Support for employees who combine paid work with unpaid care: 2

Summary

This policy brief draws on the experience of four private sector employers 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 private sector.
Support for employees who combine paid work with unpaid care

**EMERGING FINDINGS**

The private sector employers with working carer support in place we studied see caring responsibilities as something any employee or individual may have, at any stage of their career. As one HR team member put it, weaving a carer focus into all workplace policies means that much of ‘what we do’ as an employer supports employees with caring responsibilities; it can involve ‘smart working, health and wellbeing, time off work, etc.’ (Diversity and Inclusion team member).

Having a **smart workplace** and policies in place to encourage this is how two of the private sector employers were providing support for working carers. A smart workplace uses technology to allow work to be done beyond the four walls of the office, enabling employees to work from anywhere, on any device, and still be as productive as if they were in the physical workplace. For one private sector employer a focus on outcomes rather than time spent at work supports this:

> “When we look at various adjustments that people might need from a provision of technological equipment standpoint, or whatever it might be, we recognise that actually caring responsibilities mean that people might need to work in a slightly different way, might need to have flexible options and so for us we make sure it works its way through everything that we do.” Diversity and Inclusion team member

The smallest company we studied (270 employees) had introduced a **Carer Passport** scheme. This was seen as a way of helping to improve and embed identification, recognition and support for working carers within the organisation. The scheme provides a straightforward way to discuss and document the flexibility and support a business can give to enable employees to combine caring with work.

A member of the HR team explained the Carer Passport as a ‘way of recording the conversations that I’m having, what was agreed, and to keep reviewing it. Because what I’ve found with carers is that their needs change all the time’. In some cases, the Carer Passport works much better for this business and its employees than a formal request for flexible working, which can take time to process and requires a managerial decision. The company recognises that working carers often need a quick response, with additional flexibility:

> “An employee with caring responsibilities may say, ‘This is what I need for the next year’; but often it’s ‘This is what I need right now’, and then in two weeks’ time it’s this, and actually in a month’s time it’s this... and so I review things regularly, using that, and just make changes when I need to. So, it’s quite a live thing.” HR team member

For the larger private sector employers especially, **line manager training** plays a key role in raising awareness about working carers and the impact line managers have on individuals at work. It can also help line managers to identify employees with caring responsibilities and provide flexibility and support.

One of the large private sector employers we studied builds support for working carers into many of the scenarios it uses to train line managers, particularly in face-to-face training sessions:

> “There is often a caring scenario and sometimes it’s caring as it relates to a sibling or assisting with another family member, and sometimes it’s when there’s a significant, or emergency change in a situation and how do you then go about dealing with that”. Diversity and Inclusion team member

These training sessions are delivered as ‘**almost actor based training**’. A scenario is presented, and line managers are asked to take on the role as they would in a meeting with an employee— for example, at a performance management meeting. What they say and do is then discussed by session attendees to encourage thinking about how a manager might approach the scenario differently, and the key things they need to consider.

This employer also recognises the importance of line managers understanding how caring responsibilities can affect an employee’s mental health and wellbeing. Specific training on employee mental health and wellbeing is to support line managers to ‘cope with some of the stresses experienced by employees who are dealing with a caring situation during their working time’ (Diversity and Inclusion team member).
Support for employees who combine paid work with unpaid care

CHALLENGES
The three large private sector employers saw embedding an effective ‘whole organisational’ approach to understanding and supporting working carers in the organisational culture as a major challenge:

“One thing that we strive to do, and this is across the board, is to continue to provide education and awareness for all colleagues to better understand some of the circumstances and challenges that colleagues with caring responsibilities might have, so that they are more understanding and more empathetic, and aware of some of those challenges. So, it’s looking at how to filter that awareness and education across the whole organisation in the quickest and most effective way possible.”  
Diversity and Inclusion team member

DEBATES & IDEAS
For these private sector employers striving to be ‘an employer of choice’ is a reason why support for working carers is so important:

“As an organisation our motivation really comes from recognising that we are focused on being a magnet for talent across the firm, and really have a desire to source talent from the biggest and broadest talent pool possible, and so for us we recognise that every individual will have slightly different familial circumstances which do not inhibit them doing a good job in terms of what we hire people to do, but might mean that they approach their time in work slightly differently.”  
Diversity and Inclusion team member

