

Submission to the Work and Pensions Committee

Employment support for carers

December 2017

Ref: 2817

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About this consultation

This is Age UK's response to the Work and Pensions Committee's inquiry into the support carers receive to enable them to combine work with their caring responsibilities.

1. Key points and recommendations

- Significant improvements are needed to ensure that carers can access the support necessary to keep working. The Government and employers can both help – our full recommendations are set out in our policy report 'Walking the Tightrope: the challenges combining work and care in later life', available on our website.
- The Fuller Working Lives and Industrial strategies both reference the issue, and we are pleased the Government recognises that carers have particular support needs.
- There is, however, a lack of joined up working to resolve the barriers that people face, and we recommend that more is done across Government departments to help.
- Age UK analysis contained in 'Walking the Tightrope', finds that as little as five hours caring per week is a 'tipping point' and has a significant impact on someone's ability to keep working.
- The Government should introduce a statutory right to five days paid leave for caring responsibilities, plus a longer period of unpaid leave. This will allow carers to manage their responsibilities more effectively and prevent many from leaving their job unwillingly.
- The Government should improve access to flexible working by introducing a system of 'flexible by default'. This is where employees can assume they are able to work flexibly unless their employer can demonstrate why it is not possible. This system includes extending the right request flexible working to the first day of employment.
- In addition the Government should consider developing a kite mark for flexible working.
- Care services need to be improved – in localities where good quality care services are available, there is a proven link with carers staying in work.
- Employers need to ensure that managers (and indeed all staff) understand all relevant HR policies or processes. Line managers must be trained to recognise the barriers that carers face and to respond consistently to any concerns. For 'Carers statements' to be successful organisational cultures must become more accepting of carers' needs, simply mandating their use will not necessarily help.
- There are disincentives for carers to work throughout the benefits system, which are often difficult to identify. We recommend the Government conducts a full review of the 'carer's experience' to improve the claimant's journey.
- The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has a significant role to play in stimulating a cultural change in attitudes towards caring among both employers and the public. The two of these are closely interlinked and should be looked at together.

2. Inquiry questions

- 1) Does DWP provide adequate support for carers in employment and those seeking employment? What more could the department do?
- 2) How can the Department work more proactively with employers to support carers?

2.1 The Fuller Working Lives strategy revolves around the DWP working with employers to enhance employment support for older workers, including carers, and has experienced a degree of success. There have been some high profile cases of organisations improving or adopting HR policies for carers, and the 'ageing workforce' has become a more widely discussed issue. However the majority of the UK's 1.3 million employers are never likely to be reached through Government intervention of this type. With 5.7 million carers, the majority of whom are under 65, extending this reach is important.

2.2 Since April 2015 jobcentre districts have also had Older Claimant Champions who are trained to understand the barriers typically faced by the over 50s, including caring, and promote this groups' needs to Work Coaches. This is a welcome first step, and we look forward to the publication of the forthcoming DWP analysis of older claimants' experiences.ⁱ

- 3) What are the main barriers to employment for carers and how can these be reduced?

2.3 In October 2016 we published our policy report 'Walking the tightrope: the challenges of combining work and care in later life', jointly with Carers UK, available at https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_july16_walking_the_tightrope.pdf. This was based on focus groups with people aged 50+, primary data analysis, and consultation with other stakeholders. It made a series of policy recommendations which, if accepted, we believe will help carers stay in work. All the quotes in the section below are taken from the focus group sessions (most of which are included in the report). The research identified several barriers, which hinder older carers from working to their full potential, and in some cases at all. These include:

Managing emergencies and transitions

2.4 Participants in our focus groups described the moment that they realised they needed to be a carer (even if they did not use the term to identify themselves at that point) as being a stark and sudden realisation of the impact it would have on their lives. People

often found that the health and social care system was difficult to navigate or there was a long wait between care needs emerging and diagnosis, which created further difficulties.

‘Employers should be supportive of emergency commitments – but this could lead to feeling guilty about taking time off.’

2.5 The difficulties with arranging care for loved ones while continuing to work were significant, with some reporting they were forced to stop working in this initial period. This chimes with the key finding in our data analysis – as little as five hours caring per week has a significant impact on an individual’s ability to stay in work. For many, if the caring commitment rises to ten hours it can have a far larger effect.ⁱⁱ

