Carers and Employment Report

A consultation held by St George's House and Carers UK

Introduction – the caring and employment challenge

This consultation brought together individuals from a range of perspectives, including employers, care services, local government and national policymakers, to address challenges around combining caring and employment and to discuss solutions for this growing societal issue.

The 2011 census found that around 3 million people in the UK were combining paid employment with caring for older, disabled or seriously ill family members or friends. More recent research[i] suggests that this number has now risen to nearly 5 million, 1 in 7 in any workplace.

As retirement ages rise, people live for longer and social care options are reduced, many of us will find ourselves caring during our working lives. A recent study[ii] showed that the average person has a 50:50 chance of caring by age 50 – long before they reach retirement age, with half of women caring by the age of 46, compared with half of men who can expect to care at 57.

Research also shows that caring, if unsupported, can have severe consequences on physical, mental and financial health. In the last 2 years 600 people a day have left work to care[iii] and, while for some this may be an informed choice, evidence suggests that many give up work because of lack of employer support and/or suitable care services.

Caring also impacts employers and the state through loss of skilled workers and associated revenue, as well as costs associated with recruitment and unplanned absences.

Key issues from different perspectives

The consultation began with brief provocations and discussion on key challenges from the following perspectives: 1) working carers, 2) employers and business organisations, and 3) the wider social and policymaking environment.

1. Working carers

The top need for carers is **recognition and understanding**, both at a workplace and personal level.

In the workplace carers want to be able to talk about their situation without fear of losing their job or missing out on training or promotion. Their circumstances and support needs can vary vastly. Some can require relatively simple adjustments like being given permission to make private calls at work, or to accompany a relative to a hospital appointment. In other cases **flexible working arrangements and/or leave** may be required. Some may mainly need flexibility to deal with emergencies, while others may also require periods of planned leave.

Asking for flexibility and leave is often harder for frontline staff who may be working to set times and shift patterns. Carers here may need access both to emergency and planned leave (and help planning it).

Carers also need to see **workplace champions**, (especially at senior level) sharing their own caring experience and modelling use of support offered. Caring should be recognised for what it brings back to the business. Workplace carers groups can also be a key part of this.

At a personal level, carers need confidence that their **line manager** will support them. They need effective signposting and, though there may be organisational constraints, what *is* available should be known and offered openly. Gatekeeping often prevents people accessing support.

Carers also need **consistency** during a change in role or line manager; this can be encouraged through workplace **carers passports**. Line managers also need training and to be given permission to use the options available. They should feel able to say yes rather than default to no. In a pressurised situation, the 'no' default is often pushed, though businesses under pressure need to keep experienced people.

Carer support should be **embedded** in the way organisations do business: in recruitment, induction, day to day line management and mid-career reviews. Staff **training and promotion opportunities** should be more flexible and accessible to carers, and part time roles considered for promotion. Support should also be offered to staff at all stages of the employment and caring cycle.

However, no matter what an employer does, a worker who cannot get a care service for their loved one will often be faced with no option but to leave work to care. So, **care and support services** which wrap around both the person needing care and their carer are also critical. They are the oil in the wheels of the economy and should be seen as a key 'condition for employment,' just as transport and utility services are.

2. Employers

Being a supportive employer is partly about having good policy in place, but also about developing a good culture around carers and caring.

On **policy**, forward-looking employers offer a range of flexible working and leave arrangements, practical help such as health and wellbeing support and carers passports, and peer support, for example via workplace networks and carers champions.

Good employers also recognise that caring situations vary enormously and that support needs to be personalised. For example, some carers may need relatively minor adjustments while others may require a longer-term change to working arrangements and planned leave.

Forward-looking employers like **Centrica** have also acknowledged that it can be harder for carers to get flexibility and support if they are in frontline roles. The company have been seeking to address this by encouraging employees and managers to try to plan ahead as much as possible, including swapping shifts and booking leave in advance.

