

Submission to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

**Consultation on Development of the Department’s Strategy for 2020–2023 by
Care Alliance Ireland**

October 2020

1) Introduction

We are pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection regarding the departmental Statement of Strategy 2020–2023. In preparing to do so, we have consulted the current Statement of Strategy (2017–2020), and tailored the key issues to the broader level. We also based this submission on our submission to the previous Statement of Strategy, as many of the issues remain and should be considered for this latest Strategy. We would also suggest that this document be read in tandem with our most recent Pre-Budget Statement for Budget 2021¹, which goes into more detail as regards particular family carer-related issues for the Department, notwithstanding that the Budget announcement has taken place for 2021.

We see the value in continuing to work to achieve the overall 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.

¹ Available on the Care Alliance website: <https://bit.ly/34hZJRp>

2) Key Issues

2.1) Acknowledgement of Family Carers as a Core Group

We notice with disappointment that family carers were not included in the current Strategic Plan as a specifically delineated DEASP client group (despite our previous representation on the matter in 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; however, we would argue for their inclusion in the upcoming Plan for 2020–2023 in their own right, as we previously did in our submission in 2016. 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 Employment Affairs and Social Protection has been one of the most engaged departments regarding the actions contained within the National Carers Strategy, 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.

This action also ties with the acknowledgement of family carers as ‘the backbone of care provision in Ireland’ within the current Programme for Government (2020).

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.

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 used within the assessment process. Whilst the information on the departmental website is available to all, 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 high 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.

To this end, we recommend that the Strategy Statement for 2020–2023 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 formats, is readily available and is actively promoted by the Department.

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 DEASP client group.

2.4) 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 could be improved. 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 instance; 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 three 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 (2017–2020), and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next Strategic Plan (2020–2023). 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.

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.

It is worth acknowledging that family carers contribute upwards of €10 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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October 2020.

About Care Alliance Ireland

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 achieve this by supporting our member organisations in their direct work with Family Carers through the provision of information, developing research and policy, sharing resources, and instigating opportunities for collaboration.

There are in the region of 391,000 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 95 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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