommodate my caring needs along with work. I initially asked if I could reduce my hours from 32 hours/week to two and a half days and they said no. Then I asked for hybrid working and they said no to that. Then I asked for a career break and they said no to that too. In the end the redundancy package came up and I had no choice but to take it.”

(Participants at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Events)

3.0 Consultation Questions

1. Please indicate whether you are responding as:

- ☐ An individual
- ☐ An unpaid carer
- ☐ A parent of a seriously-ill child
- ☐ Someone who relies on unpaid care
- ☐ An academic, or on behalf of an academic or research organisation
- ☐ An employer
- ☐ A legal representative
- ☐ A business representative organisation (please specify)
- ☐ A trade union or staff association (please specify)
- ☒ **A charity or interest group**
- ☐ Other – please specify

2. If responding as an employer, business, business owner or business representative, approximately what is the size of your business? If responding as an individual or worker, what size workplace are you employed in?

- ☐ Micro (1 to 9 employees)
- ☐ Small (10 to 49 employees)
- ☐ Medium (50 to 249 employees)
- ☐ Large (250+ employees)
- ☐ Don't know
- ☒ **Not Applicable**

3. Which region are you based in?

- ☐ North-East
- ☐ North-West
- ☐ Yorkshire and the Humber

- ☐ East Midlands
- ☐ West Midlands
- ☐ East of England
- ☐ London
- ☐ South-East
- ☐ South-West
- ☐ Wales
- ☐ Scotland
- ☒ **Northern Ireland**

4. If responding as an employer, business, business owner or business representative, what sector are you based in? If responding as an individual or worker, what sector do you work in?

☒ **Not Applicable**

5. How easy is it for employers to access information on how to support carers in the workplace?

- ☐ Very difficult
- ☐ Moderately difficult
- ☐ Neither difficult nor easy
- ☐ Moderately easy
- ☐ Very easy
- ☒ **Don't know**

6. In your view, are there any factors that prevent employers from accessing information on how to support carers in the workplace?

Northern Ireland is a small business economy. In NI, 89% of registered businesses are micro-businesses (less than 10 employees), 5% have 10-19 employees, 3% have 20-49 employees and 2% have 50-249. NI is dominated by a small business

population with just 0.4% of businesses having 250+ employees.¹⁷ Many of these organisations do not have a dedicated human resources department or personnel staff and therefore find it more difficult to have the time and skills to research and access this information.

7. What, if any, additional guidance or information would help employers support carers?

As Northern Ireland is a small business economy it would be useful to have guidance which is suitable and tailored to small businesses. Government should work with the relevant small business representative organisations to disseminate this information.

Government should work with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to research the information that carers need and how employers can best provide that information. Many VCS organisations provide trusted, local support within their communities and understand the needs of those they serve as well as being better able to reach those who are the most marginalised. Government should work in partnership with advice sector providers, disability organisations, age sector organisations, women's sector organisations including Women's Centres and particularly with organisations that work with carers and their representatives to determine what guidance is needed to support carers and how this might be best developed. These organisations also provide valuable routes for disseminating information in a way that is best suited to carers and their needs.

8. How easy is it for employees to access information on their rights that support their caring responsibilities in the workplace?

- ☐ Very difficult
- ☐ Moderately difficult
- ☒ **Neither difficult nor easy**

¹⁷ Enterprise Dashboard, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, June 2025
https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1741516/User-Briefing-Issue-2-June-2025-Accessible.pdf

- ☐ Moderately easy
- ☐ Very easy
- ☐ Don't know

This is a very difficult question to answer in this format. The ease of which employees can access information on their rights very much depends on the circumstances of the individual carer and in some cases on the employer.

For those carers who are adept at using technology, have good access to the internet and the skills to use it, who have the time and knowledge about what to search for then the answer may be that it is relatively easy to find out this information. However, for many others where broadband availability is patchy (particularly for those in rural areas), where carers don't have the necessary digital skills or devices, where they are isolated and do not have the time outside their work and caring responsibilities to look for this information then it may be very difficult to find the information they need. This digital divide can block access to important information and support.

Particular consideration should be given to rural carers who may experience digital exclusion, poor broadband connectivity, transport barriers and reduced access to face-to-face advice services. Information should therefore be available through multiple channels and delivered through trusted local community organisations.

As we have previously highlighted, Government should work with VCS organisations to determine the information needs of carers, to help share information in the format which is most useful to carers and to help support carers access the information they need.

Government and employers must acknowledge that many carers struggle to balance work with their caring responsibilities and this means they often simply do not have the time to look for and find the information they need.

In some cases, employers or line managers may also be a barrier to accessing information about their rights. Having a supportive and informed line manager or employer makes it easier for carers to ask for information on their rights. Women's Regional Consortium research with Carers NI¹⁸ also highlighted the importance of having a Carer's Policy in the workplace. Many of the women who took part in the research felt that having a carer's policy in the workplace was helpful in setting out what they can expect from their employers and as a signal to carers that they are valued and will be supported in the workplace. However, the women stressed that this must be backed up by training for line managers/employers so that they recognise the value of their staff with caring responsibilities, that they fully understand carer's entitlements and afford them their rights/entitlements without any negative attitudes.

