

Policy Submission

National Carers Strategy

**Submission to the Department of
Social & Family Affairs**

April 2008



**Submission to the Department of Social and Family Affairs
on the
development of
a
National Carers' Strategy**

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Summary of recommendations

This Combat Poverty submission identifies a key challenge and a number of recommendations for the formulation of the National Carers' Strategy. These are now summarised.

A key challenge

Increased labour market participation is a key strategy to maintain and enhance economic growth and to tackle poverty in Ireland. A key challenge for the National Carers' Strategy is to reconcile the possible contradiction between promoting labour market participation while also sustaining the informal and home based care of people who are sick, older or with a disability. This policy challenge is one that cuts across several areas such as employment, social welfare, the provision of social services, health, transport, and housing.

Recommendations

Employment and caring

In regard to employment and leave for caring, the development of the National Strategy needs to commit to:

- promote greater levels of public awareness of the provisions of the Carer's Leave Act amongst caregivers, voluntary and community bodies supporting carers, trade unions and employers
- identify and address barriers to the take up of the provisions of the Carer's Leave Act
- identify the benefits and cost effectiveness of incorporating a period of paid leave for caregivers.

Income support mechanisms (social welfare)

Combat Poverty recommends that:

- the term of the Carer's Benefit be extended to three years
- the income disregard for Carer's Allowance be increased to €350 per week for a single person.
- the Respite Care Grant be increased to sufficiently cover the costs of respite being provided for a period of 20 days per years (national norm for annual leave)
- the Respite Care Grant be increased by at least €300 – from €1,700 to €2,000 in Budget 2009.

Involving carers

Combat Poverty recommends:

- that the National Carers' Strategy commits to work with carers' groups to develop and support the engagement and involvement of carers in the planning, monitoring, development and evaluation of public services that affect them at local and national levels.

1. Introduction

The Combat Poverty Agency is a state advisory agency developing and promoting evidence-based proposals and measures to combat poverty in Ireland. Combat Poverty works for a poverty-free Ireland by striving for change which will promote a fairer and more just, equitable and inclusive society. In line with its statutory role (Combat Poverty Agency Act 1986), Combat Poverty advises Government on policies which have an impact on poverty, informed by its research, its demonstration programmes and engagement with groups experiencing poverty.

This submission opens with a discussion of poverty, social exclusion and carers. Its primary focus is on the combination of work and caring with specific reference to carers and employment and carers and social welfare. It concludes with a short section on involving carers in the decision-making that affects them and brief reference to two studies on carers and caring that are

2. Poverty, social exclusion and carers

The National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2007-2016 acknowledges that *informal and family carers play a very valuable role in our society particularly in enabling older people and people with disabilities to remain in their own homes for as long as possible* (2007, Stationery Office: 65).

The official Irish Government definition of poverty reflects an understanding of poverty as exclusion from 'normal' living standards in society:

People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society (2007 op. cit).

Combat Poverty welcomes the Government's socially inclusive vision for carers reflected below:

... a vision of an Ireland that recognises and supports the valuable role of carers in society by providing them with support, where necessary, to assist them in their caring role and to enable them to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life.

The definition of a carer, as proposed by the Carers' Strategy Working Group established in early 2008 is:

The person caring is one who is providing an ongoing significant level of care on a voluntary basis to a person (of any age) who is in need of care in the home due to illness, disability or age.

The number of family carers in Ireland has been estimated at 149,000 (NESC 2005:47). The 2006 census of population identified over 5,400 carers aged between 15-19 years of age and, of these, 700 were working between 29 and 43 hours per week. Some 40,000 carers are in receipt of the Carer's Allowance, which is a means-tested income support payment of €214.70 paid weekly to carers on low income who are providing full time care in the home.

