



Support for employees who combine paid work with unpaid care: 3

Summary

This policy brief draws on the experience of four employers in the **health and social care sector** who were either members of the Employers for Carers (Carers UK) forum (in England and Wales) or recognised as a Carer Positive Employer (in Scotland). These employers have between 270 and 26,000 employees each. We asked them about well-established initiatives to support working carers and if they would recommend them to others.

[Mandy Cook](#) draws on her ongoing research to explore support for employees who combine paid work with unpaid care in the health and social care sector.

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EMERGING FINDINGS

All four health and social care sector employers were taking different, yet innovative, approaches to support their employees with caring responsibilities, while continuing to meet their service needs. In their daily work, they already saw carers as a hugely important asset, and aimed to help and support them in their vital roles. They realised that their **culture of commitment and support for carers should also include their own employees**:

"We have very strong partnership working with our patients and carers, and realised we were missing a trick here, because we've got all this information for carers, for patients. And what we were actually finding is, when these carers came to our group, they were our staff. So, whilst our staff had come to the carers' group for their patient, we were not doing anything for them. So, we decided to try and bring the two together and try and utilise the skills and the knowledge that some of our staff as carers had already got, to share with staff within the organisation who perhaps don't know as much."

HR team member, NHS organisation

"I think it makes sense that whatever you're pushing out into the sector, whatever your Learning and Development department are sending out with, I think it's important that what we do internally mirrors that, otherwise it doesn't make sense. There are a number of things that we're picking up that have been developed out with in the sector and using them internally. I think that's a good thing."

HR team member, social care sector

This commitment to employees with caring responsibilities had led to initiatives such as a review of existing flexible working policies, the development of a dedicated carers policy, and affiliation to the [Employers for Carers](#) and [Carer Positive](#) schemes.

The three NHS employers had developed a **health and wellbeing plan** to enable collaborative working within their organisation to support employee health and wellbeing. Their plans recognised the importance of supporting an employee's physical and mental health wellbeing. Health and wellbeing initiatives can enhance commitments to supporting working carers, and may include: 24/7 access to a spiritual care team; an intranet 'wellbeing' page (used to signpost carers to external organisations who can offer help and advice); carer health checks; and referrals for mindfulness sessions, holistic therapies, physiotherapy and chiropody services. One NHS employer had a **health and wellbeing lead** whose role was to focus on the physical, mental and financial wellbeing of employees. This included working



with the organisation's carer co-ordinator 'to try and link in with any agencies or anybody we can utilise in terms of carer support outside the organisation. She was the one who put us in touch with Employers for Carers. She instigated that. So, she tries to work as closely as possible with anybody in the area who can provide support for staff with caring responsibilities' (HR team member, NHS organisation).

CHALLENGES

All four health and social care sector employers saw **demographic change** as a significant driver for organisational change. In the UK, the peak age for caring is 50-64. Over 2 million people in this age group are carers ([Carers UK, 2019](#)). Developing ways to support and retain their **older workforce**, 'to avoid the loss of a significant proportion of the workforce over the next 5 to 10 years' (HR team member, NHS organisation), is recognised as a major challenge.

The three NHS sector employers all appreciated how wider demographic changes were playing out in their own workforce. Specific challenges arose in particular job roles. Nurses were the largest group in the clinical workforce, with the most evident ageing profile.

To help meet this challenge, employment policies to support an ageing workforce had been developed:

"We have always tried to have the supportive policies there. So, it's interesting at the moment that we are looking at more flexibility in the workplace at a time when we're really struggling in terms of money and staff. So, I think actually the organisation, whilst it understands we've got challenges, understands that staff are key to this and we really need to make sure that whilst we cover all our bases, we're still allowing that support and flexibility for people." HR team member, NHS

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Supportive policies include **flexible retirement**, which is very well utilised by one employer:

"This allows employees to retire and come back on reduced hours or perhaps a step down from a senior role to a less senior role. We have a lot of employees who do that, or will leave their substantive role and come back on the bank, on an 'as and when' contract, and we have a lot of staff who do that as well. A lot of our older staff are working carers, so it gives them the opportunity to balance their work and caring responsibilities."

HR team member, NHS organisation

Another innovative policy recently introduced in one of the organisations was an **internal movement policy**. This offered fast-track for nurses interested in a 'sideways' move, reducing the complexity and time taken to fill vacancies:

"So, we've got a policy now, which says that an individual can identify that they're now at a point where they can't work in an area (e.g. in patient services) for whatever reason, and it might be caring responsibilities, and ask to move to another area (e.g. community nursing), and the policy will support them in terms of being able to move into that area, and retain them, rather than losing staff."

