

Budget 2019 Summary- Family Carers

The announcements made last week as part of the publication of Budget 2019 will result in modest but welcome increases in income supports for many full-time family carers. Significant increases in disability supports and mental health supports will likely increase access to these important services. These will be welcomed by many of Ireland's 360,000 family carers and by those who rely on such family support. However, we remain critical of the lack of additional investment in areas which have been highlighted by ourselves and a number of our member organisations – please see below for our detailed comments.

Key Budget 2019 initiatives impacting family carers include:

- €5 increase on all weekly Social Welfare payments (Carers Allowance, Disability Allowance, State Pension, etc.) beginning in March 2019
- 100% Christmas bonus (to be paid in the first week of December)
- Additional week of Fuel Allowance (now 28 weeks)
- Home Carer tax credit increase by €300- now up to €1,500 per year
- €25 increase in the weekly income threshold for GP Visit cards
- 50 cent reduction in prescription charges from €2.00 to €1.50 for all medical card holders over the age of 70
- €10 reduction in the monthly Drugs Payment Scheme threshold from €134 to €124
- €150m extra funding for Disability services
- Recruitment of additional front-line staff, including consultants, and development of a new GP contract
- 100 new Therapy Posts to address waiting lists in Assessments of Needs for children with disabilities
- 950 additional Special Needs Assistants, Special Class Teaching Posts and additional NEPS psychologists
- €55m new funds for mental health services, in line with the Vision for Change and related strategies
- A new €20m Sláintecare Integration Fund.

Care Alliance - Further Commentary

In our pre-budget statement we identified three priority areas;

- 1) Funded Policy Development
- 2) Funding of Services and Supports
- 3) Addressing Poverty and Income Inequality.

Budget 2019 represented a modest acknowledgement of some of these issues and provides some new resourcing to address them.

A refreshed and funded National Carers Strategy for 2019 and beyond needs to be driven by the Minister for Health. Family carer and disability organisations are ready to work with the various state agencies to create an ambitious and costed strategy and to make its implementation a reality. We welcome the funding for a research programme to look at the impact of the increased costs of disability and caring, which the Minister committed to in July 2018. We look forward to working with our colleagues across the sector to input into this review.

For full-time family carers whose only source of income is the Carers Allowance, the rate of the weekly allowance remains below the latest objectively assessed level of relative poverty. The annual Carer Support Grant is a very welcome boost for many who do not receive the Carers Allowance, due to it being a means tested payment for those providing full-time care. However, latest figures indicate that there are just over 75,000 individuals in receipt of Carers Allowance, with a further approximately 2,700 in receipt of Carers Benefit. Even taking into account those in receipt of Domiciliary Care Allowance (c. 35,000), that leaves a significant shortfall of those who provide care (360,000) and those in receipt of some regular benefit.

As in previous years, those balancing paid employment and family care responsibilities have been left out of Budget 2019. Of course those providing full-time care in the home are those most likely to need significant practical and financial support. However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges for all family carers in accessing the services and supports they require to continue enabling their loved ones to live independently as possible in their own homes.

The development of more locally based disability supports is at last showing progress – after lengthy delays, new appointments to interdisciplinary teams are beginning to bear fruit. Families of children with disabilities deserve to be able to access a range of timely and holistic interventions. Navigating the system is often unnecessarily challenging.

Particular comments on home care

Budget 2019 offers no guidance as to plans for enhancing the delivery of home care and therefore will not address the real and growing deficit in home care supports that continue to exist across the country. The harsh reality is that it remains more difficult to access home care for those aged 65 and over now than it did 10 years ago. The 40% increase in our over-65 population over this period, together with welcome developments in life expectancy across our population as well as other cost pressures, mean that we need a 5% increase in resourcing annually just to stand still. With a tightening labour market, increasing regulation and high expectations in respect of the qualifications of home care staff, the government need to move forward more quickly in completing the full review of public home care support. We welcome the current review of 10 countries' approach to home care support, but need to see more urgency from the both the leadership within the Department of Health and the Minister for Health.

Access to home care remains challenging for many – with more people needing care and support. The HSE Service Plan for 2019 will need to articulate how the increasing demand for home care can be met. The increasing use of 30 minute visits and the lengthy waiting lists are not issues that will be addressed by Budget 2019. Access to regular and suitable respite care will also remain limited and for some it is simply not available.

We are now working with other NGO's to seek specific reassurances from the government that between now and the publication of the 2019 HSE Service Plan, that there will be ambitious targets set for material increases in the delivery of home care to those who need it. We know, from the latest HSE performance data for the period up to June 30th 2018, that existing delivery targets for home care are not being met.

Over the coming months we also look forward to reviewing the HSE service plan for 2019, which will provide further detail about the quantum of services that that HSE can deliver, noting the significant 5.8% or €900m increase in its budget allocation.

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