

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This paper has been developed by the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) in response to the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry on employment support for carers.
- 1.2. ERSA is the representative body of the UK employment support sector. It has around 260 members spanning the public, private and voluntary sectors, with over three quarters not for profit. ERSA's members provide frontline specialist employment support to jobseekers to help them enter, remain and progress in work.
- 1.3. Responses have been collated from organisations providing a range of employment support services to jobseekers. This submission mainly addresses the following questions: *Does DWP provide adequate support for carers in employment and those seeking employment? What more could the department do?; How can the Department work more proactively with employers to support carers? What are the main barriers to employment for carers and how can these be reduced?; Is there a coherent cross-government strategy for supporting carers in employment/seeking employment?*

2. Executive Summary

- The UK's reliance on carers is likely to increase significantly, due to both an ageing workforce and the increase in retirement age. It is crucial that carers are supported to successfully combine work and care later in life, and that the individual, societal and economic value of carers is recognised more broadly.
- Caring can leave people socially isolated and furthest from the job market, as well as lacking a strong support network and advice. It is crucial that the welfare and employment support systems work effectively together and, in turn, integrate with other provision, such as health, social services and childcare to facilitate more holistic provision better suited to the individual's needs. It is not clear at present the extent to which this is happening.
- With Jobcentre Plus, the main means of providing employment support to this group, there is real concern about the application (or perception of potential application) re conditionality and sanctions in relation to those with caring responsibilities.
- A lack of flexible working opportunities is one of the main barriers to employment for those caring for others. ERSA recommends that Universal Jobmatch is reviewed to allow easier identification of jobs offering such flexibility and that third party providers are utilised to work with employers to increase the number of roles available.
- Employers are likely to need additional support, both through government means and business to business networks, to understand how better to support individuals either accessing work with care responsibilities or acquiring them within the role.
- There is currently too little specialist support available for carers, meaning that responsibility tends to sit with Jobcentre Plus coaches, who may not have training or experience in this field. 'Ex carers' are identified as an early entry group for the Work and Health Programme, but the small size of this provision means that it is unlikely that many will benefit. However, the DWP could utilise either its Flexible Support Fund or unallocated European Social Fund to increase specialist provision.

- Finally, ERSA believes that more official information should be put into the public arena re the number of individuals who are jobseeking, economically inactive and moving between the two categories.

3. Adequacy of support from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

- 3.1 The impact of care responsibilities in terms of unemployment / economic inactivity is clear. According to research by Carers UK in 2013, over two million people have given up work at some point to care for a loved one, whilst three million have reduced their working hours.¹ ERSA members have reported that the quality and availability of social care is a contributing factor to individuals leaving employment to become a full-time carer. Others have highlighted that the scarcity in specialist care for children who are disabled has also resulted in people feeling that they have little choice other than to reduce working hours or leave paid work altogether. Clearly the availability and flexibility of both childcare and social care remain significant barriers to maintaining individuals with care responsibilities to stay in employment.
- 3.2 Evidence from the employment support sector is that carers can be supported into employment if given access to the right range of support. It is important to point out that not all carers want to work or will be able to work and this is an area where individual circumstances can differ widely. Regardless it is clear that the best support is where there is a trusted long term relationship with an adviser, where employment support advice is given without risk of misapplied conditionality or sanction and where the adviser is able to act as an advocate and a broker across a range of services, potentially including social care and healthcare settings. Other support mechanisms with a good level of evidence base are in relation to peer support, mentoring and networking. However, it should be emphasised that without practical help to access alternative care for the individual receiving care whilst the carer is working (if required), that other measures to provide support are less likely to be effective.
- 3.3 Given that the government's chosen major means of providing employment support is now through the Jobcentre, it is essential that the information related to both the quality and quantity of employment support available to carers and other groups through Jobcentre Plus is robust. However, DWP still does not report on the numbers of those Jobcentre Plus has helped into work or the profile of those doing so, preferring instead to release information related to the numbers coming off benefit. Given that taking on caring responsibilities is likely to be a significant reason that individuals move from jobseeking to becoming economically inactive, that seems to be an oversight. As such, ERSA recommends that there is a greater release of information from JCP, including on the profile of individuals leaving benefit and their reasons for doing so.
- 3.4 A first step in achieving this recommendation is for Jobcentre Plus coaches to collect a greater level of information on those accessing benefit. A perfect opportunity for this is the new 'Health and Work Conversation' which JCP advisers should now have all jobseekers after their initial claim. ERSA recommends that the Department for Work and Pensions publishes an evaluation of the Health and Work Conversation, how effective it is proving for capturing information on caring responsibilities and how work coaches are acting on this information.
- 3.5 Conversely, there is concern that the choice of Jobcentre Plus as the major means of providing employment support is not conducive to helping some of the most vulnerable individuals into work, including some with caring responsibilities. In particular, ERSA's members have highlighted that fear of sanctions, rather than incentivising people to work, only exacerbates existing problems that are

