

Balancing work and care: Approaches to improving support

A report for the Commission for Healthier Working Lives

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About the Commission for Healthier Working Lives

Learning and Work Institute (L&W), Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) formed a new collaboration as the research partners for the Commission for Healthier Working Lives, which was supported by the Health Foundation.

The Commission for Healthier Working Lives aimed to build consensus on the actions needed to address the UK's work and health challenges. It sought to improve understanding of health trends and inequalities and their impacts on individuals, employers and the economy. The final report [Action for Healthier Working Lives](#) set out the Commission's recommendations to improve working-age health and help people with health conditions to access, remain in or thrive in the workforce.

This report is one of a series of commissioned reports, all of which are available at www.health.org.uk/commission-for-healthier-working-lives.

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Executive Summary

More people in the UK are now living with long-term health conditions due to factors including an ageing population and sharp increases in reported mental ill-health. Rising ill-health, particularly among working-age people, is having a direct impact on the labour market, with record numbers of people now reporting work-limiting health conditions, both in and out of work.¹ These trends are set to continue, with projections that an additional 2.6 million people in England alone will be living with major illness by 2040.²

In support of the Commission for Healthier Working Lives, this paper examines the challenges faced by carers, who play a vital role in supporting individuals with health conditions. In addition to the direct impact on work participation, population ageing and rising health issues are increasing the demand for caregiving, creating additional long-term pressures on the labour market. Addressing these issues is essential for carers and those they support, as well as the broader economy.

This research uses a combination of data analysis, desk-based research, a roundtable with expert stakeholders, and a focus group with carers to explore the impact of caring on someone's working life along with options to support carers to work. Because of the focus on employment, the analysis focuses on working-age people, defined as 16-64 years old. Throughout this paper we use the term carer to refer to people providing care, support or regular service to a family member, friend, or member of the community, which is usually unpaid.

How many carers are there in the UK and who is providing care?

In the UK, 14% of the working-age population (nearly 6 million people) provide care to someone who is sick, disabled, or elderly. This proportion does not seem to have increased in recent years, having sat between 14% and 16% since 2010.³ However, with projections of rising ill-health driven by an ageing population, it is likely that demand for care and intensity of care required, both formal and informal, will increase in the coming years.

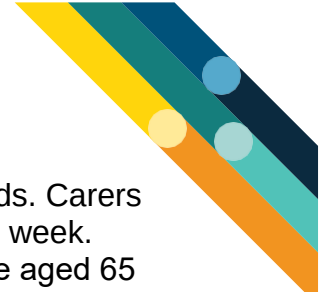
People with certain characteristics are more likely to be carers than others:

- More women than men report providing care. In 2021-2023, 61% of working-age carers were women. Women also provide more hours of care per week than men; 32% of female working-age carers provide 20 hours or more of care each week compared to 24% of male working-age carers.
- Older people in the UK are providing more care than younger people; 20% of 60–

¹ Atwell S, Vriend M, Rocks C, Finch D, Farrington-Douglas J. *What we know about the UK's working-age health challenge*. The Health Foundation; 2023 (<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/what-we-know-about-the-uk-s-working-age-health-challenge>)

² Raymond A, Watt T, Douglas HR, Head A, Kypridemos C, Rachet-Jacquet L. *Health inequalities in 2040: Current and projected patterns of illness by deprivation in England*. The Health Foundation; 2024 (<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/health-inequalities-in-2040>)

³ We see the same trend when we look at the proportion of people of all ages, rather than just those who are working age, who provide care.



64-year-olds report that they are carers compared to 7% of 16–29-year-olds. Carers aged 30-49 are more likely to be providing more than 20 hours of care per week. Care roles extend beyond an individual's working life; 25% of all carers are aged 65 or older.

- More white people report being carers than people from other ethnic backgrounds; 15% of working-age people who are white provide care compared to 12% of working-age people from black, Asian, mixed, or other ethnic backgrounds. However, since 2015-2017, the proportion of white people providing care has remained stable, while the proportion of people from ethnic minority backgrounds providing care has slightly increased.

Caring has an impact on employment

Carers are a crucial part of the UK's workforce, representing 13% of all employed working-age people. Of these, 1.7 million are 'substantial carers' providing 20 hours or more of care per week. However, carers are not participating in the labour market as much as non-carers; a lower share of carers are in employment (64%) than non-carers (72%) and employed carers also work fewer hours per week (31 hours) on average than the overall working-age population (33 hours). More hours per week spent caring is associated with greater barriers to work participation:

- 9% of carers who spend 20-34 hours a week caring report being unable to work at all. This more than doubles to 19% for carers who spend 35-49 hours a week caring.
- Around seven in 10 carers who spend fewer than 20 hours caring per week have a job, compared to fewer than half of carers who spend 20 hours or more caring per week.

The types of jobs that people with caring responsibilities have differ from the wider population. A smaller proportion of carers (5%) work in managerial or senior roles compared to non-carers (7%), while a higher proportion of carers work in administration, caring and other service industry roles, and elementary occupations (e.g. cleaning, food preparation, and manual labour; 13%) than non-carers (11%).

Many carers face challenges around money, with those who spend more time caring each week being more likely to report experiencing financial difficulties. 21% of carers who provide 20 hours or more of care per week report that their financial situation is quite or very difficult, compared to 9% of carers who care for fewer than 20 hours each week.

Many carers face their own health challenges and long-term health conditions can make it harder for carers to work alongside caring. A much larger percentage of carers who do not have long-term health conditions (73%) report being in paid employment than those with long-term health conditions (51%).

In our focus group, carers described work as important to their sense of identity, self-worth, and social life, but expressed fears about whether they would be able to find work that matched both their skills and the requirements of their caring role. An individual recognising that they have caring responsibilities and then informing their employer is often the first step in accessing workplace support. However for those that do, experiences of employer support were mixed. Those with supportive employers still faced challenges balancing work and care, such as being physically or mentally



present at work. Carers also explained how their caring responsibilities impact on their career aspirations and hold them back from accessing the most fulfilling roles.

Reflections on existing support for carers

Carers in the UK have certain rights and access to a range of support designed to assist them in balancing caregiving responsibilities with other aspects of life, including employment. These include rights and legal protections such as protection from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, access to five days of unpaid carer's leave each year, and the right to request flexible working arrangements.

Although many employers go beyond their statutory requirement to support carers, awareness of rights and enforcement of entitlements within the workplace is inconsistent. Requests for flexible working can be denied. Not all carers feel able to take unpaid time off or know they are entitled to it. Current government structures for enforcing workers' rights are fragmented and inefficient, meaning many employees, including carers, are unable to enforce their rights.

Carers who are out of work can access national employment support and careers services to help them find a job. There are no employment schemes that specifically and exclusively support carers to find employment. The expert stakeholders we engaged with felt that many employment support services currently available lack the knowledge and understanding to support carers to move into work that meets their needs.

There are also wider forms of support available to carers. All carers have the right to a 'carer's needs assessment', carried out by their local authority. Needs assessments broadly assess and address carer's needs, including those relating to employment. Expert stakeholders highlighted that access to assessments varies across the UK.

Carers are also entitled to financial support through Carer's Allowance (known as the Carer's Support Payment in Scotland) and the carer element in Universal Credit. These payments have eligibility criteria relating to the amount of care someone needs to provide, how much they can earn, whether they work, and how many hours they participate in education. These criteria have the effect of restricting financial support to part-time, low-paid workers which can either limit how much people work or leave people trying to combine longer working hours with caring.

Policy options

Carers face barriers to work participation, and although additional support and protections exist, these are not always sufficient to support carers to enter or remain in work. Developed with the input of carers, set out below are a series of potential approaches for tackling the different barriers carers face. These options were identified by carers and expert stakeholders, but are not recommendations. Further consideration and full economic costing is needed to prioritise which of these options should be taken forward as recommendations or indeed if other options should instead be pursued.

- **Develop a National Carers Strategy:** Some carers struggle to access the support they need to balance work and care. This is, in part, due to a lack of joined up



working between local services that provide support. An approach to addressing this could be the development and implementation of a National Carers Strategy, either for the UK as a whole, or new strategies for England and Northern Ireland.

- **Raise awareness of existing entitlements:** Identifying as a carer is often the first step for carers to access support, yet many take years to acknowledge their caring role and tell others about it. To support carers to identify their caring role and access the support they need, the Government could introduce interrelated awareness raising campaigns - one at the national level and another targeted at employers to help them proactively identify and support unpaid carers in their workforce.
- **Research and guidance around workplace flexibilities:** Carers often need flexibilities in their jobs to be able to provide good care while working. However, not all employers offer flexible working, and some are unaware of what flexible working arrangements could look like for their staff. The Employment Rights Bill proposes to strengthen the right to flexible working for all workers, which should benefit carers. However, introducing flexibilities can result in upfront costs for employers and they should be supported to understand the cost and feasibility of flexibilities for their staff. This could be achieved through additional research and guidance around implementing effective flexible working arrangements in different industries, occupations, and business sizes and the benefits offering flexible working can have for employers. This should include consideration of how this guidance can be effectively communicated to employers so they can better support the carers in their workforce and what the business case for doing so is.
- **Introducing paid carer's leave:** Carers are very likely to need time off work sometimes to look after the person they care for. The current system means that, when carers take that time off, they lose their income. In addition, the five days of leave available for carers is not enough for many people who are balancing work and care. One solution could be to introduce five days of paid carer's leave per year with a view to evaluating and amending entitlements in the future or supplementing it with an unpaid component for those who need extended time off work. This could be funded by taxpayers, employers, or a combination. This would have an up-front cost and so should be considered in light of the UK's fiscal and economic position. The potential impacts of additional costs on employment would also need to be considered, although evidence suggests additional leave entitlements may also lead to long-term benefits due to better worker retention and fewer unplanned absences.⁴
- **Strengthening enforcement:** Employment law can only protect workers' rights and ensure good working practices for all employees if policies are fairly and fully implemented by employers. The introduction of the Fair Work Agency (FWA) should contribute to ensuring existing labour market legislation is fairly and fully enforced. The Government should consider ways to ensure that the FWA has the power to protect carers from unjust working practices and appoint at least one caring-expert on its advisory board.
- **Tailoring employment support:** Employment support services provide support for those looking for work across the UK, but do not currently tailor their service to the

⁴ Carer's UK set out the potential costs and benefits of paid carer's leave in their report. <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>



needs of carers. Carers could be better supported by employment support services employing or training a carer specialist and offering employment support flexibly to allow carers to access it around caring. This could extend to supporting local employers around inclusive recruitment and workplace practices.

- **Reforming Carer's Allowance:** Carer's Allowance is designed to provide a safety net for those carers who are unable to work at all or for only a short number of hours. This means that it has a low earnings threshold and a cliff edge rather than taper effect. However, its design can have an unintended impact on carers' labour market options and their financial well-being. Reforms such as increasing the earnings threshold or introducing an earnings taper rate may enable carers to earn higher incomes and reduce some work disincentives, though this would also mean carers gain less from every pound earned. Given that there are carers in financial difficulty that fall below the required hour-per-week caring threshold, there may also be a case for considering extending eligibility by reducing the amount of care someone needs to provide and allowing some people in full-time education to claim. These changes would increase the number of people eligible for Carer's Allowance and therefore overall costs and could lead to some carers reducing the number of hours they work. The benefits of potentially improved financial security for some carers would also need to be weighed against the impact of the increased complexity, higher costs to taxpayers, the impact on other benefits such as Universal Credit, and consideration of whether other support (such as through the education system) would be better.



