

Towards a Participation Income for Family Carers

Introduction

The research report Towards a Participation Income for Family Care was commissioned by Family Carers Ireland and researched by a team of researchers in the Department of Sociology Maynooth University, co principal investigators Prof Mary Murphy and Dr Pauline Cullen supported the work of paid Research Assistant, PhD students Shane Gough. The final report was discussed in the audio visual room of the Irish parliament in June 2023 and subsequently distributed to all members of the Irish parliament. We welcome the opportunity to discuss the research proposal with you in the Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, today 11th Oct 2023 and mark the occasion with a new online infographic of our research proposal which we have distributed alongside this opening statement.

Since June 2023 IHREC have published a new policy statement on care in July 2023 [Policy Statement on Care \(ihrec.ie\)](https://www.ihrec.ie/publications/policy-statement-on-care). It approaches care in a very broad sense, including childcare, education etc, but includes specific recommendations related to family carers, with the Commission recommending:

‘the Department of Social Protection indexes social protection rates for family carers to wages and increases the level of income disregard for Carer’s Allowance, as immediate measures. We also recommend that the State establishes an implementation group to progress further recommendations on ensuring income adequacy for family carers, including the establishment of a participation income’. The November 2020 NESC report on the Future of the Irish Social Welfare System Participation and Protection <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/the-future-of-the-irish-social-welfare-system-participation-and-protection/> also advanced a way to use income support as Participation Income to value socially useful work including care work.

The context in which this research was undertaken includes recent initiatives relevant to better valuing care work including the Commission on Pensions and Commission on Tax and Welfare, Sláinte Care, Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality, the Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality, and the forthcoming Referendum Art 41.2, which speaks to gender, care and family and is seen by many as a way of socially valuing unpaid care work in the family and community. There are clear gendered dynamics with the shift to family and community based care likely to reinforce existing care inequalities. Census 2022 discussed in the report confirmed how demographic changes will impact on dependency ratios putting pressure on society to support the care needs of an ageing population.

While arguing for innovation and a new payment we also see the value in where possible constructively building on the seeds of the present and acknowledge positive features of the present which should be retained including the recently established principle of socially valuing care reflected in pension policy, and in present carers income support policy, the half rate payments for eligible claimants, the 1.5 payment for those caring for more than one person, and non means tested respite and other grants.

Against this background and the above recognition of positive features of present policy, there is growing concern about and acknowledgement of the poor capacity of Carers Allowance to recognise, value, reward and redistribute family based care work between the family and the state, society and the market, and between women and men. This research aimed to innovate policy solutions beyond the present policy package but building on the deeds of the future that might be found in present policy.

Methodology

A feminist methodology informed our approach, reflecting the need to respect and learn from different forms of knowledge, to ensure research does not reinforce care hierarchies and to give voice to those in receipt of care and performing care work.

A feminist methodology included academic and policy literature, and incorporated feminist literature on valuing care, international comparisons of how care is valued and an analysis of social welfare policy approaches to valuing participation. The research was grounded in qualitative interviews with unpaid family carers which confirmed the limitations of the means test and the inadequacy of carers allowance to support dignified and appropriate care. The merging of knowledge process allowed different stakeholders (academics, public servants, NGO's and family carers) to examine from the findings of the qualitative interviews from which this proposal for a Participation Income for Family Care (including recommendations and an implementation timeline) was developed.

The interview data findings were striking and affirmed the need for an approach to valuing family care that goes beyond Carers Allowance. The findings highlighted the personal and social impacts of care, low income, dependence, devaluation, exhaustion and depletion

"identity stripped away from me" "I don't feel useful in society anymore" "I don't have freedom. I don't have independence." "we don't have a life" "[The State] don't value carers whatsoever" "you do it out of love, but love's not paying enough" "We're nurses, doctors, dieticians, everything in one" **You don't have the right to be sick** "Anything to do with special needs is really expensive"

The difficulty of navigating carers allowance was which was found to be complicated, invasive and intrusive. ..., The requirement for assessment of family income, the requirement for reassessment and the form filling were all noted in a negative light.

"Fighting, fighting for everything, for speech and language, for occupational therapy, for physiotherapy, for school places. You're fighting for everything all the time. That's the most challenging." "It's [dealing with services/DSP over the phone] horrible. It's degrading. Some of them are very degrading." "We didn't have a choice, really. One of us were going to have to give up work and that was it." "There is like a really long soul destroying form [for carer's allowance]" "The application form is very invasive." "You feel like you're begging for something you're entitled to. I worked all my life and paid tax all my life." "you're living in fear of reassessments because the reassessments are made so difficult."