¹ Carers UK and YouGov (2013) as part of Caring & Family Finances Inquiry UK Report (2014) Carers UK

faced by carers. In addition, the delays to payment experienced by those in receipt of Universal Credit and legacy benefits have too often resulted in increased financial insecurity and destitution.

- 3.6 ERSA therefore believes that there needs to be changes to the current system. First, the application of conditionality which might require individuals to carry out actions which are clearly incompatible with their caring responsibilities should be stopped. Second, where an individual is known to have a caring responsibility a sanction should not be applied. This should be part of a wider overhaul of the conditionality and sanctions regime, given that sanctions are not to be an effective means of helping people into work.
- 3.7 Finally, it is worth noting that some of the pathways towards employment for those with caring responsibilities are insufficiently flexible. Most notably this includes apprenticeship pathways, with a number of members commenting that these do not always offer the flexibility to work around childcare commitments. Work placements can also be problematic given that these can too often be fulltime hours. The nature of caring responsibilities tends to be that fulltime work is difficult and/or the individual carer needs a sufficient amount of flexibility built into their hours. This can be a challenge for employers (see below), but also can manifest itself as a problem in relation to work placements.

Case study: Young Women's Trust

The Young Women's Trust *Work It Out* service supports young women seeking work in ways which are particularly appropriate for carers on a low income. The coaching service employs professional coaches to use solution-focused coaching methods in a series of sessions over the phone or online. Delivering services through telephone, Skype, email, SMS and WhatsApp means that the cost and time of travelling to appointments is removed for young women. Services staff are also able to be responsive. For example, they can quickly put the young woman in touch with a coach who will then organise, and if necessary, easily reorganise, appointments that are convenient for the young women.

4. Employers and support for carers

- 4.1 The business case for employers in terms of supporting those with care responsibilities to enter work or remain in work is well established, particularly in the field of working parents, but with a direct translation across to those with other care responsibilities. However, whilst the rights of parents with small children are well understood within the workplace, with line managers and HR departments comfortable in navigating both law and best practice, this appears to be less the case in terms of supporting those caring for parents, partners or others. The type of support that carers require to remain or enter the workforce is well understood: access to part-time and flexible work; an understanding and supportive line manager; etc. However, the increase in the number of people requiring care, both formal and informal, means that the need for such flexible supportive workplaces has increased.
- 4.2 There are a number of ways in which flexible work could be better promoted, most familiar to the Committee. These include an entitlement to a specified amount of unpaid leave open to all workers, plus support to small businesses in order to help them see advantages of retaining staff within their workforce who have caring responsibilities. It is worth noting that even in cases where flexible working is practised, it is often offered only when the employee has been working for a significant period of time with that employer. In addition, it is clear that many employers remain concerned about the impact on or perception of other staff working with the individual needing greater flexibility.

- 4.3 Attendees at a recent ERSA roundtable on supporting female jobseekers into employment recommended that DWP review Universal Jobsmatch, making it more accessible to all, but also to increase the number of opportunities for more flexible working and part time jobs. ERSA also recommends that the search function is reviewed to enable jobseekers to identify roles which would offer flexibility.
- 4.4 For some carers, self-employment is an opportunity to work in a flexible environment that supports a person's caring duties. It is important that carers are able to access information and advice which focuses on developing self-employment skills and setting up a business. However, ERSA has concerns about the impact that Universal Credit is having on people who are self-employed, and is calling for the removal of the Minimum Income Floor cliff edge in Universal Credit that newly self-employed workers face after 12 months.² As such, ERSA is pleased that the Select Committee is looking again at this important issue.