1. Painting a picture of care and paid work in the UK

More people in the UK are now living with long-term health conditions due to factors including an ageing population and sharp increases in reported mental ill-health. Rising ill-health, particularly among working-age people, is having a direct impact on the labour market, with record numbers of people now reporting work-limiting health conditions, both in and out of work.⁵ These trends are set to continue, with projections that an additional 2.6 million people in England alone will be living with major illness by 2040.⁶

In support of the Commission for Healthier Working Lives, this paper examines the challenges faced by carers, who play a vital role in supporting individuals with health conditions. In addition to the direct impact on work participation, population ageing and rising health issues are likely to increase the demand for caregiving, creating additional long-term pressures on the labour market. Addressing these issues is essential for carers and those they support, as well as the broader economy. For some people, being unable to work due to caregiving responsibilities may directly harm their own health and well-being. For the economy, the Government's target of an 80% employment rate will remain out of reach unless economically inactive individuals, including carers, are supported in finding and sustaining suitable employment when it is the right choice for them.⁷

Note on terminology

Throughout this paper we use the term **carer** to refer to people providing care, support or regular service to a family member, friend, or member of the community. This does not include childcare.

This work is typically unpaid. While the term "unpaid carers" is commonly used in the literature to distinguish this group from paid care workers, we avoid it here, as this paper does not focus on employment in the care sector, and our main data sources do not directly ask individuals if they consider themselves "unpaid".

Because of the focus on employment, the analysis focuses on working-age people, defined as 16-64 years old.

In this research, we explore three connected questions:

1. How does providing care to someone with a long-term illness or disability influence labour market participation?
2. What support is provided by governments or employers for carers, and how

⁵ Atwell S, Vriend M, Rocks C, Finch D, Farrington-Douglas J. *What we know about the UK's working-age health challenge*. The Health Foundation; 2023 (<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/what-we-know-about-the-uk-s-working-age-health-challenge>)

⁶ Raymond A, Watt T, Douglas HR, Head A, Kyridemos C, Rachet-Jacquet L. *Health inequalities in 2040: Current and projected patterns of illness by deprivation in England*. The Health Foundation; 2024 (<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/health-inequalities-in-2040>)

⁷ Department for Work and Pensions. *Government action to tackle the 'greatest employment challenge for a generation'*. Department for Work and Pensions; 2024 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-action-to-tackle-the-greatest-employment-challenge-for-a-generation>)



does this influence their labour market participation?

3. What solutions can be recommended to allow individuals to balance formal work and caring responsibilities without facing wage or other employment penalties?

This research uses a combination of data analysis, desk-based research, a roundtable with expert stakeholders, and a focus group with carers to explore these questions (for full research questions and methodology see Annex 1: Methods).

Nearly 6 million working-age people in the UK are carers

In the UK, 14% of all working-age people provide care to someone who is sick, disabled, or elderly. This equates to nearly 6 million working-age people who therefore face the potential challenge of balancing care responsibilities with paid work.⁸ This is not a new problem; the proportion of working-age people providing care has consistently sat between 14 and 16% since 2010 and does not seem to have increased in recent years.⁹ However, with predicted rises in people living with major illnesses driven by an ageing population and rises in mental health conditions, there are concerns that the number of people providing care to those in poor health, and the intensity of care required to support those in poor health, will increase in the coming years.

Carers UK estimate that it takes two years, on average, for someone to identify themselves as a carer, with people in the early stages of caring often seeing caring as part of everyday life. Identification rates can be lower among some ethnic minority groups when compared to white carers.¹⁰

It matters that people don't see themselves as carers. It makes it harder for them to access support that can help them manage challenges that might arise as a result of looking after a friend or family member. This support can then minimise the impact that providing care has on a carer's own health and their ability to work alongside caring, benefitting the health and social care system, employers, and broader society.¹¹

The amount of care people provide is increasing

The intensity of caring roles is significant. Most research on care in the UK defines "substantial care" as 20 hours or more of care per week, partially because carers face greater barriers to labour market participation when they provide this level of care.¹²

⁸ Estimates of the number of carers in the UK vary. A survey by Carers UK estimated that there might be as many as 10.6 million carers in the UK. Most other estimates are more conservative. For example, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) estimated that there are 4.4 million carers, while the 2021 Census estimated there are 5.8 million carers. However, it is likely that these are underestimates of the true number of people providing care, as many people who provide care do not recognise themselves as a carer.

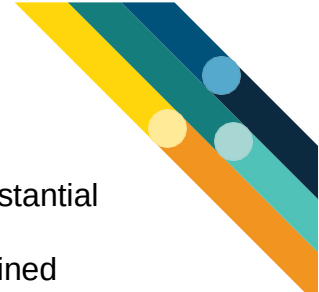
⁹ We see the same trend when we look at the proportion of people of all ages, rather than just those who are working age, who provide care.

¹⁰ Carers UK. *Identification*. Carers UK; no date (<https://www.carersuk.org/policy-and-research/our-areas-of-policy-work/identification/>)

Carers UK. *Supporting Black, Asian and minority ethnic carers: A good practice briefing*. Carers UK; 2023 (<https://www.carersuk.org/briefings/supporting-black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-carers-a-good-practice-briefing/>)

¹¹ Carers UK. *Identification*. Carers UK; no date (<https://www.carersuk.org/policy-and-research/our-areas-of-policy-work/identification/>)

¹² Some evidence suggests as little as ten hours of caring a week creates barriers to labour market participation. See Pickard L, King D, Brimblecombe N, Knapp M. *The Effectiveness of Paid Services in Supporting Unpaid Carers' Employment in England*. Journal of Social Policy; 2015 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000069>)



Twenty-nine per cent (or 1.7 million working-age carers) are classified as substantial carers under this definition, suggesting they face more significant barriers to employment. While the share of working-age people providing care has remained stable in recent years, Health Foundation analysis of Census data reveals that, among all adults, a slightly higher proportion (5%) were providing more than 20 hours of care per week in 2021 compared to 2011 (4%).¹³

Who is providing care?

Carers come from all kinds of different backgrounds. However, some types of people are providing more care than others and therefore face additional barriers to work.

Women are more likely to be carers than men

More women than men report providing care. In 2021-2023, 61% of working-age carers were women. Women also provide more hours of care per week than men; 32% of female working-age carers provide 20 hours or more of care each week compared to 24% of male working-age carers. Higher rates of caring among women compound unequal participation in household responsibilities, such as housework and childcare, exacerbating barriers to work and contributing to the gender pay gap.^{14,15}

Figure 1 shows the percentage of people from each age group who provide care and how many hours per week they are spending caring. Older people in the UK are providing more care than young people; 20% of 60–64-year-olds report that they are carers compared to 7% of 16–29-year-olds.

Carers aged 30-49 are more likely to be providing more than 20 hours of care per week. They are also most likely to be ‘sandwich carers’, simultaneously caring for both an adult, such as a parent or grandparent, and a child.¹⁶ Sandwich caregiving is a particularly intense form of caring and has been connected to worse employment and health outcomes.

Research by Centre for Policy on Ageing found that sandwich carers are less likely to be working full time (26%) than non-sandwich carers (34%).¹⁷ Office for National Statistics (ONS) analysis found that more than 27% sandwich carers in the UK experience poor mental health, compared to 22% of the general population.¹⁸

¹³ Peytrignet S, Frimm F, Tallack C. Understanding unpaid carers and their access to support. The Health Foundation; 2024 (<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/understanding-unpaid-carers-and-their-access-to-support>)

¹⁴ Nolsoe E. *Women are still much more likely to have to do most of a couple's housework and childcare*. YouGov; 2021 (<https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/34980-women-are-still-much-more-likely-have-do-most-coup>)

¹⁵ Office for National Statistics. *Gender pay gap in the UK: 2023*. Office for National Statistics; 2023 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2023>)

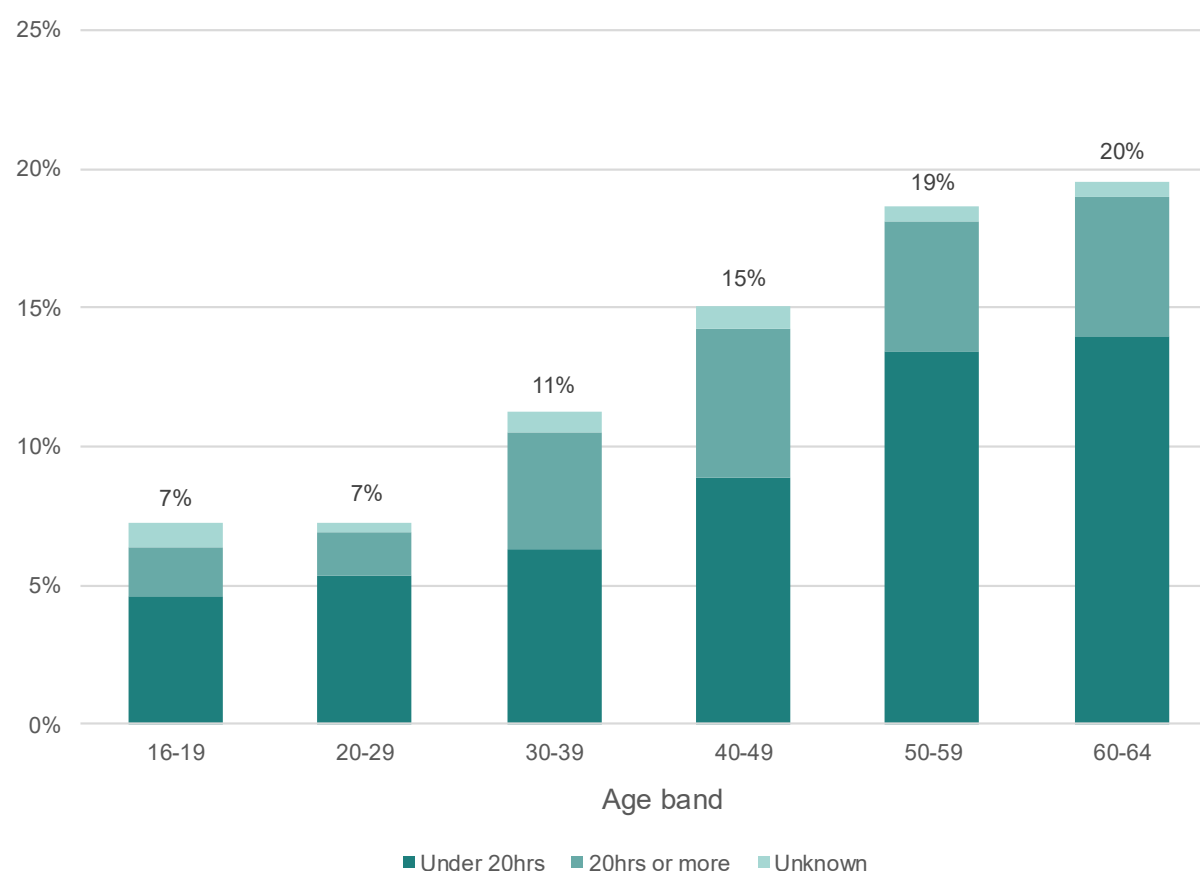
¹⁶ McMunn A, Xue B, Di Gessa G, Lacey R. *Sandwich care in the UK: How common is it and who is doing it?* SocArXiv (Preprint); 2024 (<https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/pyfxg>)

¹⁷ Centre for Policy on Ageing. *Older and sandwich generation carers and the impact of caring*. Centre for Policy on Ageing; 2015 (<http://www.cpa.org.uk/information/reviews/CPA-Rapid-Review-Older-and-sandwich-generation-carers-and-the-impact-of-caring-review-and-references.pdf>)

¹⁸ Office for National Statistics. *More than one in four sandwich carers report symptoms of mental ill-health*. Office for National Statistics; 2019 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/articles/morethanoneinfoursandwichcarersreportsymptomsmentalillhealth/2019-01-14>)

Figure 1. Older working-age people provide more care than younger people

Proportion of the UK working-age population who provide care by age and time per week spent caring



Source: Understanding Society Wave 13 (January 2021-May 2023)

Care roles extend beyond an individual's working life; 25% of all carers are aged 65 or older. As the population has aged over the past decade, there has been a shift in the age profile of those providing care across the population as a whole. Since 2013-2015, the proportion of carers who are over the age of 60 has increased from 34 to 39%, while the proportion of those under the age of 50 has decreased from 67 to 61%.¹⁹

More white people report being carers than people from other ethnic backgrounds

The proportion of working-age people providing care varies by ethnicity.²⁰ More white people report being carers than people from other ethnic backgrounds; 15% of working-age people who are white provide care compared to 12% of working-age people from black, Asian, mixed, or other ethnic backgrounds. White carers are older than carers from black, Asian, mixed, or other ethnic backgrounds. For example, 55% of white carers are aged 50-64 compared to 33% of carers from black, Asian, mixed, or other ethnic backgrounds.