9. In your view, are there any factors that prevent employees accessing information on the rights that support their caring responsibilities in the workplace?

As we have highlighted in Question 8, the digital divide can impact on carers ability to access information on their rights. A range of accessibility issues particularly around access to transport and broadband can create problems for some carers especially those who live rurally. We have also highlighted the juggle that many carers experience balancing their work with their caring responsibilities leaving little time and energy to source information on their rights.

In some cases, the attitude of the employer or line manager can have an impact on the employee's ability to access information on their rights. Some carers are reluctant to approach their line managers or employers because of negative attitudes towards their caring role, lack of support and fear of being discriminated against or suffering other detriment. In our joint research with Carers NI¹⁹ women described

¹⁸ Career or care Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Carers NI, February 2024

<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid

workplace support for their caring role as a lottery – dependent on being “lucky enough” to have a good line manager or employer.

10. What, if any, additional guidance or information would help carers understand and use their rights in the workplace?

As we have previously suggested, having a Carer’s Policy in the workplace can provide clarity and consistency for employees who are trying to balance work with care. It is helpful in setting out what employees can expect from their employers and also acts as a signal to carers that they are valued and will be supported in the workplace. However, having a Carer’s Policy is not enough on its own if it is not backed up by trained staff who recognise the value of staff with caring responsibilities, who know carer’s rights and entitlements and provide these without any negative attitudes.

It may also be useful to provide worked examples of some of the most common issues for carers so that the information and guidance is more accessible and easier to understand. Government should work with VCS organisations to develop these worked examples so that they are relevant and easily accessed by carers.

Employers should consider adopting The Carer Confident benchmarking scheme.²⁰ The benchmark is a UK workplace scheme run by Carers UK through Employers for Carers which assists employers to build a supportive and inclusive workplace for staff who are, or will become, carers and to make the most of the talents that carers can bring to the workplace.

11. Would specific guidance on support for carers in particularly challenging situations help employers and carers in the workplace (e.g. – parents of seriously ill children, those providing end-of-life care)?

☒ Yes

²⁰ <https://www.employersforcarers.org/carers-confident/>

- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

12. If yes, what challenging situations should this guidance cover?

It is important to provide this guidance as many employers do not recognise the reality of life for unpaid carers and the difficulties they experience trying to juggle their caring responsibilities with their working life. Guidance around challenging situations and the realities of life for carers would be useful in terms of highlighting the issues that many unpaid carers face including financial strain, exhaustion and mental health issues including anxiety and worry.

It would be helpful if this guidance could cover issues like the unpredictability of care needs, caring for more than one person, dealing with emergencies particularly at short notice, carer poverty, parents of children with additional needs and guidance for carers who are struggling with mental health issues and exhaustion as a result of their caring role.

13. How aware are you of the employment rights currently available to unpaid carers?

- ☐ Very aware
- ☒ **Somewhat aware**
- ☐ Not aware at all
- ☐ Don't Know

Many carers are unaware of what support is available to them. Information can be fragmented across Government, employers and charities. Carers often have little time to spend searching for help while juggling their caring role and work.

14. From your perspective, how effective are existing employment rights at helping unpaid carers balance work and care?

- ☒ **Very ineffective**
- ☐ Quite ineffective
- ☐ Neither effective nor ineffective
- ☐ Quite effective
- ☐ Very effective
- ☐ Don't know

Northern Ireland is further behind in the provision of carer's rights than other regions of the UK. While the Carer's Leave Act 2023 introduced one week's unpaid leave for employees in England, Wales and Scotland this law does not apply in Northern Ireland leaving many unpaid carers struggling to balance work and care, using their own annual leave for caring responsibilities and reducing their working hours or having to leave work completely.²¹

Proposals to introduce statutory unpaid carer's leave in Northern Ireland have been included as part of the Department for the Economy's 'Good Jobs' Bill. The proposals are to include up to five days of flexible, unpaid carer's leave for carers. However, political disagreements over the Good Jobs Bill in particular around Trade Union rights have meant that progress on the Bill has stalled.²²

Also included in the Good Jobs Bill is the proposal to introduce a day one right to request flexible working. Employees in Northern Ireland are therefore currently without this right and must complete 26 weeks of continuous service with their employer before they can make a legal request for flexible working.

²¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-68732508>

²² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg4nx8pjk9o>

Women's Regional Consortium joint research with Carers NI²³ shows the impact of a lack of support to enable women providing unpaid care to enter and remain in work while balancing their caring role:

- 1 in 3 (34%) women with unpaid caring roles have given up employment to care
- 1 in 4 (28%) women with unpaid caring roles have decreased their working hours because of caring
- 1 in 6 (17%) women with unpaid caring roles have taken on a less qualified job or turned down promotion to fit around their caring responsibilities
- Women “juggle” their caring role and employment often at the detriment of their own career, finances and health and wellbeing
- The financial impact of stopping or reducing employment to provide care is felt by women not only whilst providing the care but also throughout their life course
- Carer's Allowance in terms of monetary value and the low earnings threshold is inadequate to support women to balance caring and employment
- Support for carers in employment is often a lottery, dependent on individual employers and line managers
- Inadequacies in wider support services, including social services, healthcare, education and childcare, are stopping women with unpaid caring roles from staying in employment altogether or limiting the amount of work they can do
- For some women employment can be positive in terms of mental health and wellbeing and gives them a break from their caring role
- Women with unpaid caring roles believe that reliable, accessible, affordable support services, a range of flexible working options, carer's leave, and a change to the eligibility criteria for Carer's Allowance would help balance employment and unpaid caring
- A lack of support for carers in the workplace results in a loss of valuable and skilled individuals to the labour market.

²³ Career or care Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Carers NI, February 2024

<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

15. In what circumstances should unpaid carers be able to take carer's leave entitlements? (tick all that apply)

- ☒ **To provide personal and emotional support**
- ☒ **To provide practical support (for example cleaning, gardening, paying bills)**
- ☒ **To help with official or financial matters**
- ☒ **To provide personal and/or medical care (for example washing, dressing, administering medicine)**
- ☒ **To make arrangements for the provision of care**
- ☒ **To accompany people to appointments**
- ☒ **To allow the carer to rest and recuperate, take up carer support, and/or maintain their health and wellbeing**
- ☐ **Other (please specify)**

We believe that the carer's leave should be available for a wide range of caring circumstances as detailed above to provide the flexibility that carers need.

16. From your perspective, who should a carer be able to take carer's leave entitlements to support? (tick all that apply)

- ☒ **A spouse or civil partner**
- ☒ **A child**
- ☒ **A parent**
- ☒ **Any person who lives in the same household as the employee (otherwise than by reason of being their employee, tenant, lodger, or boarder)**
- ☒ **Any person who reasonably relies on the employee for care, regardless of familial relationship or cohabitation**
- ☐ **Other (please specify)**

We believe that a carer should be able to take carer's leave to support a broad range of people to reflect the reality of caring responsibilities.

17. Would extending the existing unpaid carer's leave entitlement be helpful for carers balancing work and care?

- ☐ Not helpful
- ☒ **Slightly helpful**
- ☐ Very helpful
- ☐ Don't know

18. If the current entitlement of up to 5 days unpaid leave was to be extending, how many days of unpaid leave a year would be appropriate?

- ☐ 6 days
- ☐ 7 days
- ☐ 8 days
- ☐ 9 days
- ☒ **10 days**
- ☐ Other (please specify)

19. In your view, what would be the impact of extending unpaid carer's leave on employees with caring responsibilities?

While we would welcome any extension to unpaid carer's leave, extending unpaid Carer's Leave alone will not address the biggest barrier which prevents many carers from using this right, namely that it is unpaid. Many carers simply cannot afford to take unpaid time away from work therefore the introduction of a statutory right to paid Carer's Leave must be a priority.

The situation in Northern Ireland is arguably worse given increased levels of carer poverty. Research into Carer Poverty in Northern Ireland shows that the poverty rate for carers in Northern Ireland is 28.3% – a rate which is higher than the poverty rate

for carers in the rest of the UK (23.6%) and considerably higher than poverty rates amongst adults in Northern Ireland who do not have caring roles (17.4%).²⁴

Rural carers can face additional unavoidable costs associated with caring including higher transport costs, longer journeys to healthcare appointments, reduced availability of public transport and increased energy costs. These additional costs further reduce already limited household incomes and increase the risk of poverty among rural carers.

Unpaid leave provisions are more problematic for some workers to benefit from. A WPI Economics report for the Carer Poverty Commission NI²⁵ stated that this was particularly true for those on low pay who often cannot afford to take unpaid leave from work and for women who provide the bulk of unpaid care.

20. In your view, what would be the impact of extending unpaid carer's leave on employers?

Evidence from Carers UK from employers (who already offer paid Carer's Leave to their employees on a non-statutory basis) shows that, on average, their eligible employees only take 2.5 days of paid Carer's Leave per year.²⁶ This demonstrates that carers only take this leave when they really need it therefore we believe that this will not have a huge impact on employers.

Extended entitlement would give carers greater flexibility to respond to care needs, help some carers to remain in work and help employers to retain these valuable and experienced staff.