One of the larger private sector employers also recognises the skills and experiences employees might have gained from their role as a carer:

“We recognise that carers are a very valuable talent pool, and if you look at a lot of things that carers might have to do outside of work, a lot of those skills are transferable to the workplace. So, whether it’s, you know, managing time very, very efficiently; having a difficult conversation; coping with pressure; etc., etc. A lot of those things are things that in a work place context are really valuable gems that we look to harness to help us to deliver what we do. And so, what better pool of talent could we have than individuals who have caring responsibilities?”  
Diversity and Inclusion team member

One of the benefits this small firm offers to support its working carers is a flexi-system. Employees clock in and out and their hours are banked and recorded; anything over standard hours can be used later to help with caring commitments, other family responsibilities or to manage transport arrangements. Working carers can also be paid for hours they have not worked, and make these up later:

“If someone had quite sudden caring responsibilities, they would be paid as normal, but would just have a negative balance on their hours that we could worry about later or manage as we go along. This is used quite a lot, especially when something first happens, and people need that kind of support. So, this is all wrapped up within our flexi-system, which everybody has access to.”  
HR team member

KEY MESSAGES
Based on our research in these four companies, our ‘good practice’ recommendations are:

• Think about how a smart workplace can support working carers. Consider all the elements that make up the smart workplace, including a digital workplace and flexible working policies. Workplace flexibility puts freedom and autonomy in the hands of employees, allowing them to determine their work schedule, among other priorities. This can generate high satisfaction and employees are more likely to be focused, dedicated and productive.

• Consider the use of an Employer Carer Passport Scheme as a way of supporting working carers. An Employer Carer Passport scheme can help raise awareness of support available for carers, develop communication at all levels of an organisation and develop consistency, creating a supportive workplace culture that is good for business and good for staff. The Carer Passport website makes the case for setting up a Carer Passport scheme, and provides resources and guidance to help transform recognition and support for carers.

• Line managers play a key role in implementing carer-friendly policies and practices and will benefit from specific training that helps them to provide effective support to carers. Member organisations of Employers for Carers, and their employees, get free access to guides and resources specifically designed to help make working and caring easier. These include a Line manager e-Learning module, designed for line managers, HR, Diversity &
Inclusion and other teams who may need to support colleagues in any workplace setting.

- **An organisational culture** that allows carers to be open about their situation is crucial if the policies and practices are to be used by the very people they are intended for. Building an open culture, with equality of opportunity for all, is an essential part of ensuring employees with caring responsibilities can balance work and care. Employers may adopt many good workplace policies and practices to attract and retain carers, but these are unlikely to be successful if the organisational culture is not supportive and inclusive. The culture and working environment needs to welcome and accommodate employees with caring responsibilities. No one solution that fits all, as different organisations have different work cultures, but policies and practices that support working carers should be demonstrated and ‘alive’ in the working environment. They should be understood and accepted at every level of the organisation (Employers for Carers, 2018).

- Being an ‘employer of choice’ is not necessarily about paying a competitive salary. Communicating clearly that your firm is working carer friendly, and promoting the additional support it offers, will help you become an ‘Employer of Choice’, as well and recruit and retain skilled and committed employees.

- Think about introducing a **flexi-system** to help support working carers, especially if this is something you have not thought about before, perhaps because yours is a small company or in the manufacturing sector. A flexi-system can work for all types of employers, and allows employees to vary their contracted working hours within agreed limits, varying their start and/or finish times and lunch breaks, provided they are present to meet business needs. It can help put working carers in control of their work and personal lives.

The support of the Economic & Social Research Council (award ES/S002480/1, Enhancing organisational effectiveness by modernising support for working carers) is gratefully acknowledged. We also thank Employers for Carers and Carer Positive for their generous time and help.

### NEXT STEPS

- The Sustainable Care Programme’s research team studying **Combining work and care** will combine these findings about private sector organisations with our research findings on support for working carers in other private sector organisations and central government departments.
- The research will examine the sustainability of care leave policies and their consequences for employees’ well-being 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.

This policy brief was prepared by Mandy Cook, edited by Sue Yeandle and designed by Kelly Davidge.