¹⁹ Figures relate to carers aged 16 years or older. Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding.

²⁰ Given a small sample size of only 345 carers from black, Asian, mixed, or other ethnic backgrounds, analysis of individual ethnic minority groups was not conducted.



Under-reporting of caring responsibilities occurs across all demographic groups. However, some ethnic minority groups have been found to have particularly low self-identification rates which could be impacting the data.²¹ This is partially because of different cultural expectations of caring for family members and therefore differing views on what constitutes care.²² As self-identifying as a carer is necessary to access financial and employment support, varying rates of self-identification may result in carers of different ethnicities accessing support unequally.

Who is being cared for?

Carers look after a wide variety of people, including neighbours, friends, and family members. A recent report by the King's Fund found that parents are the main recipients of care, followed by spouses, civil partners, and other cohabitants, and then children. However, they found that carers are much less likely to live with parents they care for compared to other recipients of care.²³ Previous research has shown that caregiving where the carer and cared-for person live together is more likely to exceed 20 hours per week.²⁴

Our analysis found that a higher percentage of working-age carers look after someone they don't live with (49%), than someone within their household (39%), while 12% provide care to both someone they live with and someone outside their household. Women more commonly care for someone they don't live with (53%) than men (44%).

Younger people provide more care to people they live with than older people. For example, 54% of carers aged 20–29 provide care to someone they live with compared to 29% of carers aged 50–59. Younger people are also more commonly caring for both someone in their household and someone outside the household than older people. White people provide more care to people outside their household (52%) than people from black, Asian, mixed, or other ethnic backgrounds (32%).

The working lives of carers

Carers are a crucial part of the UK's workforce, representing 13% of all employed working-age people. However, a lower share of carers are in employment, and those that do have a job on average work fewer hours, are in lower paid jobs, and are less likely to occupy managerial or senior positions.

A smaller proportion of carers are in employment (64%) than non-carers (72%). Generally, the more time each week someone spends caring, the greater the impact on their working life.

Figure 2 shows the employment rate of carers by the number of hours they spend caring. Around seven in ten carers who spend fewer than 20 hours caring per week have a job, compared to fewer than half of carers who spend 20 hours or more caring

²¹ Carers UK. *Supporting Black, Asian and minority ethnic carers: A good practice briefing*. Carers UK; 2023 (<https://www.carersuk.org/briefings/supporting-black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-carers-a-good-practice-briefing/>)

²² Carers Trust Wales. *Experiences of unpaid carers from black and minority ethnic communities report*. Carers Trust Wales; 2022 (<https://carers.org/downloads/carers-trust-report-final.pdf>)

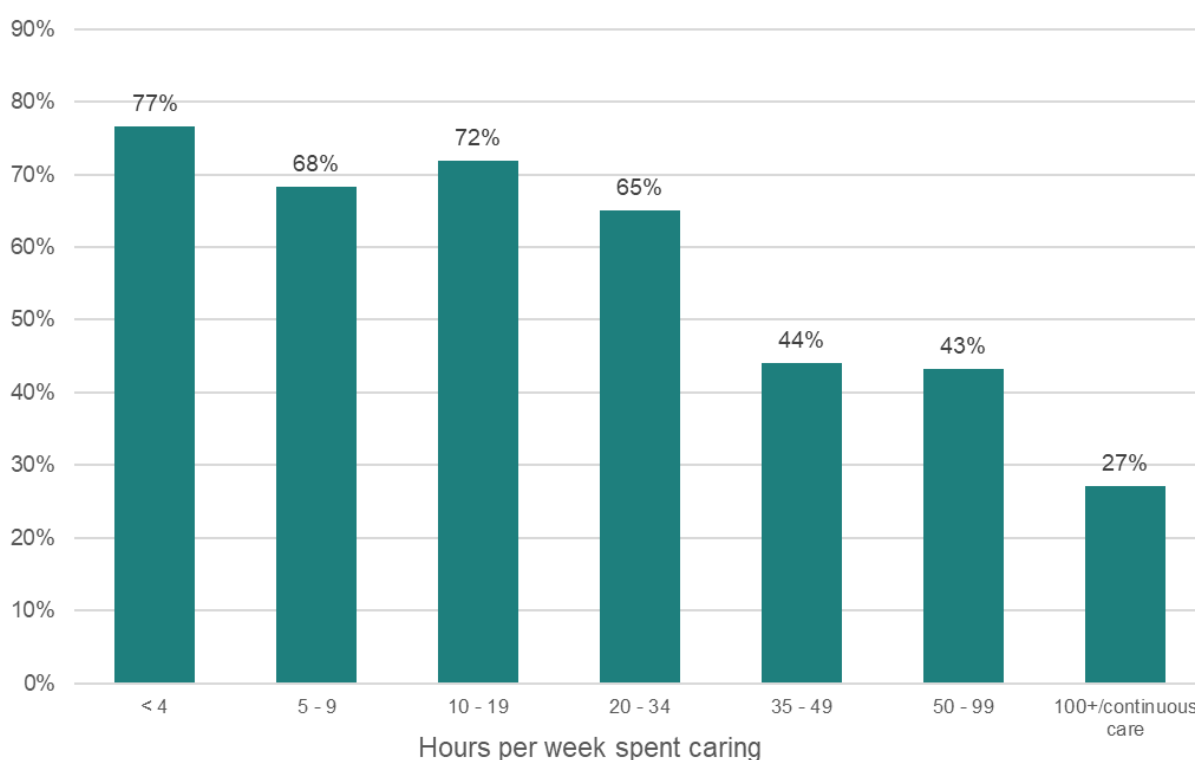
²³ Akarakiri F. *What are unpaid carers, who are they and how often do they provide care?*. The King's Fund; 2024 (<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/data-and-charts/unpaid-carers-nutshell>)

²⁴ Peytrignet S, Frimm F, Tallack C. *Understanding unpaid carers and their access to support*. The Health Foundation; 2024 (<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/understanding-unpaid-carers-and-their-access-to-support>)

per week. Employment rates tend to reduce gradually as time spent caring increases, with a sharp decrease in the proportion of carers in employment when exceeding 35 hours a week of care. Carer related benefits are only available to carers who care for at least 35 hours a week, so it may be that the decrease in the employment rate is being influenced by the availability of social security as well as the intensity of the caring role. Carers with an inconsistent care role that requires different hours of care on different weeks have lower employment rates than those who spend the same amount of time each week caring.²⁵

Figure 2. As the time spent caring per week increases, the proportion of carers who are in paid employment decreases

Proportion of UK working-age carers who are in paid employment by time per week spent caring



Source: Understanding Society Wave 13 (January 2021-May 2023)

Caring for more hours per week leads to carers feeling less able to work

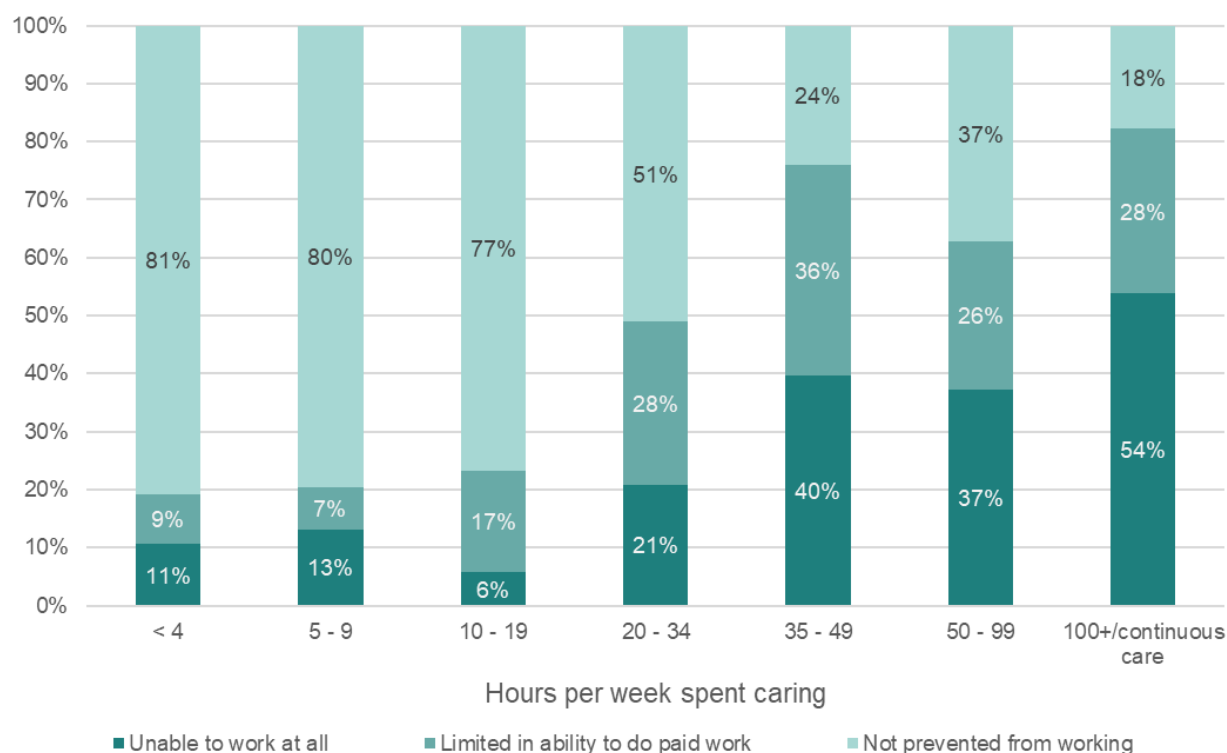
The majority of carers (56%) say that their caring responsibilities don't prevent them from being able to work. However, a significant group do identify their caring role as a labour market barrier; 20% of carers say that caring prevents them from working as much as they would like, and 24% say it prevents them from working at all. As the hours of care provided increase, the proportion of people who report that caring means they are unable to work at all also increases (see Figure 3). For example, 21% of carers who spend 20-34 hours a week caring report being unable to work at all, while

²⁵ Given the descriptive nature of our analysis we cannot draw conclusions as to if caring causes people to work less or if people who work less are more likely to become carers.

this almost doubles to 40% for carers who spend 35-49 hours a week caring.