Care work and the role of family in providing care is largely invisible in our understanding of how our society and economy works. The proposal seeks to make visible the role of family and particularly the person requiring additional care and the person providing care (often women). The aim is to value such work. Our present income support system, largely comprising means tested ungenerous social assistance payments, labour market dependant social insurance payments and occasional age related universal payments fail to provide mechanisms to value socially useful work outside the paid labour market. A new form of payment, a Participation Income (PI) is needed.

Advancing the proposal

The idea of a PI is not new and has been part of academic discussion since 1995 (Atkinson 1995, Murphy 2023), and is now a mainstream part of debate about income support reform in the context of the care crisis, gender inequality and societal challenges such as climate change. The idea of a conditional universal income that, when aligned with basic services, is adequate to meet people's needs is now common in international (Hilliam 2022, Pochet 2023) and Irish debate (Dukelow and Murphy 2022, IHREC 2023, NESC 2020). This research proposal examines the idea in the context of a new approach to valuing family care so that Carers Allowance would be replaced by a Participation Income for Family Care. Core is breaking the link between carer payments and working age logics.

A PI for Family Carers, grounded in the findings of both the literature review and the qualitative interviews, stresses first and foremost the overwhelming importance of services in capacitating good care. There are key issues associated with the design and implementation of a PI for Family Carers, and complex choices determining eligibility and entitlement and easing the difficulties family carers find in navigating the present system. The nuanced trade-offs between designing a payment and incorporating adequacy, coverage, and practical or political feasibility will ultimately determine cost.

The methodology incorporated a 'merging of knowledge' process where a number of individuals representing different forms of knowledge (carers, NGO's, policy design and implementation, academics and policy analysts) were invited to assess a straw man proposal from a number of perspectives including entitlement and eligibility, adequacy, gender equality, reciprocity and conditionality, institutional capacity and political feasibility. The strawman proposal located the PIFC in a context of provision of comprehensive accessible services, and also recognised the need for social contract and support institutions for both the person in receipt of care and the person(s) undertaking care work. Both of these, services and support institutions, are necessary alongside the income support to support family care.

While complex issues were debated without a view to consensus the merging of knowledge exercise enabled us as researchers to advance the proposal for a PI to valuing unpaid family care work. Such an approach can enhance recognition of care work while also maintaining links to the paid labour market, and enhance equality with impacts on specific groups, particularly women. We note any proposal should be subject to comprehensive equality proofing and impact assessment.

Proposal

It is the academic researcher's job to critically consider the full range of issues concerning any proposal, however it is the policy makers job to advance blueprints that can be accurately costed. Using costings prepared by the Parliamentary Budget Office the analysis finds little cost difference (circa €10m pa) between a proposal that maintains high level income thresholds of 100,000 euro and complete abolition of means testing. Following this logic we recommend **no means test** for a PIFS. In this context the estimated known cost of shifting to a PI for Family Carers is affordable, at €397 additional expenditure pa. The dynamic cost which includes behavioural changes which might impact on take up is more difficult to estimate and ultimately depends on design and implementation decisions. The Department of Social Protection should administer the income support on behalf of the parent department with main responsibility for care. The core recommendations can be summarised by the following four recommendations. All proposals should centre the person in need of care at the core of any reimagined social contract between the state, society, market, family and those in need of care and providing care and should be equality proofed.

- Introduce a non means tested Participation Income for Family Carers by 2027
- While the payment will likely be introduced following present rates, we recommend that adequacy of the payment reflect the ongoing income indexation and benchmarking processes recommended by the Commission on Tax and Welfare. Continue the principle of socially valuing care reflected in pension policy, the half rate payments for eligible claimants and the 1.5 payment for those caring for more than one person.
- In 2024 establish an implementation group reporting to the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion, the group should work within co-production principles including a wide group of stakeholders and utilising a variety of knowledges to develop the new PIFC income support
- In 2023 establish a navigation working group to examine existing and future processes of administrating care payments and methods of proving eligibility of medical care need and of care provision, ensuring these are respectful of claimant's dignity and enabling of capacity.
- The timeline for implementation should begin in Autumn 2023 with consideration by the Cabinet Sub Committee for Social Inclusion and the Oireachtas Committee for Social Protection.

To conclude, it is important to note that the scale of research was limited, funding was circa €20k, and the academic contribution was pro bono. In promoting a Participation Income for Family carers the researchers do not wish to imply any hierarchy of care and recognise the value of care in the wider community and capacity of a wider Care Income to value, support and redistribute such care. This research was and remains a valuable opportunity to expand the debate on how income support and services can be more care focused and how a Care Income can enable society meet core societal challenges including care, gender equality and wellbeing as well as climate change.

Ends

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