How employers can implement support may also vary according to the size, sector, and nature of the business. For example, the NHS is under huge pressure which may make it harder to be flexible in some areas. Small businesses face other challenges as a handful of unplanned absences make a much bigger impact and are more difficult to cope with. However, they can be better placed to promote support and a good **workplace culture** as they are small enough to know all their staff.

Employers with longstanding experience of carer support have highlighted that their biggest learning has been on this 'culture piece'**.** A supportive CEO is very important, as are champions at different levels, especially if they have personal experience of caring. Such

personal experience helps make better managers and authentic champions.

However, some employers felt that, even where good progress had been made on culture, many in their workforce were clearly still nervous about disclosing being a carer as they had not come forward for support. There needs to be awareness of what is available and what managers should do right across the organisation, including **line manager training**. Supportive colleagues are also important; if a colleague resents the situation it makes it much harder for the carer. This is a dynamic ongoing process and businesses need continuing help to promote awareness, cultural change and consistency.

Employers need to understand and push the '**business criticality'** of this issue. This is a way for organisations to make savings and enhance performance, firstly through increased retention of talent and skills and secondly through avoiding unplanned absences or reduced productivity. There are already staff shortages in many areas so it does not make sense to make it harder for those who want to work.

No organisation is unaffected. **Planning for caring situations** is essential in all sectors because people will leave if their needs are not met. Even if they do not leave, they may develop mental or physical health problems, leading to sickness absences or low productivity.

Caring is also often an issue close to people's hearts so, it can have a big impact on employee engagement. An initiative as simple as one business choosing Carers UK as a main charitable partner was very warmly received by the workforce.

3. The wider social and policymaking environment

One solution to the caring challenge has to be a well-designed social care system. However, this is a volatile policy area, with seven social care ministers in ten years and too many green and white papers to count.

The government in general struggles with the long-term view. It tends to overestimate what can be achieved in the near future and underestimate the long-term, leading to short-term funds to solve problems. Many policies expect too much too soon and inevitably end in disappointment. There needs to be a focus on sustainable solutions not short-term fixes driven by crises.

The traditional lifelong linear progression from education to employment to retirement is being challenged. Now we have a multi-stage life with various jobs and periods of retraining and re-education. This also involves caring. Our traditional policy mechanisms tend to see

complex problems through just one lens, but caring is cross-departmental and covers a range of policy areas including social care, health, benefits, employment, and business strategy.

There is a deep-seated perception in government that the family has responsibility for care and the government only has to provide a safety net. Below the surface of this thinking is a gender imbalance in the assumption that this is women's work. This view is not sustainable either in economic efficiency or in social justice.

Recently, the political weather has changed fundamentally. Evidence is becoming less important as opinions and passions drive policy. How can we respond to this? Do we need to think beyond the limits of evidence and engage with the heart alongside the head?

What could good look like?

Participants divided into two groups to explore potential solutions from the perspective of 1) working carers and employers and 2) the wider social and policy making environment including the role of service providers. The thinking was then refined with solutions grouped according to theme, then crystallised further, with thoughts and action points grouped within the following key headings (five per group).

Group 1 - working carers and employers

1. Drive an employer campaign with three key 'asks' to support carers
Focus on the following top three consistent 'key asks' from working carers to create some common momentum: increase visibility of caring through modelling and championing by senior leaders; promote wider uptake of flexibility (including 'flexibility by default'); and provide enhanced leave for crisis and planned caring situations.

2. Deliver a targeted SME campaign
Engage SMEs through a segmented and sector-specific campaign to recognise what they are already doing well for carers, ask them about challenges they are facing, and highlight help available. This should include promoting SME case studies and cover medium size to micro employers, including those in the 'gig' economy.

3. Connect workplace carers networks
Develop a mechanism to help connect and promote workplace carers networks. This could build on the informal network within Employers for Carers and learn from the experience of other umbrella networks. It could be developed into a resource to enable network leaders or chairs to support each other and include an SME network space.