Figure 3. Higher percentages of carers who provide more than 20 hours of care a week report that they are unable to work because of caring

Proportion of UK working-age carers who feel unable to work, to do as much paid work as they might if they weren't caring, or that caring doesn't prevent them from working, by time per week spent caring



Source: Understanding Society Wave 13 (January 2021-May 2023). Those who reported variable hours of care each week or 'other' have been excluded from the graph.

People who are in work with a lasting caring responsibility often change their working patterns. A recent report from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) found that people who had been a carer at least a year who changed their pattern mostly moved to more flexible arrangements, whether that was within their current job or with a new employer, but some stopped working altogether. Carers continuing in the same job, working the same hours usually did so either with the support from other family members sharing the caring role, or because they could not afford to work fewer hours. Carers reported increases to the level of care they need to provide and not having an understanding employer as the key reasons that they gave up work.²⁶

Employed carers work fewer hours than non-carers, but have the same job satisfaction

Caring does not just impact overall employment rates. On average, employed carers work slightly fewer hours per week (31 hours) than the overall working-age population

²⁶ Crossfield J, White Y, McHenry D. *Qualitative research with working people exploring decisions about work and care*. IPSOS Mori for DWP; 2024 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/qualitative-research-with-working-people-exploring-decisions-about-work-and-care>)



(33 hours). Previous research has found that carers who have been caring for someone for five years are more likely to work part time than those that have been caring over a shorter period.²⁷ As with employment rates and pay, those who are caring 20 hours or more per week are working fewer hours per week (29 hours on average) than those who care for fewer than 20 hours (32 hours). However, there do not appear to be notable differences in job satisfaction between carers who care for more or less than 20 hours, suggesting that greater caring responsibilities do not constrain an individual's job choices or opportunities in a way that reduces their overall satisfaction with work.

Carers are more likely than non-carers to work in some roles and industries

Carers are less likely to work in the construction, information and communication, and accommodation and food service industries than non-carers. Conversely, carers are more likely than non-carers to work in the public administration, education, and health and social work industries. Industries where carers are overrepresented are dominated by public sector employers, which typically offer better job security and other terms and conditions of employment, such as carer's leave, than private sector employers. Job security and favourable terms of employment may help retain carers in the workforce for longer and attract carers from other industries looking for more secure employment.

More carers work in health and social care roles than any other industry; 22% of carers who are in work have a job in this industry, compared to 18% of non-carers. Previous Learning and Work Institute (L&W) research found that young adult carers aspire to work in the health and social care sector because of their experience of providing care in an informal or unpaid setting.²⁸ These aspirations then translate into a large number of unpaid carers working in paid caring roles. A survey of NHS staff found that one third of respondents identify as unpaid carers.²⁹

A smaller proportion of carers (5%) work in managerial or senior roles compared to non-carers (7%). Conversely, a higher proportion of carers work in admin, caring and other service industry roles, and elementary occupations (e.g. cleaning, food preparation, and manual labour; 13%) than non-carers (11%). Higher levels of flexibility in more elementary roles may have an influence on the distribution of carers across occupation; the Carers Trust found flexibility to be important to 85% of carers when considering if they would take a job.³⁰ The roles carers take up are also influenced by their qualifications. Those who provide care during adolescence have been found to be less likely to obtain a university degree, which in turn limits their career prospects.³¹

More time spent caring is associated with lower financial well-being

Carers who spend more time caring each week are more likely to experience financial difficulties. 21% of carers who provide 20 hours or more of care per week report that their financial situation is quite or very difficult, compared to 9% of carers who care for

²⁷ Carers UK. State of Caring 2024: The impact of caring on employment. Carers UK; 2024 (<https://www.employersforcarers.org/media/3xqn5r2z/state-of-caring-employment-web-2024.pdf>)

²⁸ Aylward N, Klenk H, Robey C, Wolkind R. *Barriers to employment for young adult carers*. Learning and Work Institute; 2018 (<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/2805/>)

²⁹ Carers UK. *Unpaid carers in employment - occupation and industry*. Carers UK; 2024 (<https://www.carersuk.org/reports/unpaid-carers-in-employment-occupation-and-industry/>)

³⁰ Clark A, Postel-Vinay F. *Job security and job protection*. Oxford Economic Papers; 2009 (<https://academic.oup.com/oep/article-abstract/61/2/207/2362001>)

³¹ Xue B, Lacey R, Di Gessa G, McMunn, A. *Does providing informal care in young adulthood impact educational attainment and employment in the UK?* Advances in Life Course Research; 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2023.100549>)



fewer than 20 hours each week. A report from JRF found that within five years of starting caring, 31% of carers in the UK are no longer in work. Some of this is due to retirement, but over half of those who retire do so before reaching State Pension age. The report also showed that five years after starting, carers who provide at least 20 hours of care per week earn £804 less per month on average than they did before providing care. This equates to a 34% reduction in pay and is driven by carers leaving work or reducing their working hours.³²

Our own analysis suggests more time spent caring each week is associated with lower hourly pay; working carers who provide 20 hours or more of care per week earn 5% less per hour than those who care for less than 20 hours per week, although this does not account for wider demographic factors that may explain this gap. Although many carers will supplement earned income through benefits such as Universal Credit and Carer's Allowance, JRF analysis suggests that 22% of carers providing 20 hours or more of care per week live in poverty, compared to 18% of the general population.³³

Carers face their own health challenges

Many carers face their own health challenges; our analysis found that 39% of carers, or 2.3 million people, report a long-term health condition compared to 28% of the wider working-age population. Previous research has shown that becoming a carer can negatively impact an individual's health. This is particularly the case for mental health, with those providing more hours of care each week experiencing a greater effect. Older individuals who become carers tend to experience a sharper decline in physical health compared to their peers who do not provide care, although this trend was not observed in younger carers.³⁴ Figure 4 shows that as the time someone spends caring each week increases, the proportion of carers reporting a long-term health condition also increases. Around a third of carers who care for 35 hours a week or less report a long-term health condition compared to around half of carers who care for more than 35 hours a week.

Long-term health conditions can also make it harder for carers to work alongside caring. A much larger percentage of carers who do not have long-term health conditions (73%) report being in paid employment than those with long-term health conditions (51%).

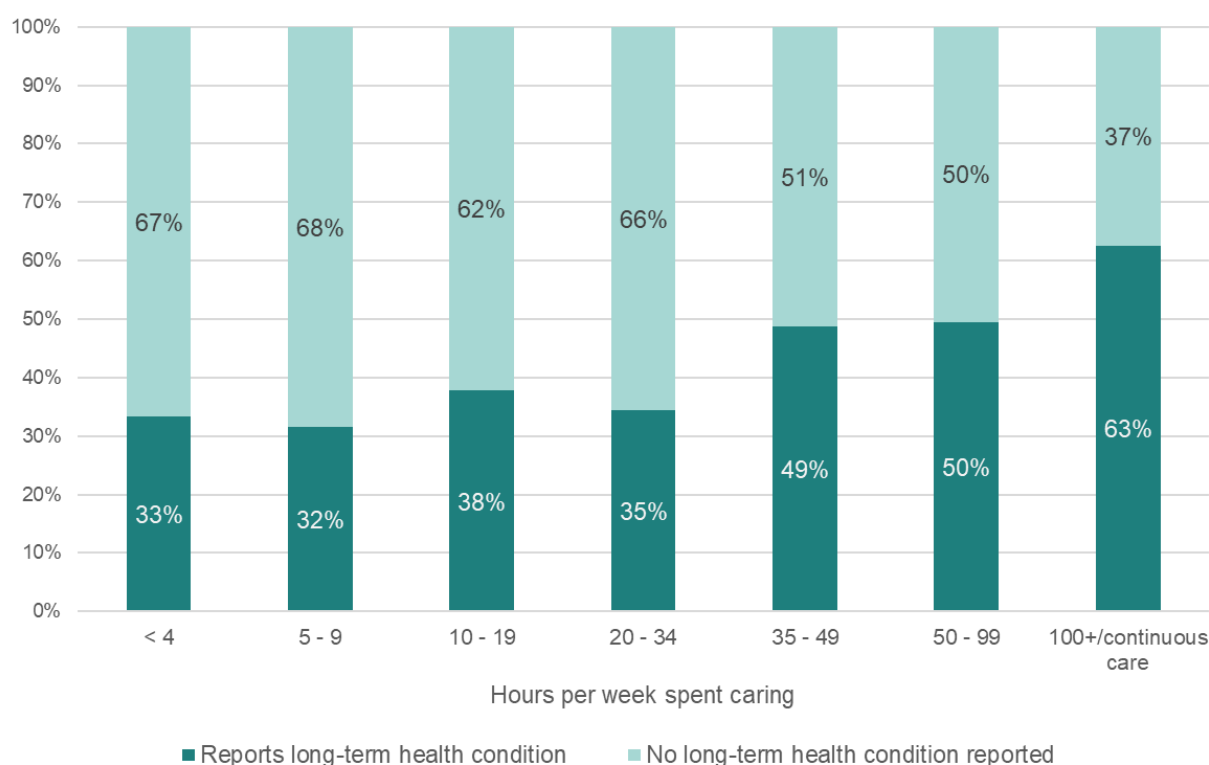
³² Jitendra A, Woodruff L, Thompson S. *The caring penalty*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation; 2023 (<https://www.jrf.org.uk/care/the-caring-penalty>)

³³ Jitendra A, Woodruff L, Thompson S. *The caring penalty*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation; 2023 (<https://www.jrf.org.uk/care/the-caring-penalty>)

³⁴ Lacey R, Xue B, Di Gessa G, Lu W, McMunn A. *Mental and physical health changes around transitions into unpaid caregiving in the UK: a longitudinal, propensity score analysis*. The Lancet Public Health; 2024 ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(23\)00206-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(23)00206-2/fulltext))

Figure 4. A larger proportion of carers with higher intensity caring roles report having a long-term health condition

Proportion of UK working-age carers who report a health condition by the time per week spent caring



Source: Understanding Society Wave 13 (January 2021-May 2023). Values may not total 100% due to rounding.

How do carers describe the barriers they face in accessing work?

To understand more about the motivations of carers, and the barriers they face in accessing work, we held a focus group with seven carers.³⁵ Although this group is not fully representative of all carers, it provides insights into some of the challenges faced by carers.

Some carers don't feel able to work

Some carers who don't have a job said they see this as their only choice because they do not feel able to work while still providing care. Some carers we spoke to explained how they need to be on call 24/7 for the person they care for and do not feel that employers would be supportive of the level of complete flexibility they would need.

"I haven't tried to look for work because I don't imagine any employer that's going to be OK with me just up and leaving work [because of my caring role]." – Carer, not working

Some carers we spoke to who are not currently working are interested in looking for a

³⁵ Full details of the carers we spoke to and how they were recruited can be found in Annex 1.



job, but do not think the previous industry or role they worked in would fit with their caring role. Experts we spoke to as part of a roundtable highlighted that recognising transferable skills can be a struggle for some carers when thinking about taking on paid work, a sentiment which one carer echoed.

