

UK's reliance on unpaid carers is unsustainable, research warns

November 29 2018

The UK Government needs to urgently implement new carers' employment rights and work with employers to better support carers in the workplace, a new report from the Work Foundation states today.

The research, based on an evidence review and a workshop attended by carers, charities and [government officials](#), highlights the profound impact caring responsibilities have on a person's employment with those providing 50 hours or more care per week being 36% less likely to be employed compared to non-carers. Findings suggest women are disproportionately affected, with 61% of female carers being employed in comparison to 68% of men. Those aged 45-54 are twice as likely as any other group to have reduced their working hours due to caring responsibilities.

This causes financial strain—reduced earnings, savings and pension contributions—meaning many suffer from relatively high poverty rates and end up in debt. Researchers are therefore calling for Government to deliver on its promise to implement new rights such as statutory leave, which was recommended in the 2017 Independent Review of the State Pension Age—and pledged by the Conservative party in their 2017 manifesto.

The number of 'informal' or unpaid carers—people who look after a friend or relative who need help due to age, disability or illness—is growing rapidly in the UK, and is estimated to reach 9 million by 2037. This follows a sharp increase between 2001 and 2011, when the number

of informal carers rose from 5.8million to 6.5million—an increase that outpaced the growth of the overall population.

Dr. James Chandler, from the Work Foundation, said: "The current carer's allowance is inadequate and means the financial barriers faced by carers are incredibly difficult to overcome. Not only do they face family and financial worries, their time away from work can have a real impact on their confidence, skills and knowledge. We found that many carers are prone to poor mental and [physical health](#), with many experiencing [social isolation](#) due to the pressures on their time.

"With an ageing population and reduced investment in [social care](#), unpaid carers provide the majority of care in the UK—not doctors, nurses or care workers—and the numbers of carers are only expected to grow. Our health system is reliant on them and they do an incredible job, but not just for their family and friends, they also make a substantial contribution to the economy—estimated by Carers UK to be £132billion a year. With Brexit looming, a reliance on migrant labour in the health and care industry and an ageing workforce, there is a risk of further pressure on employees to leave work to care for family and friends.

"The Government and employers need to act fast. For years, unpaid carers have picked up the slack, but there's a real risk that this won't continue unless changes are made urgently."

Emily Holzhausen, Director of Policy and Public Affairs at Carers UK, said: "We know that over 2 million people have given up work at some point to fulfil their caring responsibilities for someone who is older, disabled or seriously ill, when they could be enjoying the benefits of employment .

"This has costs not only for the individual but for employers who face higher recruitment costs, as well as the exchequer, with £1.7 billion in

social security benefits paid to people who have left their jobs because of unpaid caring. Another £1.2 billion in taxes on top of that is forgone on lost earnings.

"Through our employer forum, Employers for Carers, we work with employers to develop and share carer friendly policy and practice. Carers UK has long called for stronger employment rights for carers and want the Government to commit to introducing statutory paid carers' leave of at least five days and the right to request flexible working from day one.

"As well as support at work, carers also need access to high quality, affordable care services so the forthcoming Green Paper must deliver a sustainable funding solution for social care. Not only does this make good business sense—helping employers to attract and retain a diverse and skilled workforce—it also improves carers' health and well-being and strengthens families, communities and our economy."

The Work Foundation report offers a series of recommendations to policymakers, including:

- Include specific provisions for carers in the Right to Request Flexible Working. People of working age with caring responsibilities should, on starting a new job, be able to request flexible working in order to fit their caring responsibilities around their work
- Introduce dedicated carers' employment rights, such as statutory leave, as recommended in the 2017 Independent Review of the State Pension Age²¹ and pledged by the Conservatives in their 2017 manifesto
- Work closely with businesses to promote the evidence-based value of retaining carers in the workplace. The Government should collect and share examples of good practice, and provide

guidance to employers

- The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) could work more closely with social care departments in local authorities as part of the carers' assessment process so as to identify local job opportunities
- Issue guidance to both employers and prospective employees on how caring could be discussed during interview stage
- Develop an accreditation scheme or 'charter', similar to the 'Disability Confident' scheme already in place
- Establish a 'carers' committee' with the Department of Health and Social Care, made up of charities, employers and unions, to advise the Government on ways to support working carers, while recognising the needs of businesses
- Work with charities, such as Carers UK, Mind, the Carers Trust and Age UK, on policy guidance and best practice
- Launch a public awareness campaign to increase national understanding of the importance of working carers
- Establish regional networks for small and medium-sized organisations, enabling them to share best practice in supporting working carers.

Researchers also recommend that employers:

- Introduce 'Carer Champions' to raise awareness of working carers and destigmatise caring. It would reassure other working carers that they're not alone and encourage them to share experiences
- Seek to create a workplace culture where carers are supported with 'carer friendly' policies
- Set up carers' peer groups or support forums, where carers can share experiences and advice. Businesses could signpost staff to external support forums
- Share examples of good practice with other organisations

- Provide an online resource, through company employee benefit schemes or HR services, to help carers source practical advice and expert support on topics including care, legal and financial information
- Offer online or telephone counselling, through services like Employee Assistance Programmes
- Train line managers on how to identify and support carers, including bespoke approaches. Educate them that working carer roles do not mean lack of commitment at work
- Commit to flexible and remote working
- Explore how technology could help working carers and the workforce more generally
- Run workplace awareness campaigns
- Be open to employee requests to take on fewer hours or less senior roles.

Provided by Lancaster University

Citation: UK's reliance on unpaid carers is unsustainable, research warns (2018, November 29) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-11-uk-reliance-unpaid-carers-unsustainable.html>

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