Policies to support working carers are crucial to the sustainability of social care and of the wider economy. It also makes business sense for employers to support working carers, since the alternative is losing talent to stress, absenteeism, health issues and financial pressures. Support for working carers improves productivity, morale and workplace culture.

At the national level, policies such as the statutory right to request flexible working benefit carers, but are available only to some employees (not all workers). Similarly, some employers provide additional policies to support working carers, such as paid leave, carer networks and greater flexibility, but this has yet to become mainstreamed in the same way as policies for workers with parental responsibilities. Experience of being supported to combine work and care in the UK is therefore uneven and inequitable.

This Policy Perspective provides insight from expert contributors on these issues and makes recommendations relevant to policymakers, employers and researchers in the Sustainable Care programme. These include equitable rights for carers, including care leave; greater understanding, appreciation and dissemination of the contributions working carers make, both to the UK economy and in individual workplaces; and a call to adjust existing policies for groups such as working parents so these also assist working carers.
Supporting carers to work and care

CONTEXT
How best to support people combining paid work with caring for a family member or friend is an urgent issue. It was one of the topics chosen for a series of Re-Imagining Care Round Tables, held in London and Birmingham in 2018, bringing experts, practitioners and members of the Sustainable Care team together to discuss issues crucial for the sustainability of care arrangements in the UK. At a time when social care is high on the policy agenda and a growing focus of debate, the round tables were designed to inform the development of the Sustainable Care research programme and to guide the team’s advice to policymakers.

Government has promised a Green Paper on Social Care, and working carers feature in the priorities for this, set out by former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Jeremy Hunt. In his speech on 20 March 2018, he stated: "If we can make it simpler to look after a loved one, if we can make it easier to juggle working and caring responsibilities, if we can encourage volunteering – whether by more flexible working, better employer support or harnessing new technologies, then that is what we should do".

2018 also saw the launch of a long-promised Government Carers Action Plan 2018-2020, drawn up by a cross-ministerial group. Like the previous ‘National Carers Strategies’ (1999, 2008, 2010), the plan highlighted ‘working carers’ and the challenges they face. Based on a ‘call for evidence’, the Action Plan set out 64 ‘practical actions’ to support carers, including some focused on ‘employment and financial wellbeing’, designed to assist working carers, such as improving working practices, flexible working, help to return to work after time out to care, and financial support (including benefits and other assistance provided by Jobcentre Plus).

Members of the Sustainable Care team have already shown that in the UK carers save the public purse some £132bn per year. The number of carers has been rising as demand for care (more people living with disability, poor health or into extreme old age) has increased, while public funding for care services has been sharply reduced. As older workers are urged to stay in work for longer, the need to combine work and care will only increase. Today, 1 in 9 UK workers combines work and care. Research, and experience in the workplace, show workers at all levels can face challenges managing work and care: stress, poorer physical and mental health, stalled careers, and financial strain. Without suitable support, these can be insurmountable; estimates using the 2009/10 Survey of Carers in Households and 2011 Census data reveal 34,500 carers had left work to provide unpaid care - a damaging and unsustainable loss of workforce skills and experience, which costs the public purse some £1.7bn a year in lost tax and expenditure on benefits, including Carers Allowance. Employers face loss of skills and extra recruitment and training costs; some put the cost of an employee leaving work to care at 50-150% of their salary.

KEY ISSUES
The Round Table discussion and experts’ contributions raised important issues relevant to policy, employer and research agendas: the need to build on effective practice seen in some UK organisations; and the challenges of extending support to working carers in precarious employment, on casual contracts or self-employed.

Building on effective practice in the workplace

- In recognition of the value working carers add, some employers have policies in place to provide support and help employees remain at work. Employer representatives highlighted dedicated care leave (which can be paid or unpaid), carers’ networks, line manager training and ‘carer’s passports’ (which set out agreed workplace flexibility and offer clarity and reassurance). More general policies, such as flexible working (with choices about time and place) are also crucial in helping people combine work and care.
- Paid care leave is an important policy area, and an option some firms had introduced. Contributors stressed that initial concerns about its potential abuse had been unfounded. Employers introducing care leave felt the ‘alternative’, turning to sick leave to meet care needs, was not a satisfactory option.
- Employers for Carers, a membership forum created by Carers UK, provides valued practical advice and support for employers seeking to develop carer-friendly policies and practices. Its approach has been successful in bringing employers together to share experience. Centrica has shared its estimated cost savings from increased staff retention (£2.5m) and reductions in unplanned absence (£4.5m).
- There was consensus that far too few organisations were aware of carers within their workforce, which meant most employees were unable to access the
help that – within short timeframes - had proved so beneficial to the organisations leading in this field, and to their employees.

Supporting working carers in casual or precarious employment or who are self-employed

- It was noted that employment type and access to rights at work are crucial for working carers. Both the TUC and the CIPD are actively engaging with this issue. Casualisation of employment, including wider use of temporary, ‘zero hours’ contracts, agency work and self-employment, brings challenges and opportunities for working carers. These types of work come at a cost in terms of employment rights, but some working carers find more flexible forms of work easier to balance with their caring role.

- The legislated right to request flexible working, which can be beneficial for working carers, is not available to all ‘in work’, but is restricted to ‘employees’ with at least 26 weeks’ service. This leaves many workers missing out. The right to access policies which support working carers was felt to be important for all in work, regardless of whether they were ‘employees’ or other ‘workers’, or new in their job.

- Some contributors advised against ‘demonising’ non-standard work, which some carers find helpful. It was agreed, however, that it was inequitable for some to feel their only option in combining work and care is to accept less favourable working conditions. It was pointed out that some groups – notably older women and ethnic minorities - are over-represented in many forms of precarious, insecure work.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Round Table participants felt these major issues called for policy, employer and research responses.