²⁴ Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, A WPI Economics report for the Carer Poverty Commission NI, October 2023

<https://wpieconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CPC-Report-Web.pdf>

²⁵ Policies to address unpaid carer poverty: A WPI Economics report for the Carer Poverty Commission NI, August 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/u1wligs1/policies-to-address-unpaid-carer-poverty.pdf>

²⁶ Taking the next step for working carers, Introducing a new right to paid Carer's Leave, Carers UK, August 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/bgbfk3fk/carers-uk-taking-the-next-step-for-working-carers-introducing-a-new-right-to-paid-carer-s-leave-august-2024.pdf>

21. Would a longer period away from work with a “right to return” be helpful in supporting carers to balance work and care?

- ☐ Not helpful
- ☐ Slightly helpful
- ☒ **Very helpful**
- ☐ Don't know

22. If a “right to return” were to be introduced, who should be eligible?
(Choose all that apply if not selecting “all unpaid carers”)

- ☒ **All unpaid carers**
- ☐ Those providing end-of-life care for someone with 12 months or less to live
- ☐ Parents or primary caregivers providing care for seriously ill children
- ☐ Other (please specify)

23. If a “right to return” were to be introduced, what form of evidence should employees have to provide to prove their eligibility?

- ☒ Self-certification (e.g. – written statement from employee)
- ☐ Certification from a relevant professional
- ☐ Other (Please specify)
- ☐ None

24. How long would be appropriate for an extended period of leave with a “right to return”?

- ☐ Less than 1 month
- ☐ 1 – 3 months
- ☒ 4 – 6 months
- ☐ 7 – 9 months
- ☐ 10 – 12 months
- ☐ Other (please specify)

We support Carers UK who have a vision for all working carers to have a statutory right to two weeks of paid Carer's Leave a year, accompanied by a longer period of up to six months of unpaid leave.

25. In your view, what would be the impact of having access to a “right to return” on employees with caring responsibilities?

We support the introduction of an extended period of leave with a statutory right to return to work for employees with caring responsibilities. Providing this extended leave would be particularly beneficial for supporting carers where their care responsibilities make remaining in work very difficult or impossible, for example, following a serious diagnosis, caring for someone at the end of life and during periods of rehabilitation. A right to return would help to prevent experienced employees leaving the labour market benefiting both carers and employers through improved staff retention.

Research by the Centre for Social Justice found that women (61%) were more likely than men (39%) to give up paid employment because of their caring responsibilities.²⁷ Therefore, providing a right to return for employees with caring responsibilities could benefit women who are more likely to provide care and who are more likely to leave work because of difficulties juggling their caring role with work.

26. In your view, what would be the impact of a “right to return” for unpaid carers on employers?

Providing a right to return would help employers to retain valuable and experienced employees in whom they have invested considerable time and money. It would also help to reduce the costs associated with staff turnover.

Both local and national research shows the costs associated with staff turnover as a result of the lack of support with unpaid care responsibilities. It is estimated that, in

²⁷ Creating a Britain that Works and Cares, The Centre for Social Justice, February 2024
https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CSJ-Creating_a_Britain_that_Works_and_Cares.pdf

Northern Ireland, 1 in 3 people with caring roles have been forced to leave employment because of the demands of caring. This has significant consequences to employers – the average cost of replacing an employee is £2,000, which means unpaid caring could be costing businesses over one hundred million pounds in costs of re-hiring alone.²⁸ Evidence suggests that the impact of staff turnover, absence and stress because of juggling work and caring unsupported could be costing UK businesses over £3.5 billion every year.²⁹ Therefore, there are significant savings to be made by better supporting employees to combine work and caring.

27. Would the introduction of a statutory paid carer's leave entitlement be helpful in supporting carers to balance work and care?

- ☐ Not helpful
- ☐ Slightly helpful
- ☒ **Very helpful**
- ☐ Don't know

We support Carers NI and the Coalition of Carers Organisations (of which Women's Support Network is a member) who believe that carer's leave should be a statutory right paid for by Government and that no one should be financially penalised for caring for a sick or disabled person.

There is ample evidence within other leave policies, such as paternity leave, to suggest that pay is an important factor in ensuring the take up of rights. Pay is a significant barrier to employees taking the time off they need to provide care in whatever form that may take. Many people, particularly those on the lowest incomes, cannot afford to take unpaid leave as their finances are already under pressure. There is simply no point in having rights on paper that do not provide proper support for carers and therefore do not get used in practice. Any new rights

²⁸ Policies to address unpaid carer poverty: A WPI Economics report for the Carer Poverty Commission NI, August 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/u1wligs1/policies-to-address-unpaid-carer-poverty.pdf>

²⁹ https://www.employersforcarers.org/media/zjkj3zrw/business_case_new.pdf

must provide a realistic option for carers to enable them to take leave when they need it without worrying about how they are going to pay their bills.