“To be honest with you, I don’t know what I can do because obviously my skill set would revolve very much around [my previous] role or something similar to that.” – Carer, not working

Telling employers about a caring role is not always easy

To access entitlements such as carer’s leave (detailed more in Section 2), carers who have a job need to tell their employer about their caring role, but this in itself can be a challenge. Research by Carers UK found that 50% of carers don’t feel confident talking about any challenges or support they need to help balance their caring role, their health and their work.³⁶ One carer we spoke to shared how they had felt nervous and emotional about disclosing their caring role to their employer.

“When it came to telling my employer, I wanted to be as open and as frank as possible but I didn’t know how to structure that conversation. I think I was quite fearful as well that I would break down and just start crying in this meeting” – Carer, works full time

Another carer shared that they felt anxious about telling their employer that they are a carer for fear that their hours would be cut against their wishes. They worried that their employer would try to help them by reducing their workload, and they could not afford to work any fewer hours than they already do.

However, most carers who had told their employer about their caring role felt like the support they had been offered met their needs.

“[My employer] has been excellent. I can’t fault them at all.” – Carer, works part time

Carers with supportive employers still face challenges

Even with a supportive workplace, carers told us they find it hard to work alongside caring. Some challenges are practical; attending in person meetings or office days for those who work remotely or with a hybrid model can be challenging without significant planning time to organise replacement care. Carers can find it harder to focus at work due to their working day being interrupted by their caring role, either physically or emotionally. One carer explained how they were regularly disrupted while working from home because the person they care for needs support on demand. Another carer explained how they struggle to be fully ‘present’ at work because they worry about the well-being of the person they care for while they are out at work. This suggests the additional emotional requirements placed on carers could impact their productivity, and over the longer term, their career prospects.

Care responsibilities can hold people back from achieving their career goals

Being a carer also impacts on how able carers feel to pursue a career they are

³⁶ Wood K, Dempsey L, Neale B. *Unpaid carers with Health Needs in the Workplace*. Carers Trust and Kate Wood Research; 2024 (<https://carers.org/campaigning-for-change/unpaid-carers-with-health-conditions-consider-leaving-jobs-due-to-lack-of-support>)



interested in or a promotion at work. Some carers shared that they do not feel confident that the flexibility that their current role offers would be continued if they took on a different role.

“Thinking about promotion, I worry about whether or not I will be afforded the same level of flexibility that I enjoy now” – Carer, works full time

For some, the solution to balancing work and care is to work in an industry that offers them working patterns that suit their caring role, even if they do not find the job fulfilling. One carer we spoke to works night shifts in a retail job despite not enjoying it because they cannot afford not to work and the job offers them a shift pattern that allows them to care while they work.

“Retail’s not something I ever wanted to be doing but because of caring for [my grandparent], I’ve got no choice. ... But it’s a job that allows me to coast and not think too hard about what I’m doing when I’m there. It gives me enough money. And then I can go and do the responsible thing [caring].” – Carer, works full time but only night shifts

Employment gives carers a sense of self

While not all carers will want to or be able to work alongside caring for a wide range of reasons, work can be important to an individual’s sense of identity, self-worth, and social life. Some of the carers we spoke to who are not currently working said that not working means they feel defined by their caring role, rather than having a strong sense of individual identity. Some feel isolated and struggled to make friends and find opportunities to socialise because they do not go out to work. To one carer, work is about more than just the financial benefit that comes from having a job.

“I think you lose a sense of self [when you’re not in work]. It’s not just necessarily about the money, it’s about your own personal identity and who you are.” – Carer, not working

2. Reflections on existing support for carers

Carers in the UK have access to a range of support designed to assist them in balancing caregiving responsibilities with other aspects of life, including employment. This support includes both general assistance available to all individuals and specific resources tailored for carers. An overview of the policy landscape, detailing how these policies vary across the four nations of the UK, is provided in Annex 2. The following section outlines the key support and entitlements available to carers, incorporating insights from expert stakeholders and carers themselves.

This section focuses on employment and social security rather than the social care system. However, care provided by paid social care workers, also known as replacement care, is an important way carers can be supported to work alongside caring. Previous research has shown that unpaid carers are more likely to be in employment if the person they care for also receives paid services.³⁷ Additionally, when replacement care is not provided, carers are more likely to stop working because of their caring role.³⁸

However, increasing replacement care is challenging. At present, support can be hard to access; previous research showed that in 2021 only a quarter of carers who approached their local authority ended up receiving direct support.³⁹ Social care provision is already underfunded and that is without considering an increased demand if more carers either increased their working hours or returned to work. Even if funding levels were increased the adult social care sector faces longer term challenges related to recruitment and retention of care workers, meaning there are currently not enough paid social care workers to meet the care needs of those with long-term health conditions in the UK.⁴⁰

Rights and Legal Protections

There are several employment and legal protections to support the participation of carers in the workplace.

The **Equality Act 2010** protects individuals from discrimination in employment based on a number of protected characteristics, including disability. This Act also protects carers from discrimination on the basis of their association with a disabled person. For example, in the case of *Follows v Nationwide Building Society*, an employment tribunal allowed a claim where a carer was made redundant because they could not work in the

³⁷ Pickard L, King D, Brimblecombe N, Knapp M. *The effectiveness of paid services in supporting unpaid carers' employment in England*. Journal of Social Policy; 2015 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000069>)

³⁸ Pickard L, Brimblecombe N, King D, Knapp M. *'Replacement Care' for Working Carers? A Longitudinal Study in England, 2013–15*. Social Policy and Administration; 2018 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12345>)

³⁹ Peytrignet S, Frimm F, Tallack C. *Understanding unpaid carers and their access to support*. The Health Foundation; 2024 (<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/understanding-unpaid-carers-and-their-access-to-support>)

⁴⁰ Foster D. *Adult social care workforce in England*. House of Commons Library; 2024 (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9615/>)



office full time due to their caring role.⁴¹ However, stakeholders felt that a lack of awareness of this protection, both among employers and carers themselves, means this Act does not provide carers with enough protection from discrimination.

The **Carer's Leave Act 2023** is a recent piece of legislation that gives all employees the right to five days of carer's leave each year. With 91% of carers reporting that paid carer's leave is important to help them balance caring and work, this is a positive change.⁴² However, the expert stakeholders we spoke to raised concerns around carer's leave being unpaid. One person commented that offering only unpaid time off could lead to carers being forced to choose between time spent caring and income loss, exacerbating existing social and financial inequalities.

"When you have a leave entitlement that isn't paid, you risk increasing inequality" – Expert stakeholder

In the focus group, carers had mixed awareness of their entitlement to carer's leave. Those that did know about it had mostly been told by their employer when they had asked about having time off. However, there was agreement among all the carers we spoke to that five days a year was not enough to support them to care alongside working. One carer said that *"it wouldn't be enough if it was five days a month"*. They reflected that the five days might be for emergency situations rather than to support caring alongside work in the longer term, but even so felt that the entitlement was insufficient. Carers in our research identified a significant need for more substantial time off. For example, one carer suggested that a carer's leave with similar conditions to maternity leave would be a better way of supporting carers.⁴³

"It's almost like you need something like a maternity allowance. ... If you can get [paid time off and job security] for bringing a life into the world, surely you can get that for caring for a life in the world as well." – Carer, not working

Another recent legislative change came in the **Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023**. While this Act applies to all employees, not just carers, the right to request flexible working arrangements from day one of being in a job supports carers to balance work and care. These rights will be further strengthened by the Employment Rights Bill which will place stricter obligations on employers to accept requests made by staff and to explain the grounds on which they've denied a request.⁴⁴

Carers repeatedly highlighted how important flexibility from their employer was to allow them to work alongside caring. Those out of work said the main thing they needed to go back to work was a flexible and understanding employer. However, carers had some concerns about how far the Employment Relations Act could help them to work alongside caring. Carers were concerned that employers can deny someone flexible working arrangements. One carer questioned what would happen if they were given flexible working but then the nature of their caring role changed, and they needed increased flexibilities that the employer did not deem to be feasible. Some carers were

⁴¹ Rollin F. A carer had the right to bring indirect discrimination claims based on her association with a disabled person. Stevens & Bolton; 2021 (<https://www.stevens-bolton.com/site/insights/articles/indirect-associative-discrimination-claimaints-association>)

⁴² Wood K, Dempsey L, Neale B. Unpaid carers with Health Needs in the Workplace. Carers Trust and Kate Wood Research; 2024 (<https://carers.org/campaigning-for-change/unpaid-carers-with-health-conditions-consider-leaving-jobs-due-to-lack-of-support>)

⁴³ Options for expanding carer's leave are discussed in chapter 3

⁴⁴ Employment Rights Bill; 2024 (<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3737>)

also concerned that someone applying for a job would be discriminated against for requesting flexible working.

"I'm wondering how [the right to flexible working] would work if you're coming in as a newbie. So say I apply for a job and say, well actually, I need to work from home and I need to be able to work between these times. ... I'm wondering how much you would stand a chance of being successful in that job interview." – Carer, not working

These concerns are not unfounded. A survey by Disability Law Service found that 52% of carers who applied for flexible working arrangements had their application denied (although this was before the changes to rights around flexible working were introduced in 2023).⁴⁵ Our analysis highlighted that as the intensity of a caring role increases, the percentage of carers in employment decreases (Figure 2) – it is therefore important that carers are given the flexibilities they need to stay in work, especially for those who caring for 20 hours or more per week.

Stakeholders also raised that flexible working arrangements are easier to put in place in some professions than others. Our analysis found that carers are overrepresented in some roles including elementary occupations (e.g., cleaning, food preparation, and manual labour). This may be explained by the prevalence of more flexible contracts in these occupations, even if this comes with the downside of less stable employment and greater onsite attendance.⁴⁶ It remains to be seen whether the Employment Relations Act and Employment Rights Bill will enable an expansion of flexible working arrangements across a wider range of occupations.

Enforcement of workers' rights

Existing employment laws are not always complied with or fairly enforced. Some rights are enforced directly by the government on behalf of employees. For example, HMRC enforces the National Minimum Wage and the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority regulates modern slavery and the exploitation of labour. However, most workers' rights are enforced through individuals submitting a claim to an employment tribunal. This means that individuals need to have a good understanding of their rights and the capacity to defend them. The current system is fragmented and inefficient, meaning many employees, including carers, are unable to enforce their rights.⁴⁷

Employer support beyond legal entitlements

Some employers go beyond their statutory requirement to support carers. This includes employers who are part of the Employers for Carers programme run by Carers UK, which gives employers the support they need to retain and manage employees with caring responsibilities. They also have the option to become 'Carer Confident' or 'Carer Positive' (Scotland) accredited so prospective and current employees know they will be

⁴⁵ Disability Law Service. *Reasonable Adjustments for Carers*. Disability Law Service; 2018 (<https://dls.org.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-carers/>)

⁴⁶ Office for National Statistics. *Labour market economic commentary: January 2020*. Office for National Statistics; 2020 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/labourmarketeconomiccommentary/january2020>)

⁴⁷ UK Government. *Factsheet: Fair Work Agency in the Employment Rights Bill*. 2024 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employment-rights-bill-factsheets>)

able to provide support.⁴⁸

Until recently, employers in Scotland could access the Fairer Workplaces Fund to implement changes such as workplace training and processes that support flexible working, with the overarching goal of creating and sustaining a more diverse workforce. However, this fund has been cancelled for 2024-2025 due to emergency budget controls.