For policymakers:
1. Carers’ rights for all in work: The nature of work or employment affects a worker’s experience of combining work and care; not all working carers have the same experience of work, and only a minority can access workplace policies for support. Stronger rights are needed for all working carers, with a basic floor of rights, regardless of employment status.

2. Care leave: A right to take paid care leave, when caring is urgent or requires more of the working carer’s time, could make all the difference. It would help address problems which can affect productivity and organisational effectiveness, such as unplanned absences or the loss of a worker’s skills and experience, which are costly to replace. Modelling different cost scenarios or policy options, based on how existing schemes in the UK and overseas work, could help advance this agenda.

3. Recognise working carers’ contribution: Policymakers across the political spectrum were urged to understand the major contribution working carers make, the pressures they already absorb, and the impact working and caring has on them and their families. It is not realistic to expect people to ‘do more’, especially when most already do all they can - and many know they will need to work for longer as pension ages rise.

4. Disseminate the ‘business case’: The ‘business case’ for carer-friendly policies has been made, and should be presented in ways which can engage SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises), industries with dispersed workforces, and businesses struggling with recruitment or productivity. There is a connection with the UK Industrial Strategy which policymakers are urged to debate with industry.

For employers:
1. Understand the scale of the issue and the benefits of supporting working carers: At any time, 1 in 9 of your workforce are probably carers – more if you have an older workforce profile. These numbers are set to rise. When a working carer leaves employment, you face extra costs in recruiting their replacement and training a new worker. You also lose vital experience and knowledge of your business which is hard to quantify, as it cannot be replaced. Keeping track is important, too. To provide appropriate support, you need to be aware of carers in your workforce; and when you introduce policies for working carers, recording who uses them, with what results, will help you monitor and evaluate their impact.

2. Raise awareness: There are easy steps other employers use to help working carers self-identify and encourage managers and co-workers to work better with colleagues – and there are creative, flexible ways of raising awareness in dispersed workforces or organisations where few staff use IT. Don’t put all resources on your intranet if some staff can’t access this at work.

3. Expand or amend your existing policies: Are there
Supporting carers to work and care

policies for parents in your organisation you could ‘tweak’ and adjust to include working carers, for a ‘quick and easy win’?

4. **Trust your employees:** People often worry policies like care leave or flexibilities will be abused, but other employers’ experience is that this is not the case. Most working carers value support and use it only when needed – anyone who will abuse a care policy will probably do the same with other policies, so focus on managing that person’s behaviour, not on making policies hard to access.

5. **Train your line managers:** Policies are just part of the picture: line managers filter these and will be in contact with carers in their daily work. Training managers on the challenges working carers face, and the policies available (both statutory responsibilities and organisational schemes) will reap big dividends.

6. **Find a senior-level champion:** Employers which support working carers have found a senior level champion with the will to drive change makes all the difference in getting carers on the agenda.

7. **Don’t forget your contractors and suppliers:** If you care about supporting working carers, consider how this flows down your supply chain. What are your contractors and suppliers doing to help working carers? You may be able to give them useful guidance that will boost your and their efficiency and productivity.

**For the Sustainable Care research team and partners:** Sustainable Care research teams are working to develop the evidence base on these issues, focusing on:

1. **Exploring care leave policies at two levels:** at organisation level, finding out why some employers have introduced care leave, with what impact on their workforce; and at national level, finding out what the UK can learn from the experience of other countries which have legislated for care leave.

2. **Examining the potential of technology:** what technologies are working carers already using to support them in combining work and care, and what are the likely future developments in this area?

3. **Finding out how a carer-friendly approach can be used in challenging contexts:** how can organisations facing productivity challenges, or in sectors which rarely engage with this agenda, be encouraged to develop a focus on supporting their working carers?

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**Footnotes**

1 Helping employers support their working carers (2018), Simply Health and The Work Foundation.


3 The five Government Departments involved are: Health & Social Care; Digital, Culture, Media & Sport; Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy; Work & Pensions; Education.


5 Securing the future: funding health and social care to the 2020s (2018), A Charlesworth & P Johnson, IFS & Health Foundation.

6 Walking the tightrope: the challenges of combining work and care in later life (2016), Age UK and Carers UK, London: Age UK.


8 Supporting working carers: the benefits to families, business and the economy (2013) Carers UK.

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**ABOUT THE RESEARCH**

The **Sustainable Care: connecting people and systems** programme explores how care arrangements can be made sustainable with wellbeing outcomes. It studies the systems, work and relationships of care in the context of changes in technology and mobility and aims to support policymakers, the care sector and academics to conceptualise sustainable care as about ethics, justice and the distribution of resources. The programme focuses on adults living at home with chronic health problems or disabilities and their families, carers and paid workers. Funded by the ESRC, it is delivered by eight universities and Carers UK, led at the University of Sheffield by Professor Sue Yeandle. This Policy Perspective was prepared by Kate Hamblin, Mandy Cook, Sue Yeandle, Camille Allard and Alice Spann. Policy Perspectives were designed by Kelly Davidge.

**EXPERT CONTRIBUTORS TO THE ROUND TABLE**

- Scarlet Harris, Women’s Officer, TUC
- Ian Peters, Chair, Employers for Carers; and Chair, Barts Health NHS Trust
- Ben Willmott, Head of Public Policy, CIPD
- Kelly Higson, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Nationwide
- James Mummery, Chair, Transport for London Carers Network
- Katherine Wilson, Head of Employment, Carers UK

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