Providing statutory paid carer's leave would help to ensure that all carers can avail of this important right and that they are able to take the leave without worrying about the financial impacts. Research into Carer Poverty in Northern Ireland shows that the poverty rate for carers in Northern Ireland is 28.3% – a rate which is higher than the poverty rate for carers in the rest of the UK (23.6%) and considerably higher than poverty rates amongst adults in Northern Ireland who do not have caring roles (17.4%).³⁰

On the key drivers of poverty this research found that difficulty in finding and keeping employment is one of the strongest drivers of poverty amongst carers. Juggling work and care is a challenging task, and for many proves impossible. Employer support can be lacking, with many having no policies in place to support staff with the demands of their caring roles. Paid carer's leave is uncommon, so carers are forced to rely on their annual leave allowance to deal with caring-related emergencies and demands.

The Carer Poverty Commission NI³¹ have held that: *“International evidence provides a strong case that better support for unpaid carers not only improves their well-being but also brings far-reaching benefits to the government and the economy.”* This research review found compelling evidence that statutory paid leave and other flexible working policies have potential to help carers remain in work, resulting in higher tax receipts, lower benefit spending, improved well-being of carers, and lower costs to employers.

³⁰ Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland, A WPI Economics report for the Carer Poverty Commission NI, October 2023

<https://wpieconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CPC-Report-Web.pdf>

³¹ Policies to address unpaid carer poverty: an evidence review, Carer Poverty Commission NI, August 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/u1wligs1/policies-to-address-unpaid-carer-poverty.pdf>

Research by Carers UK³² shows that many carers do not feel they can use their statutory right to Carer's Leave because they are worried about the financial implications of taking time off work unpaid. The research showed that:

- 56% of working carers said they can't afford to take Carer's Leave
- 78% of carers who are employees said they would find paid carer's leave helpful in juggling work and care
- 50% of carers would find it easier to return to work after a period of absence if they had paid Carer's Leave.

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that introducing statutory paid carer's leave would help more unpaid carers, particularly women, to juggle work and care. Women are more likely to provide unpaid care, are more likely to provide care at a younger age and more likely to be forced out of the labour market by caring responsibilities. Caring affects women's participation in the workforce and can ultimately reduce their earnings over their lifetime. Research by the Women's Regional Consortium and Carers NI³³ highlights the issues that women with care responsibilities face in relation to balancing unpaid care with work:

- One in three women have given up work to care (34%).
- One in four women have decreased their working hours due to a caring role (28%).
- One in six women have taken on a less qualified job or turned down a promotion to fit around caring responsibilities (17%).
- Nearly three quarters (73%) have lost out on between £500 and over £1500 per month in wages because of challenges juggling work and care.
- Women "juggle" their caring role and employment often at the detriment of their own career, finances and health and wellbeing.
- The financial impact of stopping/reducing work to provide care is felt by women not only while providing the care but throughout their lives.

³² State of Caring 2024, The impact of caring on employment, Carers UK, November 2024
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/qlsly1mc/state-of-caring-employment-web-2024.pdf>

³³ Career or Care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, February 2024, Carers NI & the Women's Regional Consortium
<https://www.womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Career-or-care-Women-unpaid-caring-and-employment-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

Research from Carers NI and the Centre for Care³⁴ estimate that those providing unpaid care for sick or disabled family members and friends are saving Northern Ireland's health service £5.8 billion in care costs each year. In total, unpaid carers in Northern Ireland are saving the equivalent of 80% of the Department of Health's entire day-to-day spending budget for 2023-24. It is therefore time for this caring work to be valued and providing for paid carer's leave is an important step in this process.

“For me it is not an option to take a week off work without any pay.”

“My employer was not very supportive of my caring role. I had to take unpaid leave if anything happened. It came to the point it all got too stressful. My partner, who I care for, rang me in distress and I needed to leave. My employer told me I couldn't go. I ended up walking out and I left the job, it was far too stressful.”

“Paid carer's leave would be so helpful. My mum was in hospital for a week and if I had got three days carer's leave that would have been three days pay I wouldn't have lost. Even one day, anything!”

“You can get unpaid leave for an emergency in my work, but it has to be an emergency on that day. So if my son had a fit the night before it doesn't count even though I might be still dealing with the fallout of it the next day. It shouldn't be for emergencies only. Instead of me owing them four hours for a day because I've had to leave I should be able to take leave. Paid leave for carers would be great.”

(Quotes taken from Career or Care: Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland, Women's Regional Consortium & Carers NI research, February 2024)

28. If paid carer's leave was introduced, what evidence should employees have to provide to prove their eligibility for it?

☒ **Self-certification (e.g. – written statement from employee)**

☐ Certification from a relevant professional

☐ Other (Please specify)

☐ None

³⁴ Valuing Carers 2021 Northern Ireland, Carers NI and the Centre for Care, November 2023
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/irkn5e00/valuing-carers-northern-ireland.pdf>

29. How long would be appropriate and reasonable for a potential paid leave entitlement? (per year, pro-rata depending on working hours)

- ☐ 1 – 2 days
- ☐ 3 – 4 days
- ☐ 5 days
- ☐ Over 5 days
- ☒ **Other (please specify)**

The Women's Regional Consortium supports the call from Carers UK and Carers NI for the introduction of a new statutory entitlement to 10 days paid Carer's Leave per annum for employees with unpaid caring responsibilities. We agree with Carers UK who have suggested that as a practical first step that Government should introduce five days paid Carer's Leave by the end of this Parliament and that this should be enhanced to ten days over time.

