

Submission to the Department of Social Protection**Consultation on Development of the Department's Strategy for 2016–2019 by
Care Alliance Ireland****August 2016****1) Introduction**

There are approximately 187,000 Family Carers in Ireland, who provide care to loved ones with a disability, mental health difficulty or long-term health condition. The latest figure for numbers of Family Carers in receipt of Carers Allowance is just under 66,000, with an additional 2,300 in receipt of Carers Benefit¹. An estimated 86,000 full-time Family Carers are in receipt of the Carer Support Grant (Department of Social Protection, 2015). Family Carers contribute approximately €4 billion worth of care each year in Ireland (Care Alliance Ireland, 2015).

We are pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Social Protection regarding the departmental Statement of Strategy 2016–2019. In preparing to do so, we have consulted the current Statement of Strategy (2015–2017), and tailored the key issues to the broader level. We would also suggest that this document be read in tandem with our most recent Pre-Budget Statement for Budget 2017², which goes into more detail as regards particular Family Carer-related issues for the Department.

We see the value in continuing to work to achieve the overall Mission of the Statement of Strategy 2015–2017: “To promote active participation and inclusion in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services”. It is the opinion of Care Alliance that this is a worthy Mission and one which can be achieved for Family Carers by ensuring that they remain a key client group in any and all considerations by the Department going forward.

¹ Personal communication with Christy Grogan, 23/08/2016

² Available on the Care Alliance website: <http://bit.ly/29CYCzN>

We also note the time overlap of the existing Strategy (2015–2017) and this upcoming Strategy in development (2016–2019). Greater clarity regarding these timeframes is needed to ensure that the correct Strategy is communicated to all stakeholders.

In addition, we understand that the focus of this Strategic Plan is overarching in nature, and that the actions will be applicable to multiple target groups of the Department, such as jobseekers, older people, etc. Many of the comments contained in this submission, whilst primarily cognisant of issues for Family Carers, will be beneficial to multiple target client groups.

2) Key Issues

2.1) Acknowledgement of Family Carers as a Core Group

We notice with disappointment that Family Carers are not included in the current Strategic Plan as a specifically delineated DSP client group, those groups being limited to:

- Children and Families
- People of Working Age
- Employers
- Retired and Older People.

It could be correctly argued that Family Carers are included within each of these target groups; however, we would argue for their inclusion in the upcoming Plan for 2016–2019 in their own right. The National Carers Strategy (2012) contains multiple actions regarding the need to acknowledge the contribution of and the unique challenges faced by Family Carers. To date the Department of Social Protection has been one of the most engaged departments regarding the actions contained within the National Carers Strategy³, and including Family Carers as a key client group within the departmental Strategy would go further towards meeting those actions in the spirit of the Strategy.

³ See for example the three-year evaluation of the NCS contained in the Family Carers Scorecard 2016 (National Carers Strategy Monitoring Group, 2016)

2.2) Development of Active, Accessible Communications

We acknowledge the considerable steps which have been taken by the Department regarding their communication with Family Carers, in particular the actions taken by the Department in response to their responsibilities under action 1.3.1 (*Provide regular benefits advice sessions and information through the application process*) of the National Carers Strategy (National Carers Strategy Monitoring Group, 2016).

However, improvements can still be made, in particular with respect to active and accessible information provision. There is still an amount of confusion, in particular for Family Carers new to the role, as to their rights and responsibilities, and the various terms employed within the assessment process. Whilst the information on the departmental website is available to all, with a very clear front-page link to information for Carers, some Family Carers report being confused by the information presented there and that available on other platforms such as Citizens Information.

Many Family Carers, and family members who do not provide the significant levels of care required to be in receipt of Carers Allowance or Benefit, are also advocates for their loved ones. They are responsible for ensuring that those they care for, who are often in receipt of a welfare payment such as Disability Allowance or the State Pension, have all the information required. The information available does not appear to be easily available in an accessible or "plain English" format⁴.

To this end, we recommend that the Strategy Statement for 2016–2019 contains a specific action around developing accessible information in plain English. This information should be made available actively as well as passively by the Department. By passively we mean inclusion on the departmental website, the problem being that many Family Carers – in particular those with disabilities or literacy difficulties, or older Carers-- may not be able to access information in this format. It is vital that the information pertinent to Family Carers and those they care for is available in multiple

⁴ We were able to find a downloadable leaflet entitled "Carers Allowance" (<http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/sw41.pdf>) using a Google search, which contained material which was much easier to read than the information directly available on www.welfare.ie; however, this leaflet does not appear to be linked to anything on the Carers section of the departmental website. We recommend a direct link to this on the Carers Allowance information page of the departmental website (<http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/ca.aspx>)

formats, is readily available and is actively promoted by the Department. We note with interest the “Job Seeker Pack” available for download on the departmental website⁵. This is a very good example of the type of accessible and easy-to-read information which could be used as a template for any such information for Family Carers.

