



MEETING

European Parliament Interest Group on Carers

Date: 9 April, 12.30 – 14.30

Venue: European Parliament – Room ASP-5G1

Topic: Carers and work/life balance

Marian Harkin MEP welcomed participants and thanked her colleagues and Eurocarers for the effective cooperation in the Interest Group over the last 5 years.

Part 1: EU carer's strategy 'enabling carers to care'

The first part of the meeting addressed the EU Carers Strategy campaign, which was launched by the Interest Group and Eurocarers in October 2013. **Marian Harkin MEP** underlined the fact that across the EU, 80% of care is being provided by informal – usually unpaid – carers; in Ireland for instance, the value of this unpaid care amounts to 2,5 billion Euros in savings to the economy. Clearly, this makes carers an indispensable part of society and the economy. Due to the –positive- fact that the population is ageing, each of us is more likely to either give or to receive care. Marian underlined the importance of an EU-level strategy, as there many overarching issues which are shared by all Member States such as

- The impact of caring on the physical and emotional well-being;
- The risk of poverty, due to inadequate pension contributions as a result of leaving or reducing paid employment in order to care carers risk being the next generation of poor older people;
- The need to integrate formal and informal care provision, as a basis for sustainable care systems.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach. However, until now, politics and policies have mainly focused on formal, paid care providers. This needs to change as we need to ensure a genuine care partnership; carers need to be empowered and be part of the policy process.

While the Interest Group on Carers recognises the efforts made by the Commission – e.g. inclusion of carers in the Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing, the Employment Package and the Social Innovation Package – there are many more potential areas for action at EU level. Therefore, Marian Harkin invited **Health Commissioner Tonio Borg** to take the floor to comment on the current situation and possibilities for EU action in the field of informal care provision.

Mr Bor stated that the work of Europe's many informal carers is invaluable to individuals and communities alike and that it is increasingly important for this group to have a voice at EU level. He underlined that the proposal for an EU carers' strategy highlights the unique role that informal carers play and the grave challenges they face. With an ageing population, the issue of care provision is becoming increasingly important. With people over 65 expecting to spend half of their remaining years suffering from a disease or from functional limitations, an ageing population also means a shrinking workforce, including fewer health professionals. A higher proportion of people will have to rely on informal care. However, around 80% of care across the EU is already being provided by families, friends and other informal carers. The Commission therefore recognises the crucial role that informal carers play.

While the individual Member States are responsible for supporting carers and for providing the framework for health and social care, the Commission has also launched a number of initiatives to support carers, such as the European Innovation partnership on Active and healthy Ageing, the Social Investment Package and the Employment Package. Another important initiative is the Joint Action on Alzheimer Cooperation Valuation in Europe – ALCOVE. This has started a collective reflection on the best means of preserving quality of life, autonomy and the rights of both the people living with dementia and the people taking care of them.

Mr Borg stated that the EU's common goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth — as defined in the Europe2020 Strategy — cannot be met if informal carers are left out of the labour market or overlooked by welfare systems. The Social Protection Committee will present a report on the current situation regarding long-term care in June, which will identify available support to informal carers, as well as the most effective ways of ensuring that all disabled or chronically ill people can get the help they need without overburdening their families.

The Commissioner ended his presentation by underlining the limited legislative competence of the EU in this area – the bad news - fact that much work has been done in relation to carers and that there are indeed possibilities for further action – the good news. There needs to more awareness of the millions of Euros carers contribute to the economy as well as of the challenge they face. The evidence base – research good practice dissemination - in this area needs to be strengthened to form the foundation of considerations for further action under the next European Parliament and Commission.

In response to questions, Mr Borg informed the meeting of the Commission's activities in relation to the health workforce. Changing health needs require an adapted health workforce. While health care and long term care provision remain the responsibility of Member States, the Commission has set up a strategy group on health work force shortages. It was pointed out by participants that, while the health workforce is of course important, the social and long term care workforces are also increasingly relevant.

Part 2: Carers and work/life balance

The second part of the meeting focused on carers and work/life balance.

The first speaker, **Robert Anderson (Eurofound)** presented the latest research findings in relation to carers and work-life balance, underlining that, with current demographic developments, we all stand a greater chance of becoming a carer. More of us will need to reconcile care with employment at some stage; and thus, work-life balance will increase in importance in the policy debate. Rob stressed that it is important to note that family members are not the only informal carers; friends, neighbours and acquaintances are increasingly involved.

The Eurofound 2011 European Quality of Life Survey addressed 5000 carers across the EU 5000 carers, of whom 2350 working carers (providing care to an elderly or disabled relative at least once or twice a week). The survey pointed out a number of problems in reconciling work with non-work life (being too tired to do household jobs when returning from work, family responsibilities suffering and difficulties with concentrating at work), with all of these being the most challenging for those over 48 years of age. The problems affect women more than men. The survey supports the notion of the need to improve community services to support carers and their quality of life. This entails a number of services such as home care and home help, systematic and specific attention of primary health care, access to day centres and respite care, access to carers' support groups and organisations, ICT facilities, information, training and counselling and last but not least, income support and advice.

Eurofound research also concluded that impact of care responsibilities on employment can be seen in a number of areas such as:

- Financial disadvantage nil/reduced hours exclusion from paid work;
- Access to training and skills development;
- Stress, sickness and absenteeism;

- Career development and promotion;
- A general lack of specific action in the workplace to support working carers benefits, information, services, flexible working times, work organisation and leave entitlements

Another 2011 Eurofound study on 'Company initiatives for workers with care responsibilities' recommends improving measures for working and caring in the workplace, including raising awareness and promoting good practice, increasing the take-up of existing support measures, ensuring wider and more consistent provision and promoting the evaluation of support measures. Moreover, the access to employment of excluded carers needs to be improved as these carers are poorer, less healthy and more socially isolated. Eurofound will present all these findings in a report which will appear at the end of May.