30. If paid carer's leave was introduced, what baseline level of remuneration would be appropriate for those taking it?

- ☐ 90% of pay
- ☐ 50% of pay
- ☐ Equivalent to Statutory Parental Pay – £194.32/week
- ☐ Equivalent to Statutory Sick Pay - £123.25/week
- ☒ **Other (please specify)**

We agree with Carers UK that in order to ensure that no working carers lose out financially as a result of taking paid Carer's Leave, we believe that the baseline level of remuneration should be full pay. Unpaid carers face the same bills during a period of carer's leave that they would ordinarily face including rent and mortgage costs, food costs, travel costs and other household bills. Providing lower levels of financial support risks putting unpaid carers into financial hardship when many are already experiencing higher levels of poverty as we have previously outlined in this response.

31. From your perspective, what would be the impact of introducing paid carer's leave on employees with caring responsibilities?

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that introducing paid carer's leave would have significant beneficial impacts on employees with caring responsibilities helping them to better balance work and care and to enable them to remain in work while providing unpaid care. We believe that introducing the right to paid carer's leave would also help to relieve some of the stress and pressure on unpaid carers and enable them to be able to use their annual leave for the purpose it was intended rather than being forced to use it for unpaid caring responsibilities. We also believe that introducing paid carer's leave would send a strong signal to carers that they are valued and helps to acknowledge the immense social and economic contribution they make.

The Women's Regional Consortium also believes that introducing paid carer's leave would help to reduce inequalities for women and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Women are more likely to be unpaid carers, are more likely to be providing care younger in their lives and are more likely to be in low-paid, part-time jobs which enable them to combine paid work with unpaid care. As highlighted by a WPI Economics report for the Carer Poverty Commission NI³⁵ women are disproportionately affected by caring, are less likely to ask for help and more likely to leave employment in order to care. Because of this, any intervention that aims to help carers remain in employment is likely to address underlying inequalities in labour market participation. This report also highlighted that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to provide long hours of care meaning that any intervention is likely to predominantly help the poorest in society.

32. From your perspective, what would be the impact of introducing paid carer's leave on employers?

³⁵ Policies to address unpaid carer poverty: A WPI Economics report for the Carer Poverty Commission NI, August 2024
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/u1wligs1/policies-to-address-unpaid-carer-poverty.pdf>

Both local and national research shows the costs associated with staff turnover as a result of the lack of support with unpaid care responsibilities. It is estimated that, in Northern Ireland, 1 in 3 people with caring roles have been forced to leave employment because of the demands of caring. This has significant consequences to employers – the average cost of replacing an employee is £2,000, which means unpaid caring could be costing businesses over one hundred million pounds in costs of re-hiring alone.³⁶ Evidence suggests that the impact of staff turnover, absence and stress because of juggling work and caring unsupported could be costing UK businesses over £3.5 billion every year.³⁷ Therefore, there are significant savings to be made by better supporting employees to combine work and caring and providing paid carer's leave is a key element of this.

Research shows that 78% of carers said they would find paid carer's leave helpful.³⁸ Therefore, providing this leave would help them to better balance work and care with the potential of retaining employees who otherwise may have increased absence or leave the workforce. Investing in carers by providing paid carer's leave could help many of these employees stay in work reducing absenteeism and retaining valuable employees.

33. In your view, what should the main government focus be for any immediate action following the review?

- ☒ **Helping employees to balance work alongside caring responsibilities**
- ☐ Helping employers to support employees who are carers
- ☐ Helping carers to enter the workplace
- ☐ Reducing the risk of carers leaving work due to caring responsibilities
- ☐ Supporting carers to progress or develop skills at work
- ☐ Other (please specify)

³⁶ Policies to address unpaid carer poverty: A WPI Economics report for the Carer Poverty Commission NI, August 2024

<https://www.carersuk.org/media/u1wligs1/policies-to-address-unpaid-carer-poverty.pdf>

³⁷ https://www.employersforcarers.org/media/zjkj3zrw/business_case_new.pdf

³⁸ State of Caring 2024, The impact of caring on employment, Carers UK, November 2024
<https://www.carersuk.org/media/qlsly1mc/state-of-caring-employment-web-2024.pdf>

34. In your view, which, if any, of the approaches discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 would best address this focus and why?

The Women's Regional Consortium believes that the introduction of statutory paid carer's leave would help carers to better juggle their caring responsibilities with work. We believe that providing the right to paid leave would help to encourage unpaid carers to enter into work, progress in work and to stay in their jobs as they are better able to manage these two important aspects of their lives.

The Women's Regional Consortium also believe that the introduction of paid carer's leave would be particularly beneficial for women who are more likely to provide care, more likely to be working reduced hours and in less qualified jobs and more likely to be forced to leave their jobs as a result of their caring responsibilities.

