



# West Cork Carers Support Group

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## Pre-Budget Submission for Budget 2014

### Background

West Cork Carers Support Group (WCCSG) has been working for the past 15 years to gain recognition for the work of Carers, provide Carers with a wide range of information and supports, provide a voice to Carers issues and lobby for improved services and supports.

Carers are dedicated people at all levels of society who care for frail or dependent family members, relatives or friends. Care may be provided for an elderly person, or an adult or child with a long-term illness or disability or mental ill-health. The Carer's role may involve a 24-hour-day seven-day-week commitment. While providing care to a loved one may be willingly given, the cost to the Carer can be unacceptably high.

Thus, it is imperative that Carers should be supported, so that their own health and well-being is effectively maintained. If it is not, then the burden and cost of care will revert to the state. This in turn is undesirable as the care received in the home is more cost effective and preferred by the vast majority of people.

Carers have a right to recognition for their invaluable role in our society, but also a right to lead full lives and provide care without a huge cost to the quality of their own lives.

The publication of the National Carers Strategy in 2012 was welcomed as this is the first time that the Government has recognised that Carers are key players in the health system. The Strategy is an acknowledgment that Carers deserve respect, recognition and support for the work that they do. However, we find that Carers are showing signs of being increasingly overwhelmed by the physical, emotional and financial demands of caring and are feeling increasingly isolated and alone. We thereby call for more progression in the implementation of the goals set by the Strategy from each relevant department.

Following consultation with Carers in West Cork, we now welcome the opportunity to present this Pre Budget Submission and urge you to take the following recommendations into consideration on Budget Day.

# Financial Supports

## **Maintain the existing Carers Allowance, Carers Benefit and Half Rate Carers Allowance**

Income support is critical for the majority of full-time Carers, and the Department of Social Protection must consider the maintenance of the same a priority.

Any further cuts could force Carers into trying to go back into the workplace or worse still immigrate to find work and therefore putting their loved one into long-term care resulting in much higher financial pressure on government funds.

## **Reverse the 19% cut in the Carers Respite Grant**

For many Carers, the Respite Care Grant is the only direct financial support that they can receive and is an important way of recognising their value and contribution. The cutback in the Grant has created real hardship for many people who work so hard to care for their loved one. We strongly urge that funding be made immediately available to re address this injustice.

## **Reduce processing times for Social Protection Payments**

The length of delay experienced by Carers for decisions relating to entitlements has significantly increased. This increases financial pressure and stress on Carers who are already struggling to cope. There needs to be a reduction in the processing time for people claiming Carers Allowance, Carers Benefit and the Respite Care Grant by ensuring that the Department of Social Protection is adequately resourced to address current backlogs.

## **Habitual Residence**

Remove the Habitual Residence Condition as a barrier to eligibility for Carers Allowance for persons returning to Ireland to care for a loved one.

## **Pensions**

Many Carers do not have the capacity for making life savings and will be dependent on the State pension for subsistence in their older age. However, Carers are commonly not meeting the qualifying conditions for the Contributory pension based because they have remained at home to take care of family members and are now at a disadvantage with regard to PRSI contributions. Ensure that Carers do not suffer social insurance or state pension disadvantages because of periods of caring.

## **County Council Disability Grants**

WCCSG encourages responsive supports for housing adaptation to support Carers who continue to care for family members at home. The current system of means testing of the household places an unfair financial burden on the person with disabilities and their Carers, where assessed household income may not be at the disposal of the applicant of the scheme. The WCCSG would urge an immediate review of the means assessment criteria to address these concerns.

## **Water Rates**

The introduction of Water Rates will bring additional financial pressure to Carers particularly where there is increased water use due to their caring role (extra bathing/washing etc.). The introduction of a waiver scheme for Carers could significantly ease this additional financial burden.

# Healthcare and Services

The Department of Health and Children need to be assured of adequate funding to provide the following vital services:

## **Home Help Services**

Sufficient levels of Home Help must be available to support Carers and their loved ones, including provision for more flexibility for weekend and night cover.

## **Carers Needs Assessment**

Establish the legal right of all Carers to a comprehensive Needs Assessment, including health, social and financial issues, on becoming a Carer followed with regular reviews.

## **Home Care Packages**

Sustain the number of Home Care Packages in an equitable divide countrywide.

## **Patient Discharge Summary/ transfer of Care**

Develop a National Patient Discharge Summary and Care Plan for all people leaving hospital care to share with their Carers.

## **Respite Services**

In order to provide Carers with a break from providing care on a 24/7 basis, regular respite is essential. Funding for respite services should be increased to allow:

- Increased access to planned Respite breaks for dependents of full time Carers
- Development of flexible in home respite services for Carers and dependents with no access to residential respite services
- Emergency respite services that is responsive to the needs of both the Carer and cared for.

