

## Further Education and Training Strategy 2025 – 2029

### Public Consultation

#### Submission from Care Alliance Ireland

Care Alliance Ireland are pleased to make this submission to the public consultation on the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2025- 2029. The focus of this short submission is to highlight the critical importance of including family carers as a key cohort within the FET landscape, and to share some insights from our work with family carers preparing to re-enter the workforce and/or further training.

Care Alliance Ireland works to enhance the wellbeing of family carers so that they are better able to care for their loved ones. We provide direct support to family carers as well as indirectly supporting them by working with researchers, statutory actors and other not-for-profits.

One of our core areas of interest for the past four years has been our various back-to-work programmes; Kaleidoscope<sup>1</sup>, Return-Ready<sup>2</sup> and Re-Emerge<sup>3</sup>. Funded under several Dormant Accounts Funds measures, our focus in these programmes has always been to enable family carers, at whatever stage of their caring and employment journey, to find the best possible routes back to employment, training or further education. As with any marginalised group, understanding the core factors which present as challenges is critical to the success of individuals reengaging successfully with the employment market.

There are over 500,000 family carers in Ireland<sup>4</sup>. Many of these are balancing work/study/training with their caregiving responsibilities – Family Carers Ireland estimates that 1 in 9 employees in Ireland are balancing caring and paid employment<sup>5</sup>. Around 67,000 family carers find their caring responsibilities coming to an end each year<sup>6</sup>, whether that be through the recovery of the person they care for, their entry into long-term residential care, or through bereavement.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.carealliance.ie/Kaleidoscope>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.carealliance.ie/Return-Ready>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.carealliance.ie/Reemerge>

<sup>4</sup> Family Carers Ireland, "Counting Carers: Carer Prevalence in Ireland - Working Paper 1" (Family Carers Ireland, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> <https://familycarers.ie/carers-supports/caring-employers>

<sup>6</sup> Care Alliance Ireland, "The Way Ahead - A Resource to Support Former Family Carers" (Care Alliance Ireland, 2020).

Many family carers find themselves returning to a workplace that may have moved on significantly since their last employment and needing to significantly upskill or indeed change their career direction entirely following the life-changing experience of caring for a loved one.

Throughout our experience of working with family carers, it has become clear that whilst upskilling and retraining are key challenges that family carers returning to the workforce face, addressing issues of confidence and self-esteem is critical to their success. Family carers face considerable levels of isolation, loneliness and other emotional health challenges throughout their time as family carers<sup>789</sup>. In addition, many family carers experience complex grief which impacts upon the specific knowledge and skills that staff within the FET sector should have when working with family carers looking to retrain and upskill through the FET system.

Of course, family carers have significant skills and abilities to bring to companies which they can build on through further education and training. Resilience, patience, organisation skills, advocacy skills and dedication are some examples.

The focus of this submission is to highlight three issues we believe should be included in some way in the upcoming Strategic Plan to create better inclusion for this very specific marginalised group.

### 1) Include family carers as a specific, named target group

In the 2020 SOLAS Strategic Plan, examples of a number of target groups are named, with examples, as groups that have specific needs when accessing FET. We acknowledge that family carers may be included within the '*the marginalised who want to re-engage in education*' example; however, we are advocating here for family carers to be acknowledged as a specific target grouping.

As discussed above, family carers who are looking to reengage with FET with a view to upskilling and re-entering the paid workforce have unique challenges compared to other marginalised groups. They likely have experienced significant distress through receiving life-altering health diagnoses for loved ones. Many have been providing significant, round the clock medical and social care for decades, without breaks, holidays, respite or time to themselves. Often, they will

<sup>7</sup> Family Carers Ireland, "The State of Caring 2024" (Family Carers Ireland, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Konstantina Vasileiou et al., "Experiences of Loneliness Associated with Being an Informal Caregiver: A Qualitative Investigation," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 585, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00585>.

<sup>9</sup> Family Carers Ireland, College of Psychiatrists of Ireland, and UCD, "Paying the Price: The Physical, Mental and Psychological Impact of Caring" (Family Carers Ireland, 2019).

need additional supports to ‘decompress’ between the end or change of their role, and re-entering employment, training or education.

