

Care Alliance Ireland Statement to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands re: the impact of means testing on Carer's Allowance and other Social Welfare schemes.

29th May 2024

Good morning members of the Committee. I am pleased today to be here to represent Care Alliance Ireland and make this statement to the Joint Committee on the impact of means testing on Carer's Allowance and other Social Welfare schemes. I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to be here today.

For those of you who may be unaware of the work of Care Alliance Ireland, we are an umbrella organisation, with our 90 strong member groups drawn from across the caring, disability, addiction, mental health, chronic illness and broad community sectors. We provide research, policy and governance supports to our membership, as well as providing online supports to a growing number of family carers across the country. As an organisation, our vision is that the role of family carers is fully recognised and valued by society in Ireland.

That 'recognition' of family carers that we highlight in our vision and mission as an organisation, is a key concept in our core message for you as a committee here today.

'Recognition' of family care may come in many forms;

- Recognition at national policy level, such as in the National Carers Strategy, which has not been updated in 12 years, despite a commitment in the current Programme for Government to do so.
- Recognition through spoken and written rhetoric, phrases such as carers being the 'backbone' of Irish society, or lauding the selflessness of family carers.
- Recognition of the practical challenges facing those providing care, including the significant financial difficulties many families experience when a member requires care and support above the level expected.

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It is this final aspect of the recognition of care that I would like the members of the Committee here today to be most aware of, as it is the type of recognition that this particular committee can address in a meaningful way through changes in how the means test and applications for Carers Allowance can be administered.

There is significant research which points to the financial difficulties which many family carers find themselves experiencing, which can include higher heating costs; higher food bills; increased and inescapable travel costs including adapted vehicles and hospital parking. This is exacerbated by the decreased earning potential for many family carers, in particular for those with the highest levels of caring responsibilities. Living on a fixed income as a single person is not the same as living on a fixed income as a family with these additional costs. Most significantly, our colleagues in Family Carers Ireland have recently undertaken a number of research studies specifically investigating the financial impacts of family care, along with the impacts of means testing of Carers Allowance, which no doubt you will hear about in much more detail this morning.

Given that we in Care Alliance are an umbrella organisation we do our best to represent the views of our members in discussions like this. Most recently, in our preparations for Budget 2025, we asked our membership what some of the core issues facing those carers they support are; the abolition of the means test for Carers Allowance was highlighted by over half those organisations who responded as a key issue.

In addition to the work we do with our member organisations, in March 2020, in response to Covid19 we established our Online Family Carer Support Group, which has since grown to a membership of over 8,100 family carers who get support, advice and access to social activities on a 24/7 basis. In recent years one of the key aspects of care which unites the membership, and causes the most anxiety, stress and confusion is by far the means test, and related reviews for Carers Allowance. My colleague Tara, Project Coordinator for the group, can discuss the issues that come up in more detail during our discussions here this morning, but the key messages we hear from our family carer members are;

1) The means test is viewed by most family carers as an invasion of privacy. In the very helpful discussions we have had with Department officials who

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oversee the team managing the means tests and reviews, we know that the details of everyday spending are not of interest to the assessors; however, this is not always communicated to those undergoing the assessment at what is very likely one of the most stressful times of their lives. Many carers are angry at being asked to prove how they spend their money, even if the purpose is to show they are not above the means in savings or not earning additional salary when in receipt of Carers Allowance.

- 2) We know that Carers Allowance is positioned in Irish policy as an anti-poverty measure, rather than as a 'payment' for work undertaken. However, currently family carers are the only social protection 'customer' group required to not only be close to poverty to receive it, but also to work full time and still be at that line of economic struggle. This is seen as insulting to many family carers, as grateful as they are to have this protection measure in place. In addition, those just on the higher side of the means cut offs describe feeling like they get no recognition at all for what they do, simply because they have a partner who earns enough, or who was perhaps lucky enough to have savings before they became a carer.
- 3) The process of the means test is experienced by many applicants as overly burdensome and difficult to navigate. Carers already spend large chunks of their day providing significant physical, medical and emotional support, and the additional administrative burden of ordering and paying for bank statements, filling in forms, paying for postage, is significant for many.

The final point I would like to raise before I finish this statement, is that we in Care Alliance understand there is no pool of infinite money to be spent by the Department of Social Protection. We know that as the system is currently configured, some type of triaging system needs to be in place, which is how the means test currently functions. It is a blunt tool, but one we no longer believe is fit for purpose in the 21st century.

If the Government is to truly live up to the statements made across the political spectrum that family carers are the backbone of care in this country, that they are some of the hardest working and most dedicated citizens, and that they should be respected as key partners in care, per the current National Carers Strategy, then a radical rethink of how carers are supported financially must take place.

I thank the Committee for their time and am happy to answer questions and discuss such a rethink in the time to come.

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