

While the Carers Action Plan is welcome, it is not good enough in itself



Two years after the government consulted on the next steps for a Carers Strategy, the Department of Health and Social Care has published its 'Carers Action Plan'. [Melanie Henwood](#) explains that, although this provides some assurance to carers that they are on the government's agenda, the action plan must be followed through with demonstrable objectives in the forthcoming green paper.

On June 5, Caroline Dinenage, the Minister of State for Social Care published a cross-government '[Carers Action Plan 2018-2020](#)' and stated it was "an essential step towards realising the Government's commitment to value, recognise and support carers." Almost 20 years ago, in 1999, the first National Carers Strategy was published and focused on improving the quality of life for 'informal' (mainly family) carers through improved information, support, and care. The idea of a strategy was widely welcomed and seen as a step beyond the warm words and platitudes which politicians often relied on when acknowledging the vital role of carers to supporting people in the community. In 2006 a 'New Deal for Carers' was promised, and the updated strategy was published in 2008. By 2018, the vision of this document was that carers would be universally recognised and valued as fundamental to strong families and communities, and specifically:

Support will be tailored to meet individuals' needs, enabling carers to maintain a balance between their caring responsibilities and a life outside caring, whilst enabling the person they support to be a full and equal citizen.

Few would claim that this vision has been achieved in full. In 2010, the next steps for the carers strategy identified four priority areas for action over the following four years:

- identification and recognition of carers;
- realising and releasing potential;
- a life outside caring;
- and supporting carers to stay healthy.

Thereafter, things went rather quiet. The priorities were ones that commanded general support and consensus, but the idea that they were being driven by a clear strategy was less in evidence. Fast forward to 2016 and a 'call for evidence consultation' was made by the Department of Health to better understand the needs of carers and what might best be done to support them to "enjoy a happy and healthy life alongside caring." The consultation ended in June 2016 and it was anticipated that an updated version of a national carers strategy would soon follow. It didn't, despite considerable discussions behind the scenes, rapid research being commissioned to inform developments, and more than 6,800 responses to the consultation. The unexpected General Election in spring 2017 brought further delays with the official purdah and social care suddenly becoming a political hot potato.

A Green Paper on funding adult social care (or more particularly funding older people's social care) is due 'before the summer', and in his first speech on social care in March 2018, Jeremy Hunt announced that a principle for reform would be that carers would be central to the new social care strategy, and ahead of the Green Paper, "we will publish an action plan to support them." So that document has now been published, and whether it has been worth the two-year wait needs to be questioned. It is a mixed verdict on the evidence to-date.

The Ministerial Foreword provides the assurance that:

the Government recognises that there is still more to do. That is why the needs of carers will also be central to the forthcoming social care green paper. Carers are vital partners in the health and social care system and a sustainable settlement for social care will simply not be possible without focusing on how our society supports carers.

Such a statement is welcome and important, and we must reserve judgement at this stage to see what the green paper will do to deliver this vital support. Meanwhile, the action plan as it stands identifies five priorities emerging from the response to the call for evidence:

- Services and systems that work for carers;
- Employment and financial wellbeing;
- Supporting young carers;
- Recognising and supporting carers in the wider community and society;
- Building research and evidence to improve outcomes for carers.

The plan goes on to list 64 actions being undertaken across government departments that address the priorities, as it says – giving visibility to the work that is being done or is planned within government. As such, it reads more as a summary list than as an ‘action plan’. There are few surprises here and many of the actions are expressed at a high level of generality and are descriptive.

The carers sector has largely welcomed the publication, particularly the announcement that consideration is to be given to exploring dedicated employment rights for carers, alongside existing employment rights, to ensure that any proposals for carers leave are effective and robust. The announcement of a Carers Innovation Fund to develop and promote “creative and cost-effective models that look beyond statutory services to develop carer friendly communities” has also been welcomed.

However, the issue of additional resources to fund support for carers is conspicuously absent, and has been greeted with disappointment by the sector. Similarly, some groups of carers have been given greater attention than others, and in some areas – notably with young carers – this might be seen as disproportionate to their numbers. Certainly the needs of older carers, especially of spouse and partner carers who are often providing mutual support in an increasingly fragile arrangement, remain relatively overlooked and poorly understood by comparison.

The fact that the plan is a cross-departmental document with multiple ministerial signatories is positive and recognition that a commitment to carers has to go beyond health and social care. The Minister for Care is to be responsible for reviewing progress on the commitments in the action plan twice a year, and this too is to be welcomed in giving some ongoing momentum to a strategy that appeared to have stalled.

Successive governments have identified and signed up to the need to recognise, value and support carers. Some of the iterations of the strategies and commitments have been more dynamic and challenging than others, and there are risks that familiar words and concepts fail to offer anything tangible unless accompanied by genuinely ambitious and meaningful aspirations and targets.

The action plan was published just in advance of National Carers Week (11-17 June); it will provide some assurance that carers have not slipped off the ministerial radar, but it will have considerably stoked expectations for more fundamental commitment and demonstrable objectives to be integral to the forthcoming green paper. Without that follow through the action plan will be insufficient, and as Peggy Lee memorably reflected, carers will be left wondering: is that all there is?

About the Author



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