Highlight on good practice: supportive employer

One carer told us about the wide range of the support their employer had in place for carers. This included a **staff group for carers** where they could share experiences and access peer-led support. For example, the carer we spoke to had joined this group when they felt like they needed to tell their employer about their caring role but did not know how. The group was then able to help them to tell their employer in a way that felt supported and ensured that they got the support they need. They suggested using the **Carer Passport** offered by their employer. The passport is a way for carers to explain their caring responsibilities and how these impact their work and request adjustments to their working practices.

A conversation with their manager resulted in them being offered **flexible working arrangements**. These included being able to work from home more often, extend deadlines where needed, and allowed them more flexibility around attending meetings where these clashed with their caring role. They were also offered **five days of paid leave** in addition to their entitlement to five days of unpaid leave.

Employment support

Across the UK there are employment support programmes available to help people find work. However, there are no employment schemes that specifically and exclusively support carers to find employment. Employment support is devolved in Scotland and Northern Ireland, so there are different programmes in different nations of the UK. However, all countries offer **national employment support and careers services**.

Expert stakeholders felt that many employment support services currently available lack the knowledge and understanding to support carers to move into work that meets their needs. Indeed, the recent Get Britain Working white paper identifies carers as a group that the current employment support system has failed to support effectively. Specific provision for carers tends to be overlooked.

In Scotland, the **No One Left Behind scheme** provides employment support to anyone in Scotland regardless of age or background, although it does not have specific provision for carers. Additionally, 16–24-year-olds in Scotland who have been out of work for at least 6 months are entitled to a one-off payment when they get a job. There is a supplement to this payment for people with childcare responsibilities, but not for those providing other types of care.

⁴⁸ While these schemes are likely to ensure employers provide good support for their employees with caring responsibilities, they have not been evaluated so their impact is unknown.



Until September 2024, carers in England and Wales could receive employment support through the **Work and Health Programme and related Pioneer Programme**. These programmes supported a range of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including carers, to find and stay in work but are now closed to new referrals.

The Get Britain Working white paper identifies that carers are one of the groups that have been previously underserved by employment support. They recognise that carers need better access to information and support to enable them to work but there are as yet no detailed plans in place to provide this. The white paper sets out plans for the wider roll out of Connect to Work (previously known as Universal Support) in England and Wales. This is targeted at people with health conditions, and there are no details of specific support for carers.

Northern Ireland does not currently offer any employment support specific to carers or that would implicitly support them as part of wider provision for disadvantaged groups. Support is offered for those with disabilities, but this support does not extend to those providing care for people with disabilities. In the past, Northern Ireland ran a scheme called Steps 2 Success which helped people prepare for, find and keep a job by offering a personalised service, tailored to meet specific needs.

Wider support

The Care Act 2014 and equivalent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland gives all carers the right to a **carer's needs assessment**.⁴⁹ While needs assessments are not designed specifically to provide support for carers to help them work, they must consider whether a carer wants to continue to work, and provide support to meet carers' needs. Examples of support that might be offered as a result of a needs assessment include advice about benefits, access to respite care, and well-being support such as a gym membership. Carer's needs assessments are carried out by local authorities, although in some areas other organisations are also contracted to conduct assessments. Stakeholders explained that this means that access to an assessment differs across the UK.

There are two main mechanisms of financial support for carers in the UK. **Carer's Allowance** (known as the Carer's Support Payment in Scotland) is a weekly payment, paid to nearly 1 million carers who provide at least 35 hours of weekly care.⁵⁰ Carers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland must also not be studying for more than 21 hours a week (i.e. are not in full-time education). Until April 2025, to be eligible, a carer had to be earning less than £151 per week to receive a payment of £81.90. Both the earnings threshold and the value of Carer's Allowance have recently been increased, with carers now being able to earn up to £196 per week to be eligible for a payment of £83.30.⁵¹ This is equivalent to 16 hours on the National Living Wage.⁵² Carers allowance was first introduced in 1976 and is an 'income replacement benefit', designed to provide

⁴⁹ The Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 and The Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002

⁵⁰ National Audit Office. *Carer's Allowance*. Department for Work and Pensions; 2024

(<https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/carers-allowance/>)

⁵¹ Carers UK. *New rise in Carer's Allowance earnings limit to increase earning potential for carers on a low income*. Carers UK; 2025 (<https://www.carersuk.org/press-releases/new-rise-in-carer-s-allowance-earnings-limit-to-increase-earning-potential-for-carers-on-a-low-income/>)

⁵² The National Living Wage is the minimum wage employers are able to pay employees who are aged 21 and over. Carers aged 20 and under might be able to work more hours as the National Minimum Wage is lower than the National Living Wage.



financial support to people who give up the chance to work full time in order to provide care.⁵³ There have been only limited changes to the structure of the benefit since it was first introduced.

The carer element in Universal Credit (UC) increases an individual's maximum UC entitlement by £198.31 per month and is for carers that provide 'regular' care for someone eligible for disability benefits. It is designed to provide additional income to carers who have low or no income. This benefit shares the same 35-hour threshold to be eligible to claim as Carer's Allowance. However, it does not have the same earnings threshold restrictions so carers who are eligible for UC do not face the risk of losing all entitlement to financial support if they earn a certain amount. This means carers who are not eligible for UC face a greater cliff edge than those who receive wider support through the welfare system. If a carer claims Carer's Allowance and UC, the amount they receive through Carer's Allowance will be deducted from their UC payment.

Carer's Allowance in particular has strict eligibility criteria that must be met before carers can claim.⁵⁴ The earning threshold, which means carers lose all entitlement to claim if they earn over £196 in a week, has been highlighted. The Guardian uncovered that many carers who earned over this threshold had still been paid the Carer's Allowance due to administrative errors on the part of the DWP. This then led carers, many of whom were already living in financially precarious circumstances, to accrue significant debts to the government.⁵⁵ A recent publication from the National Audit Office reported that more than 130,000 carers have outstanding overpayment debt totalling £251.7 million.⁵⁶ The government has now launched an independent review of Carer's Allowance overpayments.⁵⁷

One potential issue is that the earnings threshold has not been linked to changes in the minimum wage, meaning the number of hours carers can work to remain eligible for the benefit may fluctuate year to year. Though of course not all carers earn the minimum wage, so this will always be an issue for many. One carer we spoke to shared how changes to minimum wage meant someone they knew ended up working an hour a week unpaid in order to not lose their Carer's Allowance. While carers can work and claim Carer's Allowance, the restrictions make it hard to do so. One carer reflected that the requirement to be providing at least 35 hours of care assumes that carers should not be trying to supplement their incomes through work.

"I assumed that the 35 hours a week was [set] to be as close to the equivalent of working full time, which would be 40 hours a week. So the way they were looking at it was, if you're claiming to be caring for someone, you

⁵³ Kennedy S, Buchanan I. *E-petition debate relating to Carers Allowance*. House of Commons Library; 2024. (<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2024-0078/CDP-2024-0078.pdf>)

⁵⁴ In order to be eligible to claim Carer's Allowance a carer must be providing at least 35 hours of care per week, earn less than £196 per week (after deductions such as income tax and national insurance), and not be in full-time education.

⁵⁵ Butler P. *Carers threatened with prosecution over minor breaches of UK benefit rules*. The Guardian; 2024 (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/07/unpaid-carers-allowance-payment-prosecution-earnings-rules>)

⁵⁶ National Audit Office. *Carer's Allowance*. Department for Work and Pensions; 2024 (<https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/carers-allowance/>)

⁵⁷ Butler P, Halliday J. *Minister vows to end scandal that left thousands of UK carers in debt*. The Guardian; 2024 (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/oct/15/labour-to-set-up-review-after-carers-allowance-overpayments-scandal>)



can't be out working.” – Carer, not working

Additionally, carers can only claim one Carer's Allowance even if they care for more than one person. Carers we spoke to disagreed with these restrictions. They felt that the fact that they claim other benefits does not change the fact that they are a carer and need financial support in order to provide care. They also felt that they should be given additional financial support if they look after more than one person, as they accrue additional costs for each person they care for.

On top of Carer's Allowance, young carers in Scotland can access the **Young Carer's Grant**. This is an annual, one-off payment available to 16–19-year-olds who have provided at least 16 hours of care per week in at least 10 of the past 13 weeks to someone who is disabled. Unlike Carer's Allowance, there are no restrictions on being in work or education.

Across the UK carers can also access **Direct Payments** – cash payments to allow carers to meet their support needs identified through their carer's assessment in place of that support being provided by social services. Carers also have access to **Carers Credit** which gives carers who are out of work National Insurance credits to protect their future entitlement to a State Pension.⁵⁸

Carers face barriers to accessing support

Carers face several barriers in accessing support. One barrier is a lack of awareness of their entitlements. For example, many carers we spoke to were unaware of their right to carer's leave and even fewer were aware of the eligibility criteria for Carer's Allowance. Some of the carers we spoke to were made aware of support through their employer. For those who were unemployed, one carer shared that their local carers service had told them about support available to them.

A more fundamental barrier is that many people with care responsibilities do not recognise themselves as carers. Identification is the necessary first step to accessing support, so not recognising a caring role risks carers missing out on the help they need. Given that identification is thought to be lower among ethnic minority carers, it is possible that carers from these groups are more likely to miss out on support.

One reason identification is difficult for carers is that the label can feel inappropriate or stigmatising. While being a carer helped them access support, some carers reflected that because they were looking after a loved one, they didn't identify with being a carer and attached a certain stigma to the label.

“[My friend] was like you're a carer and I was like, no, I'm mum. She was like, yeah, but you're a carer as well. That took me a while [to come to terms with] ... [I was] hurt for myself and angry that she would call me [a carer] ... [but] I'm not just a mum. I'm also not just a carer, but there is this blurred line of who I am in [my children's] lives at what time.” – Carer, not working

Once caring responsibilities have been recognised, many carers still face barriers to

⁵⁸ It is important to note the proposed changes to Personal Independence Payments set out in the Pathways to Work: Reforming benefits and support to Get Britain Working Green Paper may disqualify some carers from claiming Carer's Allowance and related benefits.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/pathways-to-work-reforming-benefits-and-support-to-get-britain-working-green-paper>



accessing services and support. Some support is provided by local authorities directly, meaning that where someone lives can influence what support is available to them, along with wait times for accessing support. Expert stakeholders highlighted how much work it is to apply for Carer's Allowance and how long the wait times to have a carer's needs assessment can be. The Department for Health and Social Care have recognised the issue of long wait times for adult social care assessments and have committed to publishing data, however, at the time of writing this data was not yet available.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Samuel M. *DHSC to publish every council's waiting times for adult social care assessments and services*. Community Cares; 2024 (<https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2024/05/03/dhsc-to-publish-every-councils-waiting-times-for-adult-social-care-assessments-and-services/>)

3. Policy options

This report has demonstrated the challenges that many carers face in their working lives. It highlights that much of the support available is not meeting the needs of carers and that change is needed to enable carers to access good, sustainable work and to be able to remain in and progress in work alongside caring. Set out below are a series of policy options, developed with the input of unpaid carers, to make it easier for them to balance work and care. These options were developed with carers and expert stakeholders, but do not represent recommendations. In deciding how policy should change further consideration, including full economic costings and greater consideration of potential knock-on impacts in other policy areas, is needed.

