



Solas Strategy Consultation 2025 - 2029:

Submission to Solas and the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Family Carers Ireland

February 2025

Clare Duffy
Policy and Public Affairs Manager
E: cduffy@familycarers.ie / M: 086 7707 231

Family Carers Ireland, Market Square, Tullamore, Co. Offaly
E: info@familycarers.ie / W: familycarers.ie
Solas: Strategy Consultation 2025-2029

Delivering on Ireland's Skill Needs in Home Care and Disability Services and Supporting Young Adult Carers in Further Education and Training

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the opportunity to submit our views to Solas and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in setting out the strategic direction of Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland up to the year 2029.

Family Carers Ireland is a national charity dedicated to improving support and recognition for Ireland's 500,000 family carers who provide regular, unpaid care to a friend or family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability, including problems related to old age. We are an approved provider of home support services on behalf of the HSE and are **one of many providers who are struggling to deliver this service due to the chronic shortage of Home Support Workers**. As the national advocacy organisation for family carers, we also see firsthand the **dire impact that the shortage of skilled workers in the disability sector is having on families who cannot access vital supports such as respite, day services or Personal Assistance due to a lack of staff resources**. Finally, Family Carers Ireland deliver Ireland's only dedicated Young Carer Project, supporting young people with caring responsibilities aged under 18 and **young adult carers aged 18-25 years**. **The latter section of this submission will address FET issues directly affecting these young adults.**

Case for Change

A 2023 Green Paper on Home Support Workers¹ set out the complex context of challenges facing the home support sector in Ireland. In summary, major challenges include:

- **Supply challenges across the whole home support sector:** lack of strategic retention and recruitment to support roles, lack of data collection and strategic decision-making, economic pressures, staff safety and wellbeing, equality and quality of care, training and development, and collaboration and integration with other sectors.
- **Retention and recruitment difficulties for home support service providers:** staffing concerns, enhancing careers within funding constraints, quality of care issues, integration challenges, provision of training and CPD, and data collection deficiencies.
- **Challenges for individual Home Support Workers:** economic pressures of low pay, unpaid travel time and costs (although this is covered for some), unreliable work hours/times, lack of recognition, stigma/low attractiveness of the sector, accessing training and development opportunities, safety concern and ensuring quality of care delivery.

Family Carers Ireland acknowledges that the crisis in staffing within the home care and disability sectors is caused by numerous interwoven factors, the most significant of which we believe is the differential between pay and benefits being offered by the HSE and section 38 funded organisations compared with what section 39 home care providers. We acknowledge that responsibility for addressing this disparity lies with the Department of Health/HSE. Therefore, this submission focuses only on the actions that could be taken by Solas and the Department of Further and Higher Education to address skills shortages within the sector.

Scale of Demographic Change and Unmet Needs

Solas and the Department are responsible for ensuring that the Further Education and Training (FET) sector responds to the critical skills needs in Ireland, including those created by our ageing population and the increasing number of people living with a disability or chronic condition. This is not only necessary to deliver Government policy, including the principles ascribed in Sláintecare and the

¹ Green Paper on Home Support Workers. Royal College of Surgeons Ireland for Leading Healthcare Providers Skillnet. (2023).

commitment to introduce a new Statutory Home Support Scheme, but also to deliver the commitments we are obligated to under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

There has been a notable rise in the demand for homecare and disability services over the last decade, largely driven by an ageing population, an increase in chronic health conditions and disability, changes in societal