



Family Carers and the New Programme for Government

The new Government published its '[Programme for a Partnership Government](#)' on the 3rd of May 2016.

The good news is that the programme commits to a range of general measures which, if carried through, should positively impact on carers' situations. It also commits to a number of initiatives which speak to specific priorities outlined in Family Carers Ireland's Election Manifesto.

Here we take a look at these commitments in some detail; but first it is worth recognising the effort of family carers and FCI staff around the country who made sure those running for election were aware of our election priorities. The emailing, letter writing, constituency visits and election events have had an impact. However, it is also clear that sustained pressure will be required to ensure that these commitments are actually carried through.

FCI Election Manifesto and the Programme for Government Commitments

In our Election Manifesto, Family Carers Ireland called for greater fairness for carers, and asked candidates for the Dáil to commit themselves to pursuing a number of priority actions to improve carers' lives. There were five broad priority areas in the Manifesto.

1. Ensure family carers are not financially burdened as a result of their caring role

Relevant commitments:

- *We will also significantly reduce the cost of medicines by reducing the annual required co-payment on the Drugs Payment Scheme and reducing prescription charges for medical card holders. (Page 54)*
- *We will extend the entitlement to a medical card for all children in receipt of the Domiciliary Care Allowance in Budget 2017. (Page 57)*
- *We support an increase in the Disability Benefit and Allowance, Carer's Benefit and Allowance, and Blind Person's Pension, (Page 72)*

2. Create a more 'carer-friendly' health service

Relevant commitments:

- *We will increase funding for homecare packages and home help every year. (Page 54)*
- *We will improve supports and services for older people to live independently in their own home, including a provision for pension increases. (Page 82)*



- *To remain independent at home, some older people need the support of home help. Currently there are 10.3m hours funded by the HSE annually. We will increase funding for homecare packages and home help every year.*
- *The provision of home care ranges from excellent to irregular for recipients across the country. We will introduce a uniform homecare service so all recipients can receive a quality support, 7 days per week, where possible. (Page 84)*

That the Programme contains numerous references to home help and home care packages, including, most importantly, an explicit commitment to increase home help hours and the number of home care packages each year, is to be welcomed. Where a note of caution might be sounded however is in the lack of concrete detail in these commitments. While these programmes perhaps cannot be budgeted for entirely in advance, or their utilisation predicted with accuracy, there is no guarantee here that, for example, the number of packages and hours will be increased sufficiently to keep pace with a rising older population who are often living longer with chronic conditions and comorbidities. The commitment is also inconsistent with recent reports of the suspension of new packages in some areas. The programme also contains a commitment to introduce uniform home care service, which will aim to eliminate the element of geographical lottery in the current system and increase quality and accessibility of services across all regions of the country. This last commitment certainly sounds promising but further detail is required to tell whether this will have a meaningful impact for family carers.

3. Invest in the futures of young carers

Disappointingly there is no mention in the programme for government of our call to support and to invest in the future of young carers. However, the National Carers' Strategy does contain actions which speak directly to the situation and needs of young carers and a recent positive was the naming of young carers as a group needing specific supports in the National Youth Strategy. So we have frameworks through which we can push for greater recognition and supports for young carers.

4. Publish phase two of the National Carers' Strategy with ring-fenced funding for implementation

Relevant commitments:

- *A Stronger Voice for Carers
Carers are the backbone of care provision in this country. In 2012, the first ever Carers' Strategy was published. We are committed to implementing it in full. We wish to see greater involvement of family carers in the preparation of care plans, aiding the provision of care, together with more accessible training and respite care, to facilitate full support. We also support an increase in Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit as well as improved access to counselling supports for carers. (Page 74)*

For the programme to include an explicit reference and commitment to the National Carers' Strategy is very welcome, and reflects commitments secured in advance of the election from all major parties in the Dáil and from a number of independents.



While the Programme for Government does not explicitly pledge funding for the strategy's implementation, Fine Gael's pre-election response made a commitment to a "successor" to the existing, cost-neutral strategy. Fianna Fáil, who are party to the confidence-and-supply agreement supporting the government, made similar commitments to a refreshed and funded strategy (the commitments of the various parties can be read [here](#)).

Mentioned alongside the commitment to implement the Carers' Strategy is the commitment to increase Carer's Allowance and Benefit. This too is very welcome. Though the amount of increase is not detailed in the programme for government, Fine Gael's specific pre-election commitment in their manifesto was to raise the rate of Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit by €20 a week by 2021.

5. Commit to supporting issues affecting carers both nationally and locally

Relevant commitments:

- *We will invest significantly in the Housing Adaptation Scheme and the Senior Alert Scheme, which provide additional safety and peace of mind for those living at home.*
- *We will invest in and support new technologies that offer more support, confidence and value, including through the Health Innovation Hub. (Page 84)*

Other positives:

Among the notable general commitments in the areas of health and wellbeing are:

- *Efforts to increase access to safe, timely care, as close to patients' homes as possible will be a priority. (Page 5)*
- *We also recognise that the stigma associated with mental health remains and will require a wider and more concerted effort across all aspects of society, not just focussed upon our health services. There is a clear consensus that the education system – at primary and secondary level in particular – is the key to greater awareness, to cultural change, to prevention and to early intervention for the next generation. It is also clear that access and availability of both early intervention services as well as aftercare and recovery following an incident need to be developed. (Page 5)*
- *Work is underway on the drafting of this new legislation for the introduction of a new mobility scheme to assist those with a disability in meeting their increased mobility costs.*
- *Personalised budgets provide an individual with more control in accessing services, giving them greater independence and choice. (Page 72)*
- *The Government is committed to early intervention and prevention services for children. Providing earlier access to children and adults to Speech and Language Therapy can*



make a vital difference to their future opportunities in life. We will introduce a new in-school speech and language service creating stronger linkages between parents, teachers and speech and language therapists. We will also commence an in-depth review of the variation in waiting lists across the country. (Page 73)

- *We will also invest additional resources in the National Educational Psychologists Service (NEPS) to ensure earlier intervention and access for young children (and also teenagers), and offer immediate support to schools in cases of critical incidents. (Page 93)*
- *We will reduce emergency department overcrowding following a four pronged approach - to reduce numbers coming into hospital by developing primary care services and integrating primary and secondary care services, to expand hospital capacity, to support timely patient discharge from hospitals and to address hospital responsiveness to increased demand. (Page 58)*

The Programme also contains a very welcome acknowledgment of the positive role of the Community and Voluntary sector in securing equity, prosperity and progress in Irish society, and a commitment to support of the sector through multi-annual funding.

- *We want to affirm the contribution of the community and voluntary sector to building a more just and prosperous society, and its strong focus on urban and rural regeneration. Community and voluntary organisations provide the human, social and community services in all key areas of our national life. In this work they contribute to the economy as well as create value for Irish society.*

We will increase funding levels to support the sector, and develop a multi-annual funding model that focuses on quality, effectiveness and efficiency. We will produce a coherent policy framework and develop a strategy to support the community and voluntary sector and encourage a cooperative approach between public bodies and the community and voluntary sector.

We will also ensure that all commissioning for human, social and community services takes place in a societal value framework (targeted at maximising the value for society). (p. 131)

On the whole, there is much to work with and to be welcomed in the programme's commitments in areas of health, wellbeing and social inclusion. The challenge now will be to maintain pressure to ensure that these commitments are implemented in a meaningful way.