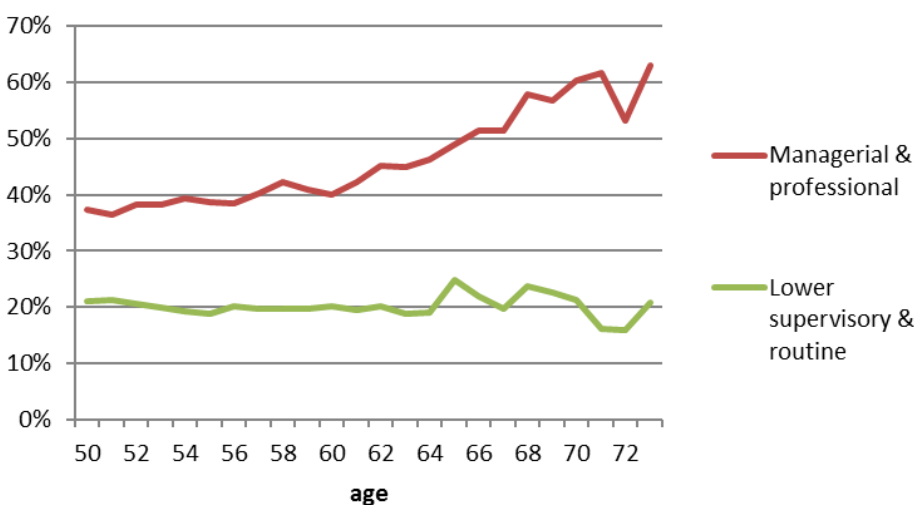
2.6 We recommend that the Government implements a statutory right to five days paid leave to meet caring responsibilities, plus a longer period of unpaid leave. This would give carers greater flexibility in managing the transition to permanent arrangements, and help those who are caring for someone with erratic needs.

A lack of flexibility

2.7 Participants in our focus groups identified this as the biggest day-to-day barrier, with many lacking both flexibility in their current roles and access to jobs that could deliver it. The ‘right to request’ flexible working had been used by some, while others were still afraid to raise the issue with their employer in spite of the legal right to do so.

2.8 Previous Age UK research on flexible workingⁱⁱⁱ highlighted the disparity in the availability of flexible working between people working in higher and lower skilled roles, shown below in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Proportion of 50+ workers working flexibly, by age and job type (ave. 2005-12)^{iv}



2.9 To help more people, particularly those in lower skilled jobs, benefit from flexible working Age UK recommends that a system of 'flexible by default' is adopted. This means that employees could assume they can work flexibly unless the employer can justify otherwise, from the first day in a job. Rejecting flexible working arrangements would be based on the existing business reasons. In practice, this would represent a strengthening of the right to request rather than a fundamental shift, which we believe would lead to a cultural change in how flexible working is viewed, making it more normal and putting the emphasis on employers to reject requests rather than individuals to make the business case.

2.10 The Government should consult on the detail of how it could work, and then pilot it in the public sector before rolling it out more widely.

2.11 We also recommend that the Government should consider developing an employer kite mark to make it clear to jobseekers when employers are willing to accommodate flexible working.

Self-employment

2.12 Self-employment can work in favour of someone who needs greater flexibility, but is not always a solution. For example, following stopping work to care for his wife and relocating to be near friends and family, one focus group participant became self-employed in the haulage and warehouse industry. This helped him at first, but ultimately when he needed time off he found his clients could not wait and went elsewhere – ultimately he had to shut down his business.

'Clients were sympathetic, but in the end the world keeps moving and they need someone to do the job.'

Compromises and sacrifice

2.13 Where employers do not have adequate policies, carers often made sacrifices that can harm their career. A survey undertaken among working carers in 2013 found that:

- 79 per cent had used holiday time to look after person cared for.
- 40 per cent had been unable to attend meetings or training sessions.
- 38 per cent were unable to take on extra projects or responsibilities.
- 20 per cent had taken on a less qualified, responsible or senior role.
- 17 per cent had taken sick leave when they were not sick.^v

2.14 People in our focus groups reported feeling stressed and worried, with a negative impact on their own health. Others had dropped out of work as they were unable to balance the two.

Attitudes of managers

2.15 If managers do not understand and support carer strategies then the practical implementation of the HR policies will be compromised. Carers in our focus groups had mixed experiences with their managers, including some where they were positive at first but became more difficult later on. One participant said:

'My employer changed their policy to give up to one working week paid carers' leave. [...] However the CEO said he thought that carers taking special leave would make other staff feel disadvantaged.'

2.16 There was also some variation around different industrial sectors. One participant who had previously been a manager in a motor manufacturing company highlighted the issue of lack of flexibility and lack of leeway for managers to offer flexibility in that industry:

'The larger employers had very positive people policies, but had zero flexibility. In manufacturing, if you need 820 people to run a production line then that's what you need. As a manager you're responsible for making sure it runs – there's no scope for flexibility and virtually no staff 'slack' built in – they might operate with a two per cent margin but no more, and as a manager you could be fired if you offered flexibility.'