The options set out below do not address issues around the availability and affordability of replacement and respite care. Undoubtedly, sharing a caring role with another person, whether they are also providing care informally or if they are a paid care worker, would help carers to balance work and caring responsibilities. Due to the need for a wider consideration of the feasibility and affordability of providing this care, replacement care is not set out as a policy option here. Instead, the policy options focus on what the government and employers could do within employment and social security to support carers. However, there is a strong case for wider reform to social care in the UK to help carers to find and sustain employment alongside caring.

Planning, co-ordination, and accountability

Some carers struggle to access the support they need to balance work and care. This is, in part, due to a lack of joined up working between local services that provide support. This results in inconsistent support across the UK and gaps in support where different departments and policies are not working together as effectively as they could. The lack of joined-up working is partly caused by a lack of strategic oversight at both local and national levels.

An approach to addressing this would be the development and implementation of a National Carers Strategy, either for the UK as a whole, or new strategies for England and Northern Ireland.

For either option, the new strategy should build on lessons learned from the current strategies in Wales and Scotland, and the previous carers strategy in England. The Strategy should be cross-departmental, providing a central focus for policymaking and co-ordination. The Strategy should be underpinned by an action plan to shape delivery and ensure that public bodies responsible for providing support to carers report on actions and outcomes.

Introducing National Carers Strategies in England and Northern Ireland could ensure that support for carers in these nations does not fall behind that in Scotland and Wales. However, a UK-wide strategy could support the co-ordination of support across all four nations of the UK and encourage consistency regardless of where carers live. This should include regular reporting to parliament and improvements to statistics to understand how many carers there are and the support they are receiving.

Awareness of carers' rights



Identifying as a carer is often the first step for carers to access support, yet many take years to acknowledge their caring role and tell others about it. Part of the challenge many carers face when identifying their caring role is that they feel they are not doing anything unusual. There is often desire on the part of the individual as well as cultural or familial expectations to look after family, friends, and neighbours who have long-term health conditions or disabilities. But this lack of understanding of what constitutes care also often extends to a limited awareness of carers' rights as well as the wider availability of support.

To support carers to identify their caring role and access the support they need, we suggest that the Government launches a national awareness raising campaign. This could focus on helping individuals to understand what it means to be an unpaid carer and therefore identify themselves or those around them as carers and recognise the support on offer. As part of this campaign, we suggest the government engages key public services which are likely to have contact with carers, such as doctors and social care workers.

Employers also have a role to play and many do not have the understanding they need to support carers. One way to address this would be for the Government, trade unions, employer bodies, and other stakeholders to work together to increase employer understanding and awareness of what caring involves, the potential impact caring can have on someone's work, and carers' statutory rights.

Both of these awareness-raising strategies could help to normalise the role of carers in everyday life and the workplace and reduce people's fears around claiming support.

Workers' rights

Improving workers' rights for all employees means that carers, and other employees who might face challenges in the workplace, can access support without being singled out. A universal approach is efficient for policymakers and employers while also improving awareness of support and reducing stigma for employees when asking for adjustments to be made. Though of course any increase in rights needs to be balanced against the risk of reducing overall employment opportunities.

Flexible working

Carers often need flexibilities in their jobs to be able to provide good care while working. However, not all employers offer flexible working (and some roles will not be suitable for it) and some are unaware of what flexible working arrangements could look like for their staff.

The Employment Rights Bill proposes to strengthen the right to flexible working for all workers by introducing stricter obligations for employers to accept requests made by staff. This should offer clear benefits for carers. However, some employers have understandable concerns about the costs they are likely to face when introducing and managing flexible working for their employees. Employers should be further supported to understand what flexibilities would be feasible for their staff and how these flexibilities could result in net gains for them as an employer.

One way to support employers in this would be to share guidance modelling flexible working arrangements across different industries, occupations, and business sizes. This could include sharing models of flexible working or investing in research, particularly in roles and industries that are often considered less able to offer flexible



arrangements. It could also highlight to employers the benefits offering flexible working has been shown to have for employers, such as improved employee productivity, retention, and job satisfaction.⁶⁰ Public sector employers and other large employers could lead the way on offering flexible working practices and modelling for SMEs – for example, the NHS could model best practice for offering flexible working in health and social care roles. Employer groups also have an important role to play in communicating to employers their responsibilities towards carers as well as the benefits of supporting flexible working.

Carer's leave

Carers are very likely to need time off work sometimes to look after the person they care for. The current system means that when carers take that time off, they can lose their income (though some employers offer paid leave), reinforcing inequalities and impacting on carers' financial well-being. In addition, the five days of leave available for carers is not enough for many people who are balancing work and care.

A solution proposed by many, including Carers UK, is to introduce five days of paid carer's leave per year, ideally on full pay, with a view to evaluating the impact and potentially extending this to ten days in the future, whilst offering a continued entitlement to unpaid carer's leave. Extended carer's leave would help carers balance work and care while providing job security when carers needed longer periods of time off work, similar to Maternity Leave.

There are two potential options for funding the introduction of paid carer's leave. The first, modelled by Carers UK, would be for carer's leave to be paid for by HM Treasury. Their analysis shows that this approach could result in a net gain for the Government despite initial upfront costs.⁶¹ A similar outcome would be expected if carer's leave was paid for by employers.

Evidence suggests that the upfront costs of paid carer's leave could be offset by anticipated reductions in lost productivity and revenue due to fewer unplanned absences and improved retention. Carers UK and Centrica estimate that UK companies could save up to £4.8 billion a year in unplanned absences and a further £3.4 billion in improved employee retention by adopting flexible working policies to support those with caring responsibilities.⁶²

It may be that a mixed funding model could be designed to share the cost of paid carer's leave between employers and the taxpayer. One way to highlight the benefits of providing paid carer's leave would be for anchor organisations,⁶³ such as the NHS, to act as an example to smaller organisations to go above their legal requirement by offering paid carer's leave. But of course any extra right brings a cost that needs to be met by employers or taxpayers, and so the impacts would need to be clearly assessed

⁶⁰ CIPD. *Flexible working: the business case*. CIPD; 2018 (https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/tools/flexible-working-business-case_tcm18-52768.pdf)

⁶¹ Carers UK. *Taking the next step for working carers: introducing a new right to paid Carer's Leave*. Carers UK; 2024 (<https://www.carersuk.org/reports/taking-the-next-step-for-working-carers-a-new-right-to-paid-carer-s-leave-report/>)

⁶² Carers UK. *Juggling work and unpaid care: a growing issue*. Carers UK; 2019 (<https://www.carersuk.org/media/no2lwyl/juggling-work-and-unpaid-care-report-final-web.pdf>)

⁶³ Defined as large, typically non-profit, public sector organisations whose long-term sustainability is tied to the wellbeing of the populations they serve. The Health Foundation. *The NHS as an anchor institution*. The Health Foundation; 2019 (<https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/the-nhs-as-an-anchor-institution>)



before any introduction to avoid any reduction in employment opportunities, particularly in the context of current increases in rights being introduced and the general economic and fiscal environment.

Enforcement of workers' rights

Employment law can only protect workers' rights and ensure good working practices for all employees if policies are fairly and fully implemented by employers. However, not all employers are aware of the rights of their employees and some do not adhere to existing legislation.

The introduction of the Fair Work Agency (FWA) is a step in the right direction to ensure existing labour market legislation is fairly and fully enforced.⁶⁴ The FWA is a new body within the Department for Business and Trade that will bring together existing state enforcement structures and, in the longer term, become responsible for enforcing a wider range of employment rights that would currently require employees to use an employment tribunal. An advisory board with representation from trade unions, employers, and independent experts is to be established to support the development of the FWA.

The government has the opportunity to ensure that the FWA has the power to protect carers from unjust working practices including denial of flexible working requests and unfair dismissal because of their caring role. One way to ensure carers are protected would be to make sure the FWA advisory board includes at least one member with the expertise to advise the government on the enforcement of labour market legislation among carers.

Employment support

Fewer carers are in work than those without caring responsibilities and those that are out of work do not always feel that employers will be able to accommodate their needs should they get a job. National employment support services provide support for those looking for work across the UK, but they do not currently tailor their service to the needs of carers.

The Government has set out plans to merge Jobcentre Plus with the National Careers Service, creating a new jobs and careers service.⁶⁵ This merger offers the opportunity to reform this support to better meet the needs of carers. This could be achieved by making sure that each jobs and careers service employs or trains a carer specialist.

This specialist would understand the unique needs of carers and provide information, advice, and guidance for carers seeking employment as well as raise awareness within the service of the needs of carers.

Another way that employment support could be reformed to meet the needs of carers could be to ensure that support is delivered flexibly to ensure all carers can access support around caring responsibilities. For example, by offering support online or by

⁶⁴ Employment Rights Bill; 2024 (<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3737>)

⁶⁵ UK Government. *Get Britain Working White Paper*. Department for Work & Pensions, HM Treasury, Department for Education; 2024 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper>)



phone and at a variety of times of the day including evenings.

Recognising that not all carers will have contact with Jobcentre Plus or the National Careers Service (or equivalent services in devolved nations), it is also important that careers services within education institutions, Youth Employment Hubs, and third sector organisations that deliver employment support programmes are trained on how to best support carers to find good work.

Employment support services will be limited in how much they can support carers if there are no jobs available with the right flexibilities and support. This means that effective employment support needs to go beyond supporting carers with job search activities to engaging proactively with employers to tailor recruitment processes and design inclusive jobs.

This could follow some of the principles of supported employment models, such as Individual Placement Support, which typically support disabled people or those with health conditions. In such a model support would comprise vocational profiling (to identify needed adjustments but also skills, experience, and aspirations), job search and brokerage, and then in-work support.⁶⁶

The Government's new Connect to Work programme has the potential to provide the support that carers need as its remit includes people from disadvantaged groups, such as carers, and people who have experienced homelessness or the criminal justice system.

Financial support

- Carers often have low financial well-being and many live in poverty. While many carers do have a job, or want to be in work, not all carers are able to work, or work as much as they would like to, alongside caring. The social security system therefore needs to provide carers with a safety net for when they are unable to work at all, or unable to earn a sufficient income. Universal Credit entitlements are often insufficient to cover life's essentials and the eligibility criteria for Carer's Allowance are complex, with a low earnings threshold and a cliff edge that restricts carers' labour market options, and their financial well-being. We estimate that 300,000 people are currently in receipt of Carer's Allowance without the protection of another benefit such as Universal Credit.⁶⁷ There are different options for how the eligibility criteria for Carer's Allowance could be broadened, all of which would need to be fully costed and potential unintended consequences considered.
- The recent increase to the Carer's Allowance earnings threshold is a step in the right direction but consideration should be given to further raising the threshold. The threshold could be raised to £245 a week to allow carers to work 20 hours a week on the National Living Wage before they lose entitlement to Carer's Allowance. A higher earnings threshold of £373 a week would allow carers to work 20 hours a week on the average UK wage, meaning carers are not restricted to low paid jobs.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Social Finance. *Scaling employment support in Europe: Individual Placement and Support (IPS)*. Social Finance; 2022

(https://www.socialfinance.org.uk/assets/documents/scaling_employment_support_across_europe.pdf)

⁶⁷ [Benefit Combinations: Official Statistics to August 2024 - GOV.UK](#).