4. <u>Identify potential financial incentives from and for employers</u>
Financial incentives could come from employers, professional institutions and government. Employers could incentivise others via supply chains through procurement strategies that require suppliers to be carer friendly organisations. They could also encourage staff to stay in employment by providing continued pensions contributions and other benefits during periods of care leave. Insurers could offer products for employers to offer their staff as an employee benefit to 'insure against the likelihood of caring'. The government could offer National Insurance discounts or holidays to carer friendly employers

5. <u>Include carers as a 'protected characteristic'</u>
The pros and cons of carers being the tenth 'protected characteristic' in the workplace were considered. Arguments in favour were that the concept of protected characteristics was relatively well understood (compared with the current position of 'discrimination by association') and that this would help increase visibility of carers in the workplace. Against this the point was made that, in the current economic and political situation, there was likely to be pressure to reduce, rather than enhance, the range of legal protections for employees in this way. However, the final conclusion was that it would be a useful lever to drive consistency of support for working carers.

Group 2 - wider social and policymaking environment

1. <u>Support a call for care leave, with the ambition for it to be paid</u>
The group considered that the introduction of statutory leave was likely to be evolutionary, with the first step being short term unpaid leave. This would provide a baseline for all employers and flexibility for forward-thinking organisations to go beyond the minimum by offering paid leave and/or a longer period of unpaid leave. They agreed there should be a shared narrative around the benefits of statutory leave among forward-looking employers who could then grow broader coalitions of support to build upon this provision in the future.

2. <u>Invest in care and engage employers in the debate</u>
Care and support services – including those enabled by technology - are critical for working carers, and an investment in a better and better-funded infrastructure for care is essential as a 'condition for employment'. Employers should actively engage in the long-promised debate on social care as they did with childcare.

3. Evidence and data

Gather and present compelling data to the Treasury on the funding of social care that supports people to return to or remain in employment. There are 'push pull' tensions around carers and employment; while there is financial value in people providing unpaid care, there is also a clear business case (including for the state) for working age carers to be able to stay in employment.

There is a continuing need, therefore, to gather compelling evidence to counter the Treasury's 'deadweight cost' argument that families will just keep providing care if no alternative support is provided. While this may be seen as the cheaper option it comes at a cost as unpaid carers are often skilled and talented employees at the peak of their career and therefore valuable to their employer and the wider economy.

4. Create wider societal change

Continue to build a social movement for the transformation of care, encompassing not only the existing care system but wider consideration around the whole range of community assets - including the NHS, care services, the community and voluntary sector, transport, housing, technology infrastructure etc. Begin by delivering a public health campaign focussing on the health and wellbeing impacts of caring, if unsupported.

5. Include carers as a 'protected characteristic'

In addition to issues considered by the employer group, participants considered this as a longer-term goal: the next 'ask' - and a key message to promote recognition of carers – after statutory care leave.

Two key issues for further consideration were identified:

1. Addressing inequalities

Much of the evidence about caring is based on increased life expectancy, yet we need to remember that the likelihood of longer life does not apply to everyone in all areas of the country. The assumption that families will just 'get on with it' also ignores the fact that it is those who cannot afford private care who will end up giving up work to care. There is therefore a danger of entrenching and widening inequalities in many of the areas to which caring relates.

In addition to this, there is a differential experience of caring across social groups due to wealth and also culture. For working age carers there is also inequality for people in precarious jobs who cannot work flexibly. How do we address these issues?

2. Turning challenges into opportunities

The UK is facing a series of political crises, which could become societal challenges, including the combination of an ageing population and shrinking supply of care services and care workers. However, this could also present an opportunity for the government, service providers, employers and other parties to address one of the most important issues of our time and thereby make a real difference to people's lives. Whichever political party is in power, people combining work and caring will be core voters, core workers, and at the heart of their communities.

Meanwhile, we live in a world of constant change with many unknowns from the impact of Brexit to the coronavirus crisis. But one thing we do know is that caring is increasing and we need to support carers better.

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[i] Carers UK and YouGov, *Juggling work and unpaid care: A growing issue* (February 2019)
[ii] Carers UK, *Will I care? The likelihood of being a carer in adult life* (Carers Rights Day report 2019)
[iii] Carers UK and YouGov, *Juggling work and unpaid care: A growing issue* (February 2019)