Frank Goodwin (Eurocarers) started his contribution by thanking the Interest Group co-chairs for their commitment and support. He underlined the fact that most working carers are in the 35-50 age range; this is a challenging time of life, with young children on the one hand side and ageing parents on the other. In many cases, being a working carer has serious implications for an individual's social life as well as for job promotion. Combining the two roles proves to be very difficult in practice.

The level of dependency and hence, the care burden is increasing over time. Flexitime and distant working are coming to the fore, but despite these measures, pressure builds up on the carers and their finances — not least because of the out of pocket expenses incurred as a result of the special and increasing needs of the person cared for.

Research has pointed out that carers are subjected to high levels of stress and strain; depression amongst carers is rampant. Carers do not have a reasonable working life and Frank presented several examples of this fact. The anxiety and being overworked often leads to reduced working hours in order to be able to provide essential care. This means that carers are being penalised in terms of social protection and pension entitlements.

Interestingly, other workers would not accept this situation – but carers have no rights. It is true, as the Commissioner said, that carers are often motivated by love, but this is being used against them and we should be troubled about it.

While recognising the limited legal competence of the EU in this area, the EU can support carers by helping to raise awareness of the challenges faced by carers. The EU can support actions which will ultimately enable carers to care. It can help share good practice (e.g. UK Employers for Carers) to make sure that carers stay in employment and facilitate their participation. This is why an EU strategy is required, as proposed by Eurocarers and the Interest Group. This lists the areas where the EU CAN take action, and Eurocarers will continue to campaign to ensure it will become a reality.

Panel response

The first panellist, **Patricia Pedelabat (European Commission, DG EMPL**) focused her response on a Commission document published in 2012 on Personal and household services. She reminded participants that one of the targets of the EU for 2020 is to bring to 75% the employment of 20-64 year-olds. At this point in time, 12% less women than men are in paid employment and many women work part time to reconcile work and social life balance. However, women are the future of growth as women are more educated than men (55% in tertiary education); in the age category 30-34, 40% of women finished their tertiary education (this figure is 30% for men). Only 26% of women currently are employers; if this rate were to increase to 50%, 4 million new enterprises could be established, providing for a huge amount of jobs.

Work-life balance is a key factor in female employment: 50% of women report problems in this area. To decrease this rate and thus foster our growth, we must improve the work-life balance. One possibility to do this is to grow the area of personal and household services. The Commission is actively working on these issues.

Patricia's colleague **Arnaud Senn** informed the meeting of an upcoming report of the Social Protection Committee on long term care issues. He also underlined that awareness of the situation of carers is still largely lacking as compared to awareness of formal care provision. The SPC report provides a reflection on the wide range of issues that are part of long term situation and will provide guidance for further EU actions with regard to long term care.

The second panellist, **Paola Panzeri (COFACE)** informed the meeting of COFACE's specific working group on family carers, which aims to raise awareness for the situation of family carers. It is also involved with the development of tools for the self assessment of family carers; in many cases carers do not realise that they are carers.

Interestingly, the region of Emilia Romagna has recently passed a law registering the status of family carers. This is a positive development which opens the way for wider recognition of family carers across the EU. This law enshrines recognition for the need for training, social protection and labour market participation (retain jobs as well as return to work and re-accessing the labour market. Part-time work is another issue; it this an active choice or the only option for the many women in part-time jobs? There are other issues as well, such as the need for more flex work and the need to address

the gender pay gap.

During 2014, COFACE is promoting a European Year on reconciliation on work of family life, involving networks of ngo's and grass roots organisations, to bring together good practice and develop recommendations on how to ameliorate work life balance. The situation of carers is one of the fundamental topics within this initiative. COFACE invites all stakeholders present to join and use this as a tool to support to support the EU strategy on carers. The findings of the Year could well support an EU-wide call for such a strategy.

The final speaker was Valentina Caimi (Platform of European Social NGOs). She informed participants of the fact that in 2010 and 2011 the Social Platform developed a number of concrete -policy recommendations to EU institutions and member states to ensure that care policies and practices are developed with a comprehensive approach. Now it is time to assess progress. One chapter of the recommendations focused on how to ensure that informal and family carers have an adequate balance between care, work and private life. Social Platform considers that an EU strategy on carers should be developed. It is true that in this field member states bear the main responsibility, but the EU has a very important role to play in pushing member states towards the adoption of better reconciliation policies. Progress has indeed been made: the contribution of informal carers has been recognised in the Social Investment Package. The Employment Package was adopted and it included the Communication on Personal and Household Services that foresees measures to support care services and other comfort services provided at home (such as cleaning, ironing, gardening, repairing etc.). However, there are many initiatives where this recognition could also become a reality such as the EU Health Programme and the European Social Fund. In many countries health and social services are still viewed as a cost rather than an investment. This needs to be changed as a matter of urgency; we need to continue to raise awareness on the costs of non-investment in these areas. Financial, social and health ministers are all crucial in this respect.

However, there are still a number of initiatives that need to be put in place. The Platform also calls for a Carers leave Directive, which would address all types of care leave. The EU should also develop recommendations on legislative recognition and minimum standards of support to informal carers, including varying systems providing financial rewards, pension and recognition of skills acquired informally or non-formally, to avoid social exclusion and poverty among informal and family carers who are very much at risk of this. Carers do not always have the choice; there should be a legislative recognition of standards for informal carers. Lastly, carers should be involved with the development of community based care services and help develop synergies between informal and formal care provision.