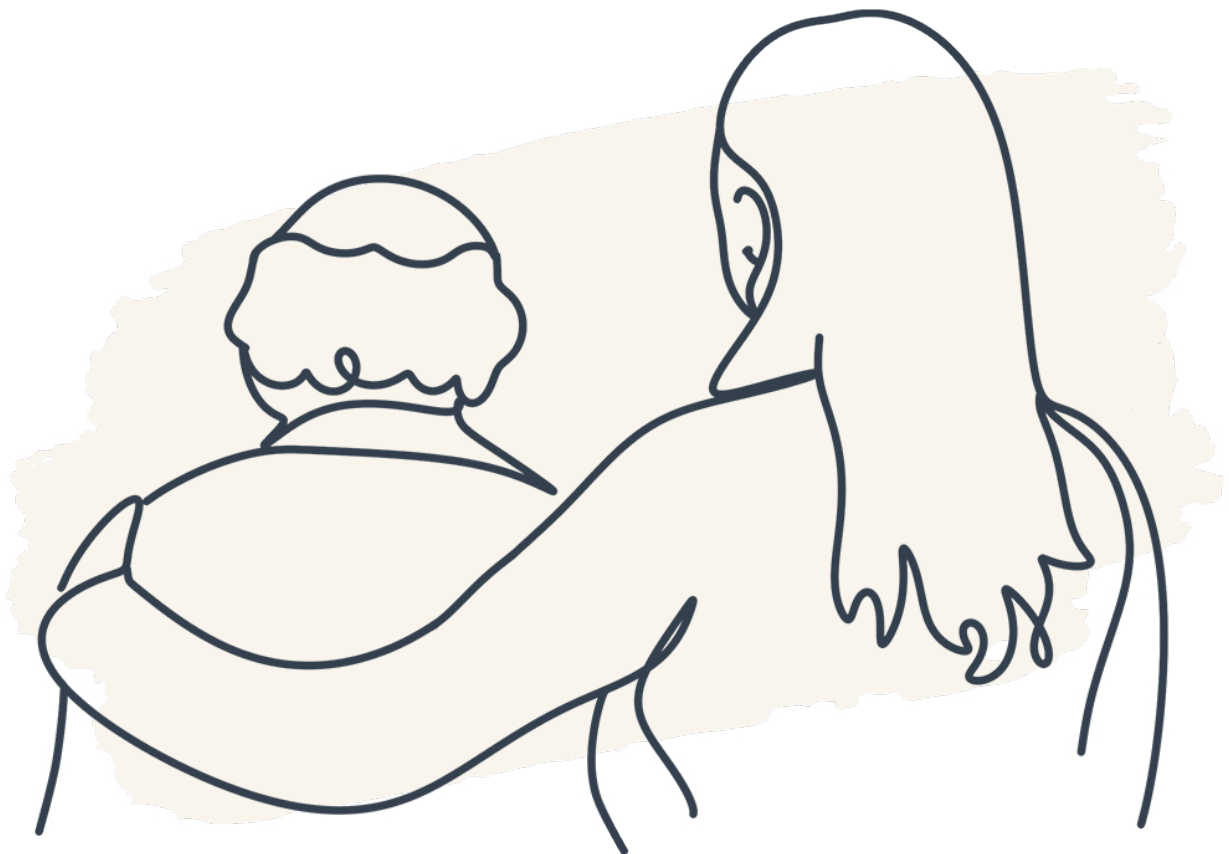


INSIGHTS
BRIEFING:
March 2025

Ageing society: Managing work and care

Insights from adults balancing work
whilst caring for ageing parents



Carents[®]

Summary

Working adults are increasingly stepping up to fill the gaps in care and give their ageing parents the support they need to live independently. There are around 4 million UK adults currently providing this support. Identifying as carers, they represent over half (57%) of all unpaid carers in the UK and as society ages the numbers will grow.

The challenges of combining work with care lead to around 10% (400,000) leaving the workforce every year, whilst others reduce their hours or struggle on. The costs to carer wellbeing, finances, UK business and the economy amount to billions of pounds annually.

In this report, we present the insights from a series of focus groups and conversations with working carers.

They emphasise a pressing need for businesses and policymakers to recognise the needs of the growing care-giving generation and provide better support to help them stay economically active whilst providing essential support for our ageing population.

Whether you are a policymaker, leader, manager or an economist, we hope that this report will help you to understand more about the realities of combining work and care-giving and that you will be inspired to find solutions.

HELEN'S STORY

“

My parents did not have to care like we do. As the population gets older and older more people will go through this awful situation. We should be heard.