Caregivers can be classified into various sub-groups such as:

- Young carers e.g. caring for siblings or parents or extended family
- Parent carers e.g. caring for children with disabilities
- Older carers e.g. caring for siblings or partners or extended family
- Working age carers e.g. combining work and caring; giving up work to care or being the spouse/partner in a couple where the other person is in receipt of illness or disability benefit. Although there are no EU wide data, figures from national studies show that up to half of all carers aged under 65 combine care with employment¹.

Some caregivers may be particularly vulnerable to poverty and exclusion.

These include:

¹ Glendinnig, Caroline. *Support for carers of older people –some international and national comparisons*. Audit Commission.

- Carers living on a fixed income and/or dependent on benefit for a long period
- Carers that experience financial difficulties as a result of the additional living costs incurred by the person they care e.g. additional living costs associated with disability
- People caring full time
- People who give up work to care (and possibly reduce their own present day standard of living and future pension income)
- Carers in poor health.

Carers' exclusion from normal economic and social activities can also arise when caregivers are unable to enjoy holidays, holiday pursuits or other social and recreational activities because of their care responsibilities.

The nature and extent of poverty amongst carers is not empirically established at national level in Ireland. A UK study² highlights that caregiving was associated with disadvantage. The proportion of the population providing unpaid care was higher in deprived areas and areas with higher levels of poorer health. Carers were also relatively disadvantaged and more likely than others of the same age to be in poor health themselves.

3. Combining work and care

Increased labour market participation is a key strategy to maintain and enhance economic growth and to tackle poverty in Ireland. It is also a key goal of EU policy as a mechanism for achieving competitiveness in a global economy.

Women continue to take up most caring responsibilities. For working aged women, this can impact on their careers and income prospects. As the National Women's Strategy notes:

² Young, H, E. Grundy, M. Jital. 2006. *Care providers, care receivers: A longitudinal perspective*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Caring work done by women is largely unremunerated and is considered to be undervalued.

TABLE 8
WOMEN AND MEN AS CARERS—SOME HEADLINE STATISTICS

	MEN	FEMALE
Number of unpaid carers 2002	57,480	91,274
Of which		
Persons who gave 1 – 14 hours of unpaid care per week	34,975	49,887
Persons who gave 15 – 28 hours of unpaid care per week	5,862	9,547
Persons who gave 28 – 42 hours of unpaid care per week	3,142	4,815
Persons who gave more than 43 hours of unpaid care per week	13,501	27,025
Number of carers who received D/SFA carers allowance/benefit 2005	4,879	20,958

Source : CSO and Department of Social and Family Affairs

One of the challenges for the National Carers' Strategy is to reconcile the possible contradiction between promoting labour market participation while also sustaining the informal and home based care of people who are sick, older or with a disability. This policy challenge is one that cuts across several areas such as employment, social welfare, the provision of social services, health, transport, and housing. Employment and social welfare are discussed below, some of the challenges for the Carers' Strategy are identified and a number of recommendations are made.

3.1 Employment

Employment is a key mechanism for households to generate sufficient resources to maintain themselves and their well-being. When the primary earner in the household is also the carer, the ability to combine work and care is crucial to the household's likelihood to experience or avoid poverty.

Job flexibility and leave are two aspects of employment that can help caregivers combine working with caring. The Carer's Leave Act, 2001,

provides an entitlement to leave for an employee, subject to a maximum of 65 weeks in respect of any one care recipient.

The data on the take up of this provision is outlined in the Working Group's own paper 13 March 2008. It highlights that since the scheme started only 49 people availed of carers' leave. 1,324 people took carers' leave and were also in receipt of Carer's Benefit.

The development of the National Strategy needs to consider:

- levels of public awareness of the provisions of the Carer's Leave Act amongst caregivers, voluntary and community bodies supporting carers, trade unions and employers
- barriers to the take up of the provisions of the Carer's Leave Act
- potential and cost effectiveness of incorporating a period of paid leave for caregivers.