35. From your perspective, which potential approach might best help employers and carers balance work and care?

We repeat our belief that the best approach to help employers and carers balance work and care would be the introduction of statutory paid carer's leave. We have outlined throughout this response that we believe that paid carer's leave would enable carers to better balance work with their caring responsibilities and that it would also be beneficial for employers in terms of improving absenteeism and staff retention.

36. How aware are you of the support currently available to parents of seriously ill children?

- ☐ Very aware
- ☐ Somewhat aware
- ☒ **Not aware at all**
- ☐ Don't know

We suggest that many families are unaware of the support available to them if their child becomes seriously ill. Searching for this information at a time of crisis is highly stressful and many families will struggle to be able to focus and to find the time to access this information. In addition, the information is often fragmented across a range of places including from Government, employers, hospitals and medical facilities and charities.

37. Would the introduction of a paid leave entitlement for parents of seriously ill children help parents in this situation?

- ☐ Not helpful
- ☐ Slightly helpful
- ☒ **Very helpful**
- ☐ Don't know

The Women's Regional Consortium strongly agree that the introduction of a paid leave entitlement for parents of seriously ill children would help parents in this situation. Dealing with a seriously ill child often requires parents to spend long periods of time in hospital and at medical appointments and providing continuous care. Providing paid leave would allow these parents to focus on their child rather than worrying about work and money.

It is important to note that in Northern Ireland, parents also do not have access to Neonatal Leave and Pay. While this was introduced in England, Wales and Scotland in 2025, proposals to introduce this right for parents in Northern Ireland are included in the Good Jobs Bill which is currently subject to political disagreement in Northern Ireland. This leaves parents in Northern Ireland in an even worse situation without access to this important leave and pay where a newborn requires hospital care within the first 28 days of their life.

38. If paid leave for parents of seriously ill children was introduced, how should we define “serious illness”?

We agree with Parents Deserve Better who have said that ‘serious illness’ should include any life-threatening, life-limiting or serious medical condition requiring prolonged hospital treatment, intensive medical intervention, palliative care, repeated hospital admissions or significant parental involvement in care. We agree that eligibility should be determined by a consultant or hospital team based on the child’s clinical needs and the impact on the family, rather than by diagnosis alone. A diagnosis-based system risks excluding children whose conditions require intensive parental involvement but may not appear on a prescribed list.

39. If paid leave for parents of seriously ill children was introduced, who should be eligible to use this entitlement?

A child suffering from a serious childhood illness affects the whole family and in these situations both parents are involved in making decisions on treatment, staying with their child at hospital and in supporting their other children. We therefore support Parents Deserve Better who advocate for paid leave to be available to both parents, legal guardians and primary caregivers.

40. If paid leave for parents of seriously ill children was introduced, what form of evidence should employees have to provide to prove their eligibility?

- ☒ **Self-certification (e.g. – written statement from employee)**
- ☐ Certification from a relevant professional
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ None

We believe that evidence requirements for paid leave for parents of seriously ill children should mirror those for some existing family-related leave entitlements, ie, a self-declaration of entitlement. There should be no need to disclose medical information or any further details given the sensitivity of the situation and the

unlikelihood of parents pretending their child is seriously ill in order to avail of extra leave.

41. If it were introduced, how long would be appropriate and reasonable for a one-off paid leave entitlement per child?

- ☐ 1 week
- ☐ 2 – 4 weeks
- ☐ 5 – 8 weeks
- ☐ 9 – 12 weeks
- ☒ **More than 12 weeks**
- ☐ Other (please specify)

We support Parents Deserve Better who have called for a one-off paid leave entitlement of more than 12 weeks. It is often the case that hospital admissions, intensive treatment and recovery periods extend beyond three months. We therefore believe that support should reflect the realities of treatment rather than an arbitrary time limit.

42. If paid leave for parents of seriously ill children was introduced, what should be the baseline level of remuneration for those taking it?

- ☐ 90% of pay
- ☐ 50% of pay
- ☐ Equivalent to Statutory Parental Pay - £194.32/week
- ☐ Equivalent to Statutory Sick Pay - £123.25/week
- ☐ Equivalent of highest rate of Disability Living Allowance - £114.60/week
- ☒ **Other (please specify)**

We believe that parents of seriously ill children should not lose out financially as a result of taking paid leave to care for their children and therefore the baseline level of remuneration should be full pay. Families continue to face the same bills and expenses when their children are ill including food bills, rent and mortgages, travel

costs and childcare expenses. Lower levels of support simply put families into financial hardship at a time when they are least likely to be able to cope.

43. Which of the following approaches to support parents of seriously ill children would be most helpful to parents, their families and employers?