Attitudes of colleagues

2.17 Many carers report finding the attitudes of their colleagues as being unaccepting, particular if taking time off leads to additional work for others. This emphasises the importance of ensuring that everyone is aware of and understands the nature and pressures of caring. Employers need to communicate their policies effectively with all employees and apply them consistently. This should include where possible protocols for distributing work fairly.

'The employer offered flexible working but other staff were unhappy about this so I had to give up the job.'

Inadequate care and support services

2.18 Experiences of the care system and of the services available also have an impact . A recent survey showed that 30 per cent of carers who had given up work, retired early

or reduced working hours had done so because there were no suitable care services available, and 22 per cent because care services were too expensive.^{vi}

2.19 In our focus groups, carers of people with dementia expressed concerns about the length of time it takes to get a diagnosis. Before there is a formal diagnosis it is often not possible to receive any formal support, which can make it difficult to stay in work. Where care services are available, however, studies have shown that people are more likely to stay in work.^{vii}

Disincentives within the benefits system

2.20 The benefits system can create disincentives to work and negatively affect lifestyle choices. This is a complex area, which we believe requires further investigation understand the disincentives and the effect they have. Often the consequences of benefit rules are unintended, and we believe that the Government should conduct a full review of how the benefits system functions for carers. Question 7 also considers this point.

2.21 For example, Carer's Allowance has an earnings disregard of £116 per week. There are some carers who would like to work more but are unable to, could find they gain little financially, or might even be worse off, because they will lose benefit:

'My employer created a part time role. Because of loss of benefits it didn't pay any more than being on benefits, it was only break even, but I took it anyway as I wanted to work.'

5) What examples of employer best practice towards carers could the Department promote?

2.22 There are a limited number of organisations, usually (but not exclusively) larger employers, which are regularly used as case studies to promote best practice. The range of organisations used should be expanded to illustrate a wider range of examples that provide more relevant comparisons for businesses, particular SMEs. The DWP should work with Employers for Carers to deliver this.

6) Would mandatory 'carers policy' statements be a good idea?

2.23 Having a "carers' policy" statement is desirable, although the feasibility of making it mandatory needs to be carefully considered. While it would force employers to recognise the issue, it alone would be unlikely to reduce barriers that carers face. As with making any HR policy work in practice, there must also be a good understanding

of its purpose and practical application across an organisation, for example by training line managers and ensuring employees are empowered to use it.

7) Is there a ‘cultural shift’ needed in our attitude towards carers in employment? If so, how far can the Department go in influencing such a shift?

2.24 A cultural shift is necessary if the Government is to help carers in employment. This is not just among employers and managers, but also among the public. The DWP can play a role in shaping this – it needs to consider how carers are viewed in wider society, including by employers, as well as how they are treated by the welfare system, which underpins much of this.

2.25 In our focus groups with 50+ carers we uncovered examples of perverse incentives. For example one man (who had dropped out of work due to caring) had to maintain a separate address, because if he moved in with his partner, for whom he cared, she would lose her single person’s discount on Council Tax and they would face further financial hardship.

2.26 We recommend that the DWP conducts a re-evaluation of the benefits system and how carers interact with it – the ‘carer experience’ – to ensure that it works smoothly, offers appropriate financial reward, and facilitates a good quality standard of living.

8) Is there a coherent cross-government strategy for supporting carers in employment/seeking employment?

2.27 The Fuller Working Lives strategy recognises the needs of carers and helps promote the benefits of employing carers. However, there is a lack of consistent Government-wide efforts to reinforced this strategy and reduce the barriers that carers face. These can emanate from a variety of sources including the social care, benefit and unemployment support systems.

2.28 The Industrial Strategy makes just one mention of ‘carers’^{viii} – we believe that carers, along with the ageing workforce, should be considered in more detail as part of this.

ⁱ Referred to by Damian Hinds in his answer to a Parliamentary Question on 23/11/17
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2017-11-15/113418/>

ⁱⁱ See 'Walking the Tightrope' figure 4 on page 24, https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/active-communities/rb_july16_walking_the_tightrope.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Age UK (2012), A means to many ends: older workers' experiences of flexible working. Our definition of flexible working is also set out in the appendix to this report.

^{iv} This chart is an update of that which is included in the 'Means to many ends' report, with the analysis conducted in 2014.

^v Pickard, L., King, D., Brimblecombe, N., Knapp, M., *Overcoming barriers: Unpaid care and employment in England, A Longitudinal Study* (2015)

^{vi} Carers UK and Employers for Carers (2015), *Caring and isolation in the Workplace: Impact report and recommendations*

^{vii} See for example Pickard L, King D, Brimblecombe N and Knapp M (2015) The effectiveness of paid services in supporting carers' employment in England, *Journal of Social Policy* 44 (3) : 567-590

^{viii} Industrial Strategy White Paper, November 2017