3.2 Social welfare

In Ireland, women are the primary recipients of the Carer's Allowance. As mentioned above, this allowance may be combined with part-time employment or education up to 15 hours weekly. Gender inequality in pay and employment opportunities remains a concern. Women's part-time employment is frequently in the low paid and insecure sectors of the labour market. Increasing the work disregard may increase a person's earning potential but it may also increase the dual responsibility of work and caring for many women.

The economic and social circumstances of families may mean that many carers do not have real choices about their caring role. It has been noted that caring on a regular and substantial basis leads to financial hardship, stress and exhaustion as well as loss of all kinds of opportunities such as employment. One of the challenges for the Carers' Strategy is to reduce the negative financial impacts of caring. When caring arises as a short- or long-term contingency, the social welfare system is key in ensuring that the living

standards of families, carers and people being cared for are the same as the norms in society.

Carer's Benefit is a payment for insured people who have recently left the workforce and are looking after certain people in need of full-time care and attention. This benefit is payable for 2 years. Combat Poverty recommends that:

- the term of the Carer's Benefit be extended to three years.

The Carer's Allowance is the primary income support mechanism for people who leave the workforce to care for someone in need of full time care and attention. There is a work disregard of up to 15 hours per week so that carers can engage in employment, self-employment, training or education while retaining their income support. Recipients of the Carer's Allowance also qualify for a number of secondary benefits such as free travel, telephone rental allowance, free TV licence etc.

The Carer's Allowance is means-tested. For those with no means and caring for one person aged over 66, the monetary value of the Carer's Allowance is €214 per week. Those in receipt of another social welfare payment may also qualify for a half rate Carer's Allowance. Combat Poverty recommends that:

- the income disregard for Carer's Allowance be increased to €350 per week for a single person in Budget 2009.

Not all recipients of the Carer's Allowance may be able to avail of the work disregard and the Allowance may be their primary or sole income source.

The Respite Care Grant is an annual payment for carers who look after certain people in need of full-time care and attention. The payment is made regardless of the carer's means. Combat Poverty recommends that:

- the respite care grant be increased to sufficiently cover the costs of respite being provided for a period of 20 days per years (national norm for annual leave).
- The respite care grant be increased by at least €300 – from €1,700 to €2,000 in Budget 2009.

4. Involving carers in decisions that affect them

Carers' are affected by a range of public policy decisions relating to the development of public services relevant to their lives. Often the day to day pressure of caring and, constraints on people's availability because of care responsibilities, are factors that may make it difficult for carers to be involved in opportunities for public consultation or ongoing mechanisms for their involvement in local relevant structures. The social isolation of many carers and the imbalance of power in some carer/professional relationships may also be barriers.

Empowering carers through providing supports for training to build confidence or to join together to have an effective voice are useful strategies to support carers' contribution as active citizens in various local fora or community and voluntary organisations relevant to them.

Carers' involvement in shaping and engaging in the roll out of public policies and public services that affect them can be supported by public service bodies working with and liaising with voluntary organisations and carers' groups. Combat Poverty recommends that:

- the National Carers' Strategy commits to work with carers' groups to develop and support the engagement and involvement of carers in the planning, monitoring, development and evaluation of public services at local and national level that affect them.

5. Research on carers, caring and poverty

Combat Poverty would like to draw the attention of the Working Group on the National Carers' Strategy to two research initiatives concerned with carers.

These studies are funded by Combat Poverty and currently are 'work in progress'.

The first of these is a study on hidden young carers in Cork. It aims to highlight the circumstances and experiences of young people who undertake significant caring responsibilities at home. The study's main objective is to understand the relationship between young carers and those factors that make them more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion.

The second study seeks to identify the health status of recipients of the Carer's Allowance and to establish if being a carer impacts on health.

On conclusion of both studies, Combat Poverty would be pleased to make the findings available to the deliberations of the Working Group.

6. Conclusion

This submission has focused on three particular areas relevant to poverty and carers – carers and employment; carers and social welfare and involving carers in the decision-making that affect them. A number of recommendations in these areas have also been outlined.