## **Young Carers**

Introduce a specific budget to advance the recommendations emerging from the Office for Children and Youth Affairs' Young Carers study.

## **Research and Technology Development**

Provide safety and security systems to all vulnerable people in the community at a nominal monitoring charge to support Government Policy for Independent Living.

# Support Carers Health and Wellbeing

## **Full medical card and Annual Health Checks**

Carers are often unrecognised by health services and face significant health deficits as a result of caring. Many forego their own health and wellbeing due to their caring role and the financial costs involved. We recommend that Carers be provided with a non-means tested medical card and annual health checks.

These measures should be considered cost effective for the government, as the consequences of a Carer becoming ill and no longer being able to care, will undoubtedly have greater cost implications for the exchequer.

## **Information Services for Carers**

Carers proclaim the provision of accessible information and support services as essential to their ability to continue in their caring role. Continuity of support to Carers dedicated groups such as West Cork Carers Support Group to provide a 'one-stop shop' model of information and supports that reduces Carers isolation is therefore critical.

## **Transport and Travel Issues:**

Research suggests that Carers in rural areas have the same needs as Carers living elsewhere. However, the rural setting in which they live means they face additional barriers of physical and social isolation and a lack of services (both in terms of access and availability).

Additional issues which Carers in rural areas may face include lack of specialist services; lack of respite; difficulty in accessing medical support; isolation and lack of companionship; information gaps; lack of alternatives to family care; and difficulties with transport and employment.

The excellent Rural Transport programme has made transport in the West Cork area more accessible and available, however we would ask that the following recommendations are also considered:

### **Travel Pass for all Full-time Carers**

Extension of the free travel pass for all those in receipt of the Respite Care Grant to enhance access to services and reduce isolation, particularly for Carers living in rural areas.

### **Disabled Drivers and Passengers Tax Relief Scheme.**

A relaxation of the archaic & stringent criteria currently used in the six-point assessment of the Primary Medical Card which is a condition of the Disabled Drivers and Passengers Tax Relief Scheme.

Review of the Disabled Drivers and Passengers Tax Relief Scheme to take into consideration adults and children with intellectual disabilities where a need exists for a special harness or special car seat. This presents a real safety issue for many parents and we would urge an immediate review of the medical criteria to address these concerns.

### **Rural Transport**

Maintenance of the existing Rural Transport Scheme service in West Cork

## **Education and Training**

### **During caring:**

Carers require a range of practical, accredited and employment preparation training options that respect and work around the realities of caring. WCCSG recommend the introduction of a Carer Training Plan based on the Needs Assessment & Care Plan previously mentioned so that a Carers individual training needs are identified.

It is vital for anyone taking on a commitment to care for someone who is dependent on them, that they are adequately prepared, not only emotionally but also practically. Carers have a right to be offered the same training opportunities that are currently provided for Health Care professionals in the practicalities of care i.e. Patient moving and handling, using aids and appliances, nutrition and personal care etc.

### **Post Caring:**

After caring there is a need for training which up dates Carers skills e.g. in computer skills but which also values the skills they have developed in their caring role. Often a person's self confidence and self worth can be affected by an extended period of Caring. Training programmes to assist former Carers back into employment ideally need to be cognisant of this.

## **Social Inclusion**

Carers face significant social exclusion, which has been further exacerbated by reducing services and financial resources. It is apparent that there are Carers, who do not recognise themselves as Carers, nor do they acknowledge their own needs. There are also many who feel they do not have the support of the system and that they have to fight for everything they need. This could be addressed by the introduction of a Needs Assessment protocol, which is implemented for all Carers as mentioned previously.

The availability of training programmes as highlighted above could also greatly enhance a sense of recognition and inclusion amongst Carers. What is apparent is that there is a need for support systems irrespective of income or means.

Carers have also highlighted the need for training, education and awareness-raising sessions on Carers issues for all Health Care Professionals. This should include the provision of a compassionate, respectful and dignified approach to enhance communications with Carers.

## **Conclusion**

Carers are the main providers of care and support in the community, and they should be supported in their role. It should be noted that the costs and special value of the care they provide, which includes personal and emotional support, treatment and 24-hour supervision, could never be replaced by health and community care services. We cannot underestimate Carers' invaluable contribution to society.

The fiscal implications for government cannot be underestimated: with Carers contributing over €2.5 billion to the economy every year; this figure would otherwise have to be borne by the health service. Thus, enhancing the capacity of family care, with adequate community-based supports for Carers, can directly contribute to a reduction in demand for expensive and inappropriate institutional care.

We are expecting that you will use your position as Minister to protect income and services currently available and work for much needed additional supports for Carers and that the 2014 Budget will reflect this.