

CARERS look after family, partners or friends in need of help because they are ill, frail or have a disability. The care they provide is unpaid.

11th July 2005

Social Security Advisory Committee
Room 344
New Court
48 Carey Street,
London
WC2A 2LS

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: The Social Security (Work Focussed Interviews Amendment) Regulations 2005

About Carers UK

Carers UK is the leading organisation representing the views and interests of the six million carers in the UK who care for their frail, disabled or chronically ill partners, relatives or friends. Carers UK is an organisation of carers, run by carers, for carers. We have a membership of carers and over 100 Branches, run by carers, throughout the UK. Carers UK have offices in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and a UK office in London. We provide information and advice to carers and professionals on benefits, rights and entitlements and receive 50,000 enquiries every year. We also have an advocacy project in London and run other projects such as Action for Carers and Employment, seeking to make a difference for carers who wish to return to or remain in employment.

Carers UK is a campaigning organisation and has been since it was established nearly 40 years ago. We continue to seek change for carers so that they are able to access the same opportunities in life as others. We aim to raise awareness of carers' issues and seek changes in the law and practical support to prevent carers from poverty, having their health and well-being affected by caring and by not having a choice about whether or not to take on a caring role. Our response is therefore based on our rights-based approach to work, our information and advice queries and our views and experiences of our membership.

Carers and Work

Numerous surveys have stressed the value of being able to go out to work and many carers would like to return to work if the right support is in place. It is important that those carers who want to work are supported to do so.

However, not all carers are able to work. It is equally important that those who are unable to work do not feel compelled to do so and have an adequate income if they are caring and not in work.

The vast majority of carers (80%) are of working age. 3 million carers already combine work and care. Women have a fifty-fifty chance of providing substantial care by the time they are aged 59 – in other words, a strong likelihood that they will become carers during their working lives. Every year, over 2 million people become carers, some overnight, some more gradually – so there is a new population of carers in the workforce every day. 3 in 5 people will become carers at some point in time.

Work commissioned by Carers UK found that the current probability of providing care of at least 20 hours per week is around 3 in 5 people at some point in their lives. This is based on our current population characteristics i.e. a population of around six million carers and a population of around 8 million disabled people. Every year, one third of carers start caring and one third cease. Half of these carers are still caring after 5 years.

Abolition of mandatory work focused interviews

Financial problems are our largest proportion of enquiries to our helpline, and many carers find themselves having to give up work because of their caring role. Many carers tell us that they find attending work focused interviews unhelpful at a time when a relative or friend may be seriously ill, or newly diagnosed with a disability. From that perspective, we welcome the abolition of the mandatory work focused interview at the start of a claim for Carer's Allowance or Bereavement Benefits. Many carers could benefit from having a WFI at a time when they are thinking of returning to work.

However, in paragraph 8 you say, for those only claiming Carer's Allowance or Bereavement Benefits, 'a mandatory WFI at the start of the claim is not appropriate for most customers as they are likely to be preoccupied with establishing their entitlement to benefit and sorting out access to caring support.' Equally, these issues apply to those carers who are also claiming Income Support and/or Incapacity Benefit (with an underlying entitlement to Carers Allowance). In the circumstances we would urge that these carers are also exempt from mandatory WFIs for precisely the same reasons you outline in your own paper.

Carers who have been called in for a mandatory work focussed interview have told us that they have found the experience stressful. For many carers caring involves providing around the clock care, and it is not realistic for these carers to return to work.

Quarterly WFIs for lone parents

The consultation also asks for views on the establishment of a quarterly WFIs

regime for lone parents with a youngest child aged at least 14 years. Whilst Carers UK entirely appreciates the rationale for this for most lone parents, we do believe that lone parents whose child is disabled should be exempt from this regime.

For the parent of a severely disabled child, caring is a lifelong commitment. Sadly, many disabled children will not achieve full independence and will need the support and care of their parents for their whole lives. As a disabled child grows older the care they need may be more and not less - for example lifting and carrying in connection with personal care may become more difficult as a child gets bigger and heavier. In some cases a child with a life limiting condition may not be expected to survive into adulthood. For such a parent to be called in every 13 weeks to 'think positively about a return to the labour market in advance of the anticipated change in their benefit status' would be, at best, insensitive. This is particularly the case for parents caring for a child who is not likely to achieve full independence in adulthood and whose caring role will be more intense as schooling finishes. We would urge that all carers in receipt of carers allowance - or with an underlying entitlement to carers allowance - are exempted from mandatory WFIs and participation is offered on a voluntary basis.

Work Focussed Interviews for partners of Incapacity Benefit Recipients

The majority of calls that Carers UK have received relating to Work Focussed Interviews have been from partners of Incapacity Benefit recipients, who have been called for interview in respect of their partner's claim. These carers have reported that being called for a mandatory interview was stressful and in some cases insensitively handled.

Carers UK would like to see an additional change to the Regulations to give carers an automatic right to have waive or defer WFIs in respect of their partner's Incapacity Benefit claim.

I hope our views are helpful to you and we would be happy to provide further information should you need us to and we would be happy to comment on the wording of the draft letter to carers if you would find this useful.

Yours sincerely



Imelda Redmond
Chief Executive Officer