HR team member, NHS organisation

DEBATES & IDEAS

The line manager is critical in sensitively balancing the needs of the individual and the business. They are often the person who knows an employee best, who applies organisational policy relating to people management, and who is best placed to signpost carers to internal and external support mechanisms. For working carers, the attitudes and behaviours of managers and other employees are as important as formal policies ([Greater Manchester NHS, 2018](#)).

Members of the HR teams in these health and social care sector organisations recognised the pivotal role line managers play in supporting working carers, and the importance of line managers being aware of the policies in place and of how '*at the manager's discretion*' should be interpreted. HR team members encourage line managers to 'have the conversation' with carers in their team, and to think creatively about how they can provide the support needed, rather than reinforce some staff's perception that '*the manager is just going to say 'no' all the time*'.

One NHS employer ran **lunchtime roadshows** across its main hospital and community sites, hosted by HR staff, trade union and local carer's organisation representatives and carer leads, to facilitate carer identification, information sharing and peer support.



A key theme to emerge from the roadshows was variation in managers' responses when interpreting 'at a manager's discretion' in terms of allocation of different types of leave for carers. In response, an e-learning module was developed:

"An e-learning module has been developed in order to give managers a sense of what it is like to be a carer, the value of keeping carers who are employees in the organisation and the range of options open to them as managers in using policies to support staff in their teams. Part of the modules include two digital stories of carers (one female clinician and one male non-clinician) who have shared their experiences. The stories have also been used as part of presentations to teams and groups."

HR team member, NHS organisation

Another health sector employer was considering **workshops** as a way of encouraging dialogue and supporting line managers to have the conversation with team members who are carers:

"We are thinking about these workshops, to try and encourage managers to come and ask questions about the policies. Because certain policies do say 'at your managers discretion', it's very easy for them just to say 'no'. But we are hoping the workshops will encourage line managers to have that conversation. As I say, it's not always about getting time off, it's about thinking differently, how to support that person, asking them what they need, and what they would like as well."

HR team member, NHS organisation

KEY MESSAGES

Based on our research with NHS and social care organisations, our '**good practice**' recommendations are:

- Think about how your **existing culture of support and commitment to carers** could be utilised to support your employees with caring responsibilities, such as inviting employees to existing carers' groups. You could also try something new, as one

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award-winning NHS employer did, by running lunchtime roadshows for employees, supported by a local carers' organisation, and piloting monthly lunchtime carer surgeries, based in the canteen and run by a carers' organisation.

- If you have an existing, or looking to developing a new, **staff health and wellbeing plan**, think about how support for working carers could be highlighted and included in that plan. It is important to ensure that working carers have an environment and opportunities that encourage and enable them to lead healthy lives and make choices that support their wellbeing. The NHS [Health and Wellbeing Framework](#) sets out standards for NHS organisations to help them support staff to feel well, healthy and happy at work. It sets out clear actionable steps and provides guidance for organisations to develop and deliver a staff health and wellbeing plan.
- Working later in life and **supporting an older workforce** will be a major issue for organisations in health and care over the next 20 years. Over half of NHS staff are over 40 (a third are over 50) so the NHS workforce is ageing ([Royal College of](#)

[Nursing, 2016](#)). These figures, plus the fact that the peak age for caring is 50-64 ([Carers UK, 2019](#)), mean it's vital for employers in the health and social care sector commit to managing and supporting an older workforce, including working carers. Acting in partnership with unions, health and social care employers can ensure staff feel valued and are prepared to lead long, healthy and rewarding careers. Introducing age-friendly policies, such as flexible retirement and an internal movement policy, can be one way of achieving this.

- Think about ways to ensure that '**at the manager's discretion**' in your workplace policies is interpreted consistently and fairly by managers throughout the organisation. Consider how you will engage with managers to raise awareness about working carers and the impact their role has on individuals at work.

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NEXT STEPS

- The [Sustainable Care Programme](#)'s research team studying **Combining work and care** will combine these findings about health and social care organisations with our research findings on support for working carers in private sector organisations and central government departments.
- The research will examine the sustainability of care leave policies and their consequences for employees' wellbeing and organisational effectiveness.
- Workshops will be arranged, with selected employers and other stakeholders, to explore progress, monitoring and success measurement tools designed to assess the business benefits of supporting working carers.
- The team will also develop a framework, linking working carers' challenges to technological solutions (the "Working Carer's Technology Toolkit").
- The research findings will be disseminated to employer, employee, policy and practitioner audiences.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This research focuses on how organisational effectiveness can be enhanced by modernising support for working carers, and is linked to the [Sustainable Care: connecting people and systems](#) programme. Modernising support for working carers is a major and growing issue impeding productivity and organisational effectiveness across all industrial sectors. This research engages with businesses alert to the benefits of eliminating unnecessary costs and of modernising workforce management by helping employees remain active and productive when caring for an older, sick or disabled person, and will extend this approach to a wider and more diverse range of organisations.

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