

Public Consultation on the development of the Department of Social Protection's Statement of Strategy 2023-2026

Submission by Care Alliance Ireland

February 2023

We are pleased to make a submission to the Department of Social Protection's Statement of Strategy 2023-2026. We previously made a submission to the Department on the topic of the two previous terms' Strategy (2020-2023), which is available to view on our organisation website¹.

We see the ongoing relevance of the existing mission of the Department: *"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.

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.

Before beginning the discussion of proposals for inclusion in this next strategy, it is important to acknowledge the progress made by the Department with regards to the actions outlined in the previous strategy (2020-2023). We note the commitment to *'consider options for a pension solution for carers, the majority of whom are women, particularly those of incapacitated children, in recognition of the enormous value of the work carried out by them'*. We welcome the announcement in September 2022 of the approval of enhanced State Pension provision for long-term carers (in excess of 20 years), as recommended by the Pensions Commission, to be introduced from January 2024², and look forward to further progress on this matter; in particular in light of the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality. These include the introduction of Care Credits for those caring, and for the introduction of an individualised pension scheme for family carers, as committed to in the Programme for Government³.

¹ https://www.carealliance.ie/userfiles/files/CAI_DEASP_Strategy_2020.pdf

² <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-10-20/316/>

³ **Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality**, 'Unfinished Democracy: Achieving Gender Equality', 2022.

We remain disappointed that the commitment in both the Programme for Government and the 2020-2023 DSP Strategy regarding the extension of the free GP Card scheme for all those in receipt of the Carer Support Grant has yet to come to fruition. We recommend that this is considered as a priority for the next Strategy.

We also recommend that this submission be read in conjunction with our most recent Pre-Budget Statement⁴, which goes into more details regarding specific measures for family carers. We understand this submission is focussed more on overarching policy and strategy viewpoints which will in turn impact these more specific measures. However, it is useful for context for the Department to understand some of the wider issues facing Ireland's 500,000 family carers.

Key Issues

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 (despite our previous representation on the matter in 2020 and 2016), those groups being limited to:

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

It could be argued that family carers are included within each of these target groups (see point 2 below for further details); however, we would argue for their inclusion in the upcoming Plan for 2020–2023 in their own right.

The National Carers Strategy (2012) remains the key guiding policy document regarding family carers, although it very much needs updating and refreshing per the current Programme for Government. It 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 Strategy. 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.

⁴ https://www.carealliance.ie/userfiles/files/CAI_PBS_DSPFocus_July22.pdf

The naming of family carers as a specific group would give expression to the existing language within the programme for government (2020), where family carers are described as 'the backbone of care provision in Ireland'.

2) Acknowledge the ways in which family care intersects with other issues under the remit of the DSP

There continues to be a lack of sufficient understanding at policy level that family care is not a distinct and standalone issue facing individuals, but intersects with multiple other issues, and across family systems, to create a significant web of potential disadvantage. This was made particularly clear following the announcement of the different 'cost of living' payments as announced in Budget 2022. Whilst these payments were welcome, given the considerable additional costs of disability and caring⁵, we were very disappointed that family carers who are disabled, and consequently more significantly at risk of economic disadvantage, were not entitled to both payments, but only one. This suggests a true lack of sufficient understanding of the nature of both family care and disability within Government, and in particular within the DSP.

This is not merely of relevance to disability and caring, but to all four of the key client groups identified in the current strategy outline above. Delineating such client groups is of course necessary in order to streamline services for clients of the DSP. However, failing to acknowledge the overlaps and intersections between all these groups only contributes to the siloed nature of policy decisions. This is an ongoing issue that we and other organisations in the not-for-profit sector have called attention to in the past. Such a siloed approach creates considerable barriers to combatting the key challenges faced by individuals most at risk of disadvantage⁶.

We recommend that the DSP commit, within their 2023-2026 strategy, to undertake a course of education and training for all staff to understand this intersectionality in order to better understand those individuals falling within the remit of the Department. This will also enable more comprehensive supports for those most at risk of significant poverty, which is a key responsibility of the Department at large.

⁵ **Bernadette MacMahon, Hannah Boylan, and Robert Thornton**, 'Care at Home: Costs of Care Arising from Disability' (Family Carers Ireland, 2022); **Indecon International Research Economists**, 'The Cost of Disability in Ireland', 2021; **John Cullinan**, 'The Economic Costs of Disability for Families', *Frontline: The Irish Voice of Intellectual Disability*, no. 97 (2015)

⁶ **Diarmaid O'Sullivan**, 'Mind the Care Gap - Exposing the Health System's Vulnerability to the Gap between Family Care Provision and Anticipated Demand.' (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2019); **Care Alliance Ireland**, 'Disability and Family Carer Policy - Challenges and Responses.' (Care Alliance Ireland, 2017).

3) Integration of the EU Strategy on Long-term Care

Accepted by the EU in December 2022, the EU Strategy on Longterm Care is a key piece of policy which will drive a number of policy changes relating to the support of family carers across member states. We are lucky in Ireland in that some supports we provide for family carers are amongst the most advanced in the EU – albeit at times insufficient. However, there are a number of actions which will have a positive impact on family carers, which fall under the remit – or at least the particle remit – of the Department of Social Protection.

In particular, the actions outlined under section 3.2. *A better balance between work and care responsibilities* are of particular relevance to the DSP Strategy 2023-2026. We recommend that the Department integrate these commitments into the plan currently under consideration – for example regarding the monitoring of the Work-Life Directive, and publicising the new rights for leave entitlements afforded to those in employment who also have care responsibilities. Doing so would continue to illustrate the DSP commitment to work across sectors and Departments, which has been evident in the past in their work in Ireland.

Conclusion

This submission has outlined 3 key points of direct relevance to the development of the next Strategic Plan of the Department of Social Protection. We have focussed on issues of strategic relevance to family carers in Ireland which directly fall under the purview of the Department of Social Protection.

Family carers contribute upwards of €20 billion worth of care every year⁷, and they remain the only departmental clients who are required to work full-time (through the provision of care) 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.

⁷ **Family Carers Ireland**, 'Counting Carers: Carer Prevalence in Ireland - Working Paper 1' (Family Carers Ireland, 2021).

About Us

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 for family carers. We work with organisations to provide better information and supports 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 deliver a number of carer specific projects; namely an Online Family Carer Support Project and a Back to Work Project.

There are in the region of 500,000 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. We work with our 90+ member organisations and other agencies to support them in their work with family carers.

Our legitimacy derives in part from our membership base which includes a wide range of organisations currently providing services to Ireland's family carers. Our membership is comprised of both large and small, regional and national organisations.

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