⁶⁸ This is calculated based on the median hourly earnings for full-time employees reported by ONS for April 2024 which was £18.64 an hour.



The threshold should also be linked to changes to the National Minimum and Living Wages to ensure long term parity. However, any such change would need to be assessed in terms of the additional cost to taxpayers and the fundamental purpose of Carer's Allowance to support those who face a reduced ability to work due to caring responsibilities.

- Current rules mean that claimants lose all entitlement to Carer's Allowance if they earn over the earnings threshold. The Government could review ways to reform benefit payments for carers who are not eligible to claim UC to remove the current cliff edge. For example, introducing an earnings taper rate (although this would come with administrative challenges⁶⁹) similar to that in UC, where the amount of Carer's Allowance would reduce as earnings increase.⁷⁰ This would need to be balanced against the extra complexity it would introduce, the extra cost to taxpayers, and any unintended consequences (such as a reduced incentive to increase hours worked and any knock-on impacts on Universal Credit).
- Nearly half of carers who spend 20-34 hours a week caring are unable to work at all or are limited in how much paid work they can do (Figure 3). One way to address the barriers to work these carers face would be to lower the caring threshold so that carers who provide at least 20 hours of care per week are eligible to claim. Again, this would need to be balanced against the purpose of Carer's Allowance and whether alternative sources of financial support (such as changes to Universal Credit) would be more appropriate.
- The 21-hour rule in education pushes carers in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland to choose between claiming Carer's Allowance or studying full time.⁷¹ Removing this rule, at least for some students, would enable carers to gain skills and qualifications, alongside caring, to improve their long-term employment outcomes.
- A full economic evaluation of these options needs to be undertaken to understand the costs and benefits of any changes to Carer's Allowance.

⁶⁹ UK Parliament. *Carer's Allowance*. Commons Chamber Debate; 2024 (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-10-16/debates/E2DA60CE-2780-4ED6-927C-1930DF0DA5E0/Carer%E2%80%99SAllowance>)

⁷⁰ For every £1 someone on Universal credit earns, their benefit payment goes down by 55p.

⁷¹ L&W have campaigned for the 21-hour rule to be scrapped for several years. See Aylward N. *Young adult carers and the 21 hour rule*. Learning and Work Institute; 2023 (<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/young-adult-carers-and-the-21-hour-rule/>) Further information on the costing of removing the 21 hour rule is available on request



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Annex 1: Methods

We used a combination of methods and data to answer the following research questions:

1. How does providing unpaid care to someone with a long-term illness or disability influence labour market participation?
2. What support is provided by governments or employers for unpaid carers, and how does this influence their labour market participation?
 - a. What is the perceived effectiveness of these support systems among carers?
 - b. Are there gaps or unmet needs in the current support structures for carers?
3. What solutions can be recommended to allow individuals to balance formal work and caring responsibilities without facing wage or other employment penalties?

Scope of the research

There is no single accepted definition of what constitutes unpaid care or makes someone a carer. For the purpose of this research, we used the same definition as the Census:

An unpaid carer may look after, give help or support to anyone who has long-term physical or mental ill-health conditions, illness or problems related to old age. This does not include any activities as part of paid employment. This help can be within or outside of the carer's household.

Our research focused on working-age people, defined as aged 16-64, which has not been explored previously to our knowledge.

While there is ample evidence that unpaid care is associated with worse health outcomes for those providing care, this was not something we explored in this paper in detail.⁷² This is because we wanted to focus specifically on the intersection between unpaid care and paid work.

Qualitative research

To inform our approach and to understand what we already know about unpaid carers and their working lives we conducted a scoping literature review of academic and grey literature. We also developed a framework to map the policy context which allowed us to understand what support is already provided to carers. The framework set out data sources, inclusion and exclusion criteria for policies, and search terms. Using the framework as a starting point, we took an iterative approach to identifying policies that support carers to work.

We then brought together a group of 10 experts from government, the charity sector,

⁷² e.g. Longobardo I, Rodríguez-Sánchez B, Oliva J. *Does becoming an informal caregiver make your health worse? A longitudinal analysis across Europe*. Economics & Human Biology; 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2023.101264>)

Stöckel J, Bom J, *Revisiting longer-term health effects of informal caregiving: Evidence from the UK*. The Journal of the Economics of Ageing; 2022 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeoa.2021.100343>)



and academia at a roundtable. The discussion had three parts; firstly, we drew on attendees' expertise to check our understanding of the support available to carers to help them work alongside care. We then discussed what barriers carers face to work, how well current policies support them, before moving on to think about what changes are needed to ensure carers get the support they need to participate fully in the labour market.

Policy recommendations were then drafted and tested with a group of seven working-age carers from across the four nations of the UK. Carers were recruited through a market research agency and included a mix of carers who are in work, working part time, and out of work, as well as a variety of different ages, ethnicities, and intensity of caring role (see Table 1 for details of the characteristics of carers who attended the focus group). The session focused on the challenges carers face when balancing work and care, their experiences of accessing support, and what changes they would make to the support available. These suggestions were then used to evaluate existing policies and refine our policy recommendations.

Table 1: Characteristics of carers in the focus group

Carer 1	Lives in the West Midlands, works part time, and cares for father-in-law who has dementia, partial blindness, mobility issues.
Carer 2	Lives in the South East, works full time but only night shifts, and cares for grandparent who has vascular dementia and diabetes.
Carer 3	Lives in Wales, has not worked for a long time, and cares for teenage child with autism and mental health challenges.
Carer 4	Lives in Scotland, has not worked since Covid, and cares for child with mental health challenges and mobility issues.
Carer 5	Lives in London, works full time, and cares for grandparent who has diabetes and struggles to walk.
Carer 6	Lives in London, works full time, and cares for parent who has vascular dementia and incontinence.
Carer 7	Lives in Northern Ireland, does not work but is studying at the Open University, and cares for children with SEN needs and ADHD.

Data analysis

To understand how many people are providing unpaid care in the UK, who they are, and what their working lives look like we used quantitative data analysis. Analysis was conducted using [Understanding Society](#) (also known as the UK Household Longitudinal Survey), a nationally representative longitudinal study which has been following a cohort of around 40,000 households in the UK since 2009. It drew primarily from Wave 13, the most recent wave covering the time period January 2021 to May 2023, but also utilised Waves 2-13 for time series analysis from 2010 to 2023. All data used in the analysis was weighted using the cross-sectional adult main interview



weight derived by the Understanding Society team.

Carers were identified in the dataset through responses to two questions: *“Is there anyone living with you who is sick, disabled or elderly whom you look after or give special help to?”* and *“Do you provide regular service or help for any sick, disabled or elderly person not living with you?”*. This generated a sample of 2,829 carers to be included in the analysis. Caring was also broken down by the hours per week spent caring with 20 hours being used as a threshold to explore differences between carers with higher intensity care hours and lower intensity care hours. To explore who is providing care, demographic variables for age, ethnicity, and sex were used. Labour market participation was analysed through whether someone is in paid employment, hours per week spent working, hourly pay, job satisfaction, financial well-being, economic inactivity due to ill-health, industry, and occupation. The impact of caring on labour market participation was assessed based on whether carers reported that caring prevents them from working. As with the research project as a whole, analysis was constricted to working-age people only (aged 16-64 years).⁷³

Descriptive statistical analysis of Wave 13 was used to generate up to date statistics on how many people in the UK provide unpaid care, how much time is spent caring per week, who is providing care, how much carers are participating in the labour market, and whether carers feel that caring prevents them from working. Most variables were cross-tabulated against the time per week spent caring. Additional time series analysis of Waves 2-13 was completed to explore whether the number and characteristics of people providing unpaid care in the UK has changed over time.

⁷³ Working age has been defined as 16-64 by the ONS since 2010 and therefore this is a standard definition used for data analysis and allows for comparison over time. However, we acknowledge that since the state pension age increased to 66 in 2021 some people who would be considered working age have been excluded from our analysis.

Annex 2: Diagram of support for carers in the UK

	Legislation/programmes	Support provided	Differences between nations
In work	Equality Act 2010	A carer cannot be discriminated against in service provision, employment or education on the basis of their association with a disabled person.	N/A
	Carers Leave Act 2023	Employees with caring responsibilities have a statutory entitlement to five days of unpaid carer's leave each year.	N/A
	Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023	All employees have the right to request flexible working arrangements from their first day of employment and the right to make two requests each year.	N/A
Employment support	National careers services	Free, impartial careers advice, information and guidance for adults across the UK.	Different services in each nation but serving the same core function: National Careers Service (England), Careers Wales, Skills Development Scotland, and Careers Service (Northern Ireland).
	Employability in Scotland: No One Left Behind	Provides employment support regardless of age or background, but with no specific provision for unpaid carers.	Applies to Scotland only.
	Employability in Scotland: Job Start Payment	16-24 year olds who have been out of work for at least 6 months are entitled to a one off payment when they get a job. There is a supplement to this payment for people with child care responsibilities, but not for those providing other types of care.	Applies to Scotland only.

Work and Health Programme

Supports a range of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including carers, to find and stay in work.

Applies to England and Wales only.

Work and Health Programme
Pioneer

An extension of the Work and Health Programme, Pioneer targets economically inactive people and supports people to find sustained work through a 'place and train' model.

Applies to England and Wales, but has only been rolled out in some areas.

Wider support

Care Act 2014

Carers (Scotland) Act 2016

Gives carers parity of esteem with the person they care for and gives carers the right to a needs assessment. This assessment could include identification of support a carer needs to be able to balance work and care.

Needs assessments are the responsibility of local authorities, although some also contract third sector organisations to conduct assessments. This means they function differently in different places and are easier to access in some places.

Social Security
Contributions and Benefits
Act 1992

Social Security
Contributions and Benefits
(Northern Ireland) Act 1992

Social Security (Scotland)
Act 2018

The Carer's Assistance
(Carer Support Payment)
(Scotland) Regulations 2023

Provides a wide range of benefits including carer's allowance (known as carer's support payment in Scotland) – a weekly payment of £83.30. Carers are entitled to claim if they spend at least 35 hours a week caring for someone in receipt of a qualifying disability benefit. If carers have a paid job, they must not earn more than £55 a week after deductions (e.g. income tax and national insurance). In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, carers cannot be in full-time education and claim carer's allowance.

Despite benefits being devolved, carer's allowance in Scotland and Northern Ireland is mostly the same as in the rest of the UK. Scotland has, at times, offered a supplement to carer's support payments (e.g. through the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Act 2021). Carers in Scotland also are able to claim carer's support payment if they are in full-time education if they are over the age of 20, and in some instances for younger people.

Welfare Reform Act 2012

The Welfare Reform
(Northern Ireland) Order 2015

Those who are eligible for carer's allowance and claim Universal Credit (UC) can also be eligible to receive an extra amount of money through the carer supplement to UC.

N/A

The Carer's Assistance
(Young Carer Grants)
(Scotland) Regulations 2019

Provides grants to young carers aged 16-19 who have provided at least 208 hours of care (16 hours a week) in at least 10 of the last 13 weeks to someone who is disabled. The payment is annual and currently £300 is paid. There are no restrictions to being in work or education.

Applies to Scotland only.

Contact details

Learning and Work Institute is an independent policy and research organisation focused on lifelong learning and better work. Our vision is for a fair and prosperous society where learning and work enable everyone to realise their potential. We research what works, influence policy and develop new ideas to improve practice.

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