- ☐ Guidance for employers on how to support parents of seriously ill children
- ☐ Flexible working
- ☐ A longer, unpaid period of time away from work to focus on looking after a seriously ill child with a right to return to the same or a similar role
- ☒ **A shorter, paid period of time away from work to provide financial support in the immediate aftermath**
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Families in this situation are in greatest need of support when they first face hospital admissions, diagnosis, treatment plans and uncertainty about their future. We therefore agree with Parents Deserve Better who have stated that early support can prevent long-term financial hardship and help parents in this situation to remain in employment.

44. From your perspective, what would be the impact of introducing paid leave for parents of seriously ill children on parents in this situation?

We believe that introducing paid leave for parents of seriously ill children would have significant positive impacts for parents at a time of crisis. It would help to reduce financial hardship and the likelihood of getting into debt, relieve some of the stress and anxiety connected to the situation, allow parents to focus on their child and family and help to keep them in work.

45. From your perspective, what would be the impact of introducing paid leave for parents of seriously ill children on employers?

As we have highlighted a number of times throughout this response the cost to employers of staff turnover, absence and stress because of juggling work and care unsupported could cost UK businesses over £3.5 billion every year.³⁹ Many parents are forced to leave their employment due to a lack of formal support. Introducing paid leave for parents of seriously ill children could help with staff retention and keeping experienced staff. The cost of providing this leave is often significantly lower than the cost of recruiting, training and replacing these employees.

46. Is there any other information that you think would be valuable to share on employment rights for unpaid carers, including parents of seriously ill children?

- The provision of unpaid care is a highly gendered issue with women more likely to provide this care, more likely to care at a younger age and more likely to have to leave work as a result of their caring responsibilities. This has impacts for women throughout their lives leaving them facing a lifelong financial penalty reducing their lifetime earnings and pensions. Therefore, improving the rights of unpaid carers helps to address a longstanding gender inequality.
- Given that the carer population disproportionately reflects wider socio-economic and gender inequalities, intervention directed towards carers will predominately help some of the poorest and most marginalised people. To that end, better workplace support for carers might also help to reduce pre-existing socioeconomic and gender inequalities in Northern Ireland.⁴⁰
- Northern Ireland lags behind in terms of support for carers. Legislative developments in other parts of the UK have made positive changes for carers which have not been replicated in Northern Ireland including the right to unpaid carer's leave, a day one right to flexible working and Neonatal Leave and Pay. Progress on these rights are tied up in the 'Good Jobs Bill' which is currently subject to political disagreement in the Northern Ireland Assembly and is stalled.

³⁹ https://www.employersforcarers.org/media/zjkj3zrw/business_case_new.pdf

⁴⁰ <https://www.carersuk.org/media/d0ddgef/k/making-the-case-for-change-report.pdf>

We believe it is highly unacceptable that carers in Northern Ireland continue not to have access to the same entitlements as carers in the rest of the UK.

- Government must recognise the distinct challenges faced by rural carers and ensure that any reforms to carer's rights are rural proofed to assess their impact on those living in rural and isolated communities.
- There were an estimated 23,000 young people aged 16 to 24 years in Northern Ireland who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in January to March 2026. This was equivalent to 11.6% of all those aged 16 to 24 years in NI.⁴¹ Carers Trust research⁴² shows that young carers are twice as likely to be persistently out of work or education and therefore they are a key risk group and supporting them to balance education, training and work with their caring responsibilities must be an important consideration within this consultation.
- Legislative reform is only the beginning of the process. Changes to the law are only as good as how they are understood, implemented and used. In order for these changes to be effective they must be adequately resourced and supported by the necessary information and training for line managers and employers so that they fully understand carer's entitlements and afford them their rights and entitlements without any negative attitudes. In addition, there is a need for an awareness campaign so that carers know about their rights in law, how to access these rights and how to seek redress if they are not afforded their rights.
- The Voluntary and Community Sector are an important partner in this process and Government should work with them to determine the guidance that is needed to support carers, how this might be best developed and disseminated in ways that are best suited to carers and their needs. VCS organisations provide trusted, local support in communities understanding the needs of those they serve and are best placed to reach those who are the most marginalised.

“NI lags behind the UK in support for carers. Carers here need more rights.”

⁴¹ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-labour-force-survey-young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet-statistics-january-march-2026>

⁴² <https://carers.org/news-and-media/news/post/622-young-carers-twice-as-likely-to-be-persistently-out-of-work-or-education-new-research-shows>

“We are classed as the silent sufferers. Government know we will do the job they have never cared about us, we’re just left to do it. Because you love the person you care for you are going to do it anyway and they know that.”

“There’s not enough financial support or working rights for carers which really disadvantages them.”

“My 23-year old son has autism and I had a very hard fight to keep him in special schools. I ended up having to take a career break from work and eventually left work to care for him. There are no services available to him – there is no Autistic Centre here.”

“If you price what it costs for someone to go into care against what carers provide it would be very expensive. The Government are saving billions on this type of care. There really should be a little given back to carers.”

(Participants at Women’s Regional Consortium Consultation Exercises)