2.3) Training of Front-line Departmental Staff

Whilst the great majority of front-line departmental staff and welfare officers are well informed and helpful on contact, we believe there is scope to include specific training and awareness around Family Carers issues to any staff development strategic action. This point follows naturally from 2.1 above, which recommends that Family Carers be specifically named as a key DSP client group.

2.4) Assessment Times

Family Carers remain the only group of welfare-support recipients who are required to work full-time to receive their payments, and who therefore cannot avail of significant employment opportunities outside of the home. Most recent information regarding current waiting times for assessments point to a 21-week wait for Family Carers to know the outcome of an application (Ryan, 2016). Family Carers are much more likely than the general population to experience poverty (Carers UK, 2007, 2011; Cullinan, 2015; OECD, 2011; O’Shea, 2000; Wubker et al., 2014), with the added costs of disability and caring exacerbating this situation. For many, the need to become a full-time Family Carer comes along with a loved one experiencing a serious deterioration in health, which is a highly stressful event. A wait of up to 21 weeks after such an event to receive basic economic support is unacceptable.

We note that this is by far the longest waiting time for any named support (with the exception of Child Benefit (EU Regulation)) and this support also has one of the largest backlog of individuals awaiting assessment (with the exception of Jobseekers Allowance and Treatment Benefit). Clearly this situation is critical and must be addressed by the

⁵ <http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Jobseeker-Pack.pdf>

Department as it is an issue which has been of concern for a considerable length of time.

We recommend a specific strategic action to ensure all assessments should be carried out within a guaranteed four-week timeframe by the end of the life of the new Plan.

2.5) Issues of Trust

As a result of increasing waiting time for assessments, and other issues such as individuals being turned down for Carers Allowance only to be granted it upon appeal, trust between many Family Carers and the Department is low. We acknowledge the difficulties that the Department faces with regard to applicants “holding back” information for appeal which would have led to the granting of the Allowance in the first instance⁶; however, the fact that Family Carers feel the need to do so in their applications points to a misunderstanding regarding the application process.

If the foregoing four recommendations in this submission were addressed as part of the Strategic Plan, we feel the lack of trust between Family Carers and the Department would be well addressed and the bedrock laid for an increasingly positive relationship as we move forward into the next iteration of the National Carers Strategy.

3) Conclusion

We acknowledge the significant developments which the Department has been part of during the life of the most recent National Carers Strategy and the existing Departmental Strategic Plan (2015–2017), and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next Strategic Plan (2016–2019). To that end, we have identified four key actions which, if included within the remit of this upcoming Plan, would significantly benefit Family Carers and ensure that the Department is respectful and cognisant of the issues facing them. Together, they would also address lingering issues of mistrust between Family Carers and the Department.

⁶ This issue was addressed at the DSP Annual Carers Forum in February 2016.

These actions are:

- 1) Acknowledge Family Carers as a key client group alongside Children & Families, People of Working Age, Employers and Retired & Older People.
- 2) Develop accessible, plain English information which is disseminated actively to Family Carers and related client groups.
- 3) Ensure all front-line departmental staff and all Welfare Officers are trained in issues specific to Family Carers.
- 4) Reduce assessment waiting times to a guaranteed four weeks by the end of the next Strategic Plan period (2019).

It is worth repeating that Family Carers contribute up to €4 billion worth of care every year, and that they remain the only departmental clients who are required to work full-time to receive a welfare payment. It is crucial, therefore, that Family Carers are seen as central to the work of the Department.

We remain available to the Department for further information on the points made within this submission, or other issues relating to Family Carers.

Submitted by

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About Care Alliance Ireland

There are approximately 187,000 Family Carers in the Republic of Ireland. Family Carer support is provided by a number of organisations, including those dedicated solely to carer support and others who support Carers as part of their response to individuals with specific conditions.

Care Alliance Ireland is the National Network of Voluntary Organisations supporting Family Carers. Our vision is that the role of Family Carers is fully recognised and valued by society in Ireland. We exist to enhance the quality of life of Family Carers. We achieve this by supporting our 104 member organisations in their direct work with Family Carers through providing information, developing research and policy, sharing resources, and instigating opportunities for collaboration.

Our legitimacy derives from our membership base, which includes all the carer organisations and virtually all of the disease/disability-specific organisations currently providing services to Ireland’s Family Carers. Our membership comprises organisations both large and small, and both regional and national.

We work with organisations in order that they can enhance the information and supports they provide to Family Carers. We provide them with opportunities to collaborate on initiatives including National Carers Week, a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary Family Carer Research Group, and joint policy submissions. We actively encourage collaboration in all our projects. We provide cohesion to those organisations working to support Family Carers. We commission relevant research that supports quality interventions in the lives of Family Carers.

By focusing on these functions we enable more of our member’s resources to go directly to coal face services.

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