5. **Barriers and opportunities**

- 5.1 As stated above, the barriers specific to employment for carers are well known. First, there may be a loss of confidence or skills related to time spent away from employment. Second, it is recognised that those with caring responsibilities may be under considerable pressure and might benefit with help to cope with that. However, most important of all are the issues relate to the supply of appropriate roles to fit around caring responsibilities and the ability of carers to identify these roles and present themselves for them. Aside from this, carers are likely to exhibit the same range of issues in the wider jobseeking population, whether that is related to disability, health, skills, confidence, etc.
- 5.2 In addition, it appears that the earnings limit and study rule for those on Carer's Allowance acts as a barrier those wanting to progress, earn more, or increase their hours. At the moment, a person is not eligible for Carer's Allowance if they earn more than £116 a week or are in full time education. However, it could be cogently argued that those with caring responsibilities tend to incur higher costs – and certainly save the state considerable outlay – and thus Carer's Allowance should not be means tested in this way. ERSA therefore supports calls for the regulations related to Carer's Allowance to be less stringent so that carers are able to progress in their career without fear that the Allowance will be lost.
- 5.3 In terms of overcoming barriers, the approach must be a multi-pronged one:
- First, those with caring responsibilities who are not claiming benefit must have somewhere to go to gain careers advice and employment support. It seems unlikely that Jobcentre Plus will be an obvious option for people in this situation.
 - Second, whether claiming benefit or economically inactive, there must be access to high quality employment support. This will mean one to one advice and potentially group work and peer mentoring specific to those with caring responsibilities, combined with access to the wider range of employment and skills support that should be available to anyone seeking employment.
 - Next, carers benefit from dedicated job brokerage, given that flexible and/or part time work is likely to be of most benefit to them. However, Universal Jobsmatch is not strong on this point, whilst individual jobcentre work coaches are not likely to be sufficiently resourced to work with employers in relation to creating such roles.
 - Finally, employers themselves need support to understand how best to support employees who have caring responsibilities.

² See ERSA's (2017) submission to the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into the rollout of Universal Credit and self-employment for more detail.

5.4 In terms of provision of good quality employment support and job brokerage, ERSA believes the government should look at ensuring that good quality third party provision is in place to which job coaches can refer or individuals could self-refer. This could be purchased through the Dynamic Purchasing System, which is the means through DWP is spending the Flexible Support Fund. It is worth the Committee noting that this is heading for a considerable underspend yet again. Or the DWP could opt to use much of its under allocated European Social Fund to support carers into employment.

6. Coherence of cross-government strategy

6.1 ERSA very much welcomed the 'Fuller Working Lives' strategy and the commitment to a cross-government carers strategy. However, along with many other organisations, it is disappointed that this has not yet been published. As a result, responsibility sits across several government departments and levels of government with little obvious co-ordination, with individuals, as a result, who find themselves in a caring role not always clear where to go.

6.1 In terms of the DWP policy universe, there does not seem to be a specific focus on those with care responsibilities, despite the government's focus on reducing the disability employment gap and on health related issues. To give an example, the Work and Health Programme identifies 'ex carers' as an early entry group for the programme. However, it does not specify carers themselves (potentially indicating the department believes they are economically inactive), whilst the programme is so thinly funded it seems likely that only a small number of people falling into the 'ex carer' group will benefit from the programme.

6.2 One opportunity is the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) which could be used to purchase specialist provision via the Flexible Support Fund which helps carers move towards or back into the workplace. Carers were identified as a target group in only one report for one region (North West), according to the DPS market status reports for August 2017. However, it seems likely that carers could be a priority group in all Jobcentre Plus regions. ERSA has been working with the DWP for the past year to help the provider base understand the new system and to encourage Jobcentre Plus staff to use the system to purchase specialist support in their areas. There remains concern that the system is much underused and that there will be a significant underspend as there has been in previous years.

7 Conclusion

7.1 The UK's reliance on carers is likely to increase significantly, due to both an ageing workforce and the increase in retirement age. It is crucial that carers are supported to successfully combine work and care later in life, and that the individual, societal and economic value of carers is recognised more broadly. It is clear that it is the interests of businesses to support existing employees, through flexible working practices, enhanced benefits and better support to remain in work.

7.2 This is an issue that will affect everyone at some point, whether in work and hoping to remain so, or out of work and trying to gain employment. Without real investment and a cohesive carer's strategy, carers do not stand to receive the specialist support and training they need to remain in the labour market, and Britain's economy and overall wellbeing will suffer as a result.

7.3 For more information please contact policy@ersa.org.uk