”



Context and background

Society is ageing with significant implications for policy, public services, business and families.

Although UK adults are living longer than ever before, many are finding that those extra years of life are blighted by health problems which make it difficult to live independently. As a result, more working adults are stepping up to give their ageing parents the care and support they need. These carers do so without hesitation, helping with everything - shopping, banking, healthcare and even personal care. It is something they want to do, are proud to do and will continue to do as long as they are needed but many feel ill equipped for the role and encounter multiple challenges along the way.

Unfortunately, combining work with care isn't easy and many carers find themselves reducing their hours or leaving the workplace altogether. It is a situation which is costly for them, for business and for the UK economy making it essential to find ways to enable carers to work and care.

A GROWING PHENOMENON

A combination of factors, including an ageing population and more people living with multiple chronic conditions, mean that the number of people providing informal care to family and friends has increased rapidly.¹ The average person in the UK now has a 50% chance of becoming a family carer by the time they are aged 50.²

The most common type of family care is provided by carers - adults caring for ageing parents or relatives. The absolute numbers vary depending on the survey, we estimate there are around 4 million carers in the UK; around 1.4 million adults are sandwich carers supporting dependent children and adult relatives.³

Statistics show that 57% of all unpaid carers are caring for a parent or grandparent⁴ and these carers are more likely to be female, aged in their 50s and 60s^{5,6}.

Unpaid care in the UK has been valued in excess of £184 billion annually.⁷

CHRISTINE

“

I am one of a huge army of Working Carers. We are balancing our paid work whilst caring for our elderly parents. It's tougher than you can ever imagine until you get to this place.

”

SUPPORTING CARENTS

Providing care is demanding, and the evidence shows that it can have a negative impact on physical, mental or financial wellbeing.⁸ Different types of family carers have different needs for support⁹ and there is a lack of evidence about how best to support carents.¹⁰

There is an urgent need to find solutions for carents as experts predict that the number of dependent older people in the UK will increase by 113% by 2051.¹¹



HELPING CARENTS TO STAY IN WORK

Working offers multiple benefits for individuals such as financial stability, or better health and wellbeing.¹² Yet employment is one of the greatest challenges facing carents. The struggle to maintain their own wellbeing whilst combining work and care is often so great that they reduce their paid working hours or leave employment altogether. Few return to work after their caregiving responsibilities end.¹³

It is thought that around 400,000 carers leave their jobs each year to provide family care for relatives costing the UK economy around £6 billion in lost taxes and additional benefits. One study found that more UK carers exit employment than elsewhere in Europe.¹⁴

“There’s probably a wide pool of talented people out there who are struggling to balance... it’s important that they should offer that opportunity for people to be able to balance caring for an elderly parent and working as well because there’s so many other people.”

(A’s story)

Businesses also face challenges - they lose talented people often in their 50s and 60s - in whom they have invested significant time and money.¹⁵ All occupational groups are affected – one analysis found that the proportion of women providing care in management or professional roles was increasing.¹⁶ The cumulative costs to employers of a carer leaving the workplace can amount to 50-150% of their salary¹⁷ which would equate to £20 -60K per employee based on current average earnings.¹⁸

EXCERPT FROM
A’S STORY

“

I just think we are living longer. We’re getting older and we’re going to be in the same position. I just hope that we continue to find ways to give quality of life to an older person who is housebound and for families to have the information there of what they can do, to give them that quality of life.

”

ABOUT THE FOCUS GROUPS AND CARENT STORIES

The focus groups were led, organised and facilitated by Christine Bell in partnership with Carents®, Centre for Facilitation and Nifty Fox Creative.

Christine has found the Carents® Lounge^a community to be an invaluable source of support whilst caring for her own mother, her mother in law and now her father. As part of her own ambition to make life easier for working carents, she joined forces with us to find a way to amplify carents' voices and prompt action using her skills as a facilitator to support the focus group process.

There were 3 focus groups during January 2025, held at different times of day to accommodate working carents' availability. The focus groups provided space for working carents to share their experiences of balancing work with the care for their elderly parents.

Carent stories

Following the focus groups, two carents were inspired to share their own stories.

These two different stories illustrate common challenges for working carents and their employers – uncertainty, long timescales and progressing demands. Both stories show how extensive the time commitments can be when it comes to caring for an ageing parent and how the level of responsibility can grow – often unpredictably – over time.

A describes how her first employer was very supportive during a crisis but was unable to accommodate her needs in the longer term and so she moved to another company. Helen describes how her commitments steadily increased over the course of ten years and became so onerous that she left work altogether.

HELEN'S STORY

“

I think we should share our stories. Only those going through this will understand. We have to make the next generation understand what is going on so improvements can be made for them.

”

Helen's story

Helen described how she...

"Supported both parents for about 10 years. Gradually doing more and more for them. It started with helping with the garden and DIY, taking them out. Continuing to take them shopping and to all appointments.

Insidiously the time spent with them grew more and more. As dad got frailer, I took over banking, shopping, gardening, decorating, DIY. More time spent with them than in my own home. I have not had a week's holiday since 2017. I live 45 mins drive away.

Dad died in 2020, and since then mum has steadily needed more and more support. I was trying to work and care but my stress levels, as well as going through the menopause were unsustainable so I took early retirement from NHS in 2022.

Each year has seen more and more time spent caring until 7 months ago when I had to move in with mum to provide 24/7 care."





A's story

A was unable to join the focus groups due to time pressures but wanted to share her story anonymously so that others can see that it is possible to successfully combine work and care.

A is working full-time and caring for an elderly parent. Her employer is very happy with A's performance but does not know about her caring commitments. A is concerned that being too open might cause unnecessary problems at work.

"I already feel guilt, you know, sometimes when I have to do that doctor's appointment, or I have to make that phone call about his medication."

"When this role came up knew I could balance it. And I just thought I want to give it a go and show them what I can do, you know, without them knowing that I'm also caring for mum/dad. So, if it did come to a point where I did have to say something, I could at least say well actually for the last 12 months I've been doing exactly this so it's no difference so yeah, I think that I just didn't want I think there might be a prejudgment"

A's parent lives at home and is housebound due to advanced heart and lung diseases. For the last 2-3 years s/he has relied on A and her sister for everything - meals, medicines, housework, dressing and bathing.

"S/he does not leave the house. S/he sits in the chair all day watching TV and then just goes to bed. And s/he just waits for us to bring him/her food and sit with them and s/he always keeps saying to us "I am so glad to see you every day, you know."

They have tried a care agency but that didn't work out so now it's just A and her sister.

"unfortunately, it wasn't the greatest. Mum/dad had it for a couple of weeks, but we and s/he were feeling it wasn't the best."

In her previous job, A's manager was supportive, but they could not give the flexibility that she needed to give her parent the support they needed.

"I worked with a previous employer where they didn't offer flexible working for anyone unless they lived 50 miles away or above. And I was very transparent about my parent. In fact, that's when s/he was in a hospital with heart surgery and they were really supportive and they gave me an opportunity to go to the hospital and see her/him, leave work a little earlier and everything. But then when I approached this subject, could I look at working flexibly, which I could do in my role completely, they basically said no. They couldn't offer me that because then they would have to offer it to everyone. So yeah, so I couldn't get that as an opportunity."

So, A changed job around 6 months ago and her new role allows her to work from her parent's home three days per week. She arrives early in the morning to organise breakfast and works from there so that she can provide supervision, companionship, lunch and other essential tasks throughout the day. In the evening, she returns to her own home and her husband.

"Luckily, I have a very supportive husband so when I come home I can be really honest about how I'm feeling and he knows I'm just tired. Sometimes I think I neglect the other people around me too."

This arrangement is working well for everyone concerned. A's employer is happy with her performance and A is content that, despite being exhausted, she is giving her parent the help and support they need.

"So it's working... it's tiring though. Because we're constantly thinking we can't make plans because we need to make sure we're there... I can't go away and have a break... sometimes I do get a little bit low about it."

"What's great is the change with maternity leave and paternity leave. It's fantastic. It wasn't there for me when I was needing it 15 years ago... and I love seeing it now... we need to think the same way in relation to people caring for a parent and I think that's what HR departments need to do definitely."

Key insights from the focus groups

Whilst each parent's specific circumstances and care responsibilities varied, they shared many common challenges.

The overriding narrative was that working parents are struggling. They feel overwhelmed and anxious about managing their own income and their employment whilst giving their parents all the support they need. They are desperate for more support from employers and wider society.

Attendees found the conversations useful opportunities to be heard by others in similar circumstances, to share their ideas and some considering early retirement were even encouraged to stay in work.



WORKING CARENTS' PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

- Endless admin to manage their ageing parents' affairs - health, care, legal, financial matters etc
- Being constantly on call, on duty with no down time
- Day to day management of vital medicines and health appointments
- Other people – friends, managers, colleagues, who have never been a parent just “don't get it”
- Managing care remotely - the travel, the calls, the coordination and the assumption you can just drop everything for a crisis when you live miles away.
- Unpredictability of ageing parents health and care needs
- Parents they adore who are wholly dependent on them for all their practical and emotional needs
- Ongoing negotiations with ageing parents who are vulnerable but resist help and support
- The lack of support and guidance from others – health and care workers who automatically assume that parents will cope without offering any guidance or support.
- Managing their own finances and health problems.

WORKING CARENTS' EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES

Three key negative emotions emerged through the discussions

Guilt • Fear • Exhaustion

They feel **guilty** about:

- Their performance at work
- Difficult - often negative or conflicting - feelings relating to their situation eg resentment
- Neglecting other key people in their lives eg partners, children, friends
- How their own ill health might impact on their ability to care.

They are **fearful** about

- Letting people down - colleagues, partners, ageing parents
- Their finances and their work

They are **exhausted** due to

- The pressures on their time
- All the responsibilities they are juggling
- “Always being on” - on duty, on call, worrying about what might happen next,
- Sleep deprivation – working around the clock, disturbed sleep
- Travel – to work and to their parents' home
- Feeling constantly split between their own needs, their parent(s), and their others.



HOW CAN EMPLOYERS HELP?

In general, the carers were keen to work. Aside from the salary benefits, they acknowledged that work can also act as a form of respite with valuable support from, and connection to, colleagues. It can also restore balance and provide perspective preventing caring from becoming all consuming. In one group, two carers who were considering leaving work, were encouraged by others to keep working.

The carers identified a variety of solutions which had made it easier for them to continue working. These included:

- An understanding boss or manager who is willing to listen
- Supportive colleagues
- Flexible working arrangements such as compressed hours, flexible working, working from home
- A workplace that understands and respects carers' responsibilities and challenges
- Counselling paid for by work
- Leave arrangements - paid carers leave, unpaid dependency leave - arrangements which might be available but aren't necessarily advertised
- Carer support groups in and outside of work including safe spaces such as Carers® Lounge^a
- Self-employed carers using other freelancers to cover their work.

Carers also discussed their concerns about disclosing their situation in case it affected their job security, or chances of promotion. General advice emphasised the importance of having the courage to:

- Be transparent
- Ask for help
- Say no



HOW CAN SOCIETY HELP?

Carents discussed how wider social changes could make life easier for carents to combine work and care.



Their priorities related to the support available to older people and the need to prioritise care and support for those who struggle in later life.

“ It should be realised that older people need more support, eg they are not computer literate or even have smart phones, so often are excluded from health services because of this. We will all get old, but society seems to want to ignore the elderly. ”

HELEN'S STORY

Priority themes included more joined up care, more support for carents, better access to respite care and better day care facilities with opportunities to help older adults develop their digital skills.

“ I want social services to listen and understand. Listen to the carer – the patient gives a very different story. ”

FOCUS GROUP MEMBER

There was support for shorter working weeks and repeated comparisons with support for parenting...

“ No one cares about older people. There is a zillion of types of help for children. It is so different in Italy. ”

FOCUS GROUP MEMBER

and the need to better prepare adults for carenting.

“ People only talk about it once you're in it ”

“ No one prepared me for this ”

“ My life is on hold ”

FOCUS GROUP MEMBERS



Conclusions

This report provides evidence of the impact that carenting has on the wellbeing of those providing care.

It shows the emotional struggles carents face and the extra demands on their time which they endure over extended periods of time. With prevailling feelings of overwhelm and anxiety many are left feeling exhausted with little remaining bandwidth for work. Given the context, it is hardly surprising that options like part time working, or early retirement are appealing.

However, the participants recognised the value of work and wanted to remain economically active.

The attendees found it valuable to discuss and share their experiences with others who understood – a consistent experience for members of our own peer support community Carents® Lounge^a.

They also identified multiple ways employers and wider society could help. From simply understanding their challenges through to expanding respite services for older people there is plenty that employers and society can do to make life easier for working carents.

A recurring observation was the growing need to give carents the same level of support as parents.

Arguably, those attending our focus groups might not be representative of working carents. However, their concerns are supported by research with other types of carers.

We will be applying these user led insights to survey our community and establish the scale of the challenges faced by the wider carents community.

We hope that whether you are a policymaker, leader, manager, economist or simply a colleague, that this report will help you to understand more about the realities of combining work and carenting and that you will be inspired to find solutions.



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About Carents®

Carents® is an innovative digital platform which was developed to support the growing numbers of adults who provide support to ageing parents struggling to live independently. It provides information, advice and connections to help the carenting community keep themselves and their aging parents safe and well.

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