COVID-19: SUPPORTING CARERS IN THE WORKPLACE

Why employers need to respond now

Carers are all those providing care and support for people that is not part of a paid job. This includes shopping and household chores, help with household admin, remote support and also caring at a distance. More and more employees are informally caring for elderly parents and family members and the number is set to grow. The ability to support and retain informal carers in the workplace is increasingly important for UK business.

During the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak, many existing carers will need to adapt the way they balance work and caring and other employees will be taking on new caring responsibilities, many becoming carers for the first time.

Employers need to provide the right support for their working carers to help ensure their wellbeing and reduce unscheduled absences and the risk of people feeling they need to give up work altogether. Nearly half a million carers have given up work over the past two years as a result of caring[1]. But with appropriate support, carers can effectively balance caring with work.

The majority of carers are looking for employers to act as 'enabling' organisations, giving carers permission to respond as and when they need to. The following checklist will help you support your working carers.

1 in 7

of your workforce is likely to be carers for an older, disabled or ill person[1], but many will not self-identify as carers.

The proportion will be much higher when adjusted to include those caring temporarily for people with coronavirus.

43 per cent

of carers feel that colleagues and managers do not understand the impact of their caring[1].

600 people

give up work every day to care, with over 45s most likely to do so[1].

The peak age for caring is 52 to 69 and women are more likely to take on caring responsibilities than men[2].

Carers Policies	check
Review your current policies and procedures for supporting carers in the workplace in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, including flexible working, emergency leave and carers leave. Remember many employees may now be sandwich carers, caring for both older and sick people and for children now home-schooling.	
Consider providing extensions to your existing policies eg flexible working, special leave. Ideally offer specific support to carers eg up to 5 days paid self-certified Carers Leave with the opportunity to extend on agreement with you as an employer. Also consider offering the right to request flexible working from day one in the job.	
In addition consider being more flexible about how, where and when people work so that they are confident they can continue to combine work and their caring responsibilities.	
For staff still in the workplace, review rules regarding use of personal mobile phones during working hours. Allowing appropriate access to mobiles allows people to respond to caring needs more promptly which can help to reduce their anxiety.	

Communication	check
Encourage carers to self-identify - often people do not see themselves as carers. Include a definition of carers in your policies and communications (see introduction above). Remember that at present people will be supporting friends and neighbours as well as family members.	
Make sure that **all** employees know what carers support is available to them and any updates you are making now to your policies and procedures. Many people may become carers for the first time during the COVID-19 outbreak.	
Ensure that all line managers are aware of any changes you make to your caring policies and recognise that people's caring responsibilities and hence working patterns may need to change over time.	
Consult and inform any other groups/teams/suppliers who provide support to your employees eg Employee Assistance provider, employee staff networks, Trades Unions.	
Provide regular sign-posting to up-to-date information including official information and other reliable sources – see examples in the sources of information section below.	
Provide a focused FAQ resource to summarise information.	

Carers Networks	check
Ensure that Carers Networks continue to operate effectively as you adapt your ways of working to the evolving situation.	
If you can, support Networks to use technology to offer remote meetings, online or phone-based support and resources.	
Support your Network chairs and committees by providing information on digital options within your business and by sharing links to up-to-date information and guidance. If possible increase the amount of time that the chair(s) of the caring network has to fulfil their role as its likely to increase over the coming weeks.	
Draw on your Carers Network to understand the needs of your caring employees as the situation develops.	

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Carers health & wellbeing	check
Highlight information on how employees can provide caring support safely without putting their own health at risk. Make sure this information includes financial wellbeing as well as physical and mental health - many carers report borrowing money and/or taking out an overdraft due to their caring responsibilities.	
Be sure that all employees are aware of the circumstances in which they would need to isolate themselves from work colleagues.	
Check your EAP provider, if you have one, is geared up to provide support to Carers, both for information on caring and also how best to look after their own health and wellbeing.	

Sources of information on caring in the workplace	check
BITC: Supporting carers in the workplace toolkit **https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/support-carers-in-the-workplace/**	
Carers NI: offer advice for carers including guidance on contingency planning for replacement care in the event of emergencies and other unplanned changes to caring arrangements **https://www.carersuk.org/northernireland**	
BITC: COVID-19 and small business https://www.bitc.org.uk/fact-sheet/small-business-and-covid-19/	
Carers Trust NI: can help with advice on personal wellbeing, benefits and support, and can signpost for assistance with finance https://carers.org/our-work-in-northern-ireland/carers-support-service-northern-ireland	
Age NI: providing advice about older people and COVID-19 https://www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland/information-advice/coronavirus-covid-19/	
NHS: COVID-19 home page https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/	
NI Direct: COVID-19 advice for individuals and businesses **https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19**	

References

1 Carers UK 2019 'Juggling work and unpaid care: A growing issue'

2 ONS 2019 'Living longer: caring in later working life'

To find out more, please visit https://www.bitcni.org.uk/programmes/age-at-work/

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