Our previous and current workplace support programmes highlight how different the needs are for family carers in comparison to other FET learner groups, as highlighted within the previous FET Strategy. We learned through our first programme (Kaleidoscope, 2021-2022) that family carers need more supports in building confidence and somewhat ‘basic’ knowledge of how the workplace and education sites have changed over the time they spent caring. Almost without fail, when we received feedback, and when we evaluated the programmes, the need for extra time, patience and supports in these areas was highlighted.

When these supports were provided as part of the programme (in addition to the practical skills development supports), the confidence, and readiness for work scores of participants increased significantly, and loneliness decreased similarly. All of these evaluation results, detailing the use of several validated tools, are available in the Kaleidoscope project report, available online<sup>10</sup>.

## 2) Collaboration with the NGO sector

Collaboration across sectors is at the core of how we work in Care Alliance Ireland. We believe that collaboration and sharing of information, skills and opportunities does not weaken any organisation or provider - but strengthens all and ultimately provides for more impactful supports to service users.

We have, in the past, found it difficult to successfully collaborate and work meaningfully and positively with providers within the FET sector. In reviewing the previous Strategic Plan, it is notable that there is minimal reference to collaboration and collaborative working in the Plan. When it is mentioned, it refers primarily to collaboration within the FET sector (e.g. with Higher Education Institutes) and across the enterprise sector (Enterprise Ireland, local Chambers of Commerce, etc.), rather than with organisations outside the Sector who may be providing similar programmes (such as NGO’s like ours, with a remit for services and supports with a specific cohort).

Throughout 2022 and 2023, when formally reaching out to local Solas funded organisations, it was our experience that there was limited appetite for working with us, and that in some cases organisations like ours may have been seen as

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.carealliance.ie/userfiles/files/Kaleidoscope\\_Interim\\_Evaluation\\_Report\\_February\\_2022.pdf](https://www.carealliance.ie/userfiles/files/Kaleidoscope_Interim_Evaluation_Report_February_2022.pdf)

'competition' to the FET sector at large. This could not be further from the truth. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this challenge with your organisation's relevant leadership.

Therefore, we highly recommend including a specific commitment and action plan to encourage cross-sectoral collaboration with a broad range of NGO's, HEI's and SME support organisations to enable learning and development.

### 3) Compassion, understanding and the development of 'soft skills' for staff within the Sector

As discussed previously, family carers who are looking to re-enter the workplace and are looking to access FET opportunities have often had specific experiences which differ significantly from other marginalised groups. Many family carers have experienced trauma (although they may not name it as such) through many years of isolation, seeing their loved ones in pain, facing discrimination, and significant time spent advocating on their behalf with service providers, health and social care professionals and others.

Self-confidence has often been eroded for these family carers. A number of those we have supported throughout our successful programmes have told us of not experiencing empathy and understanding from staff when trying to access further opportunities for education and training. This can be extremely upsetting and can undermine a successful return to education, training or employment for some family carers.

For those who are accessing FET whilst still providing care, theirs is a balancing act. Those in receipt of Carers Allowance or Carers Benefit are only permitted to work or access education or training for 18.5 hours per week. They also have significant responsibilities at home, and staff must be aware that for them, those caring responsibilities must come first. Ensuring that staff are aware of these particular issues, and are trained in empathetic and supportive methods, must be a key aspect of any new Strategy for the Sector.

### Conclusion

We are pleased to have had the opportunity to make a submission to this important consultation. In our work with family carers looking to continue with the education and training, with a view to returning to the workplace, we have seen the benefits of appropriate, evidence-based and evaluated targeted programmes to enable this marginalised community to thrive post-caring. We

have also seen the immense skills and other benefits that family carers bring to businesses who employ them. Family carers, and those who are former carers, have a significant role to play in the building of our economy – and need to be supported to do that, should they wish. For others, they wish to develop their knowledge and education to share with others. We encourage SOLAS to ensure that the specific needs of this group of dedicated and skilled individuals has full and appropriate access to all that the FET sector has to offer by acting on our recommendations in this submission.

We are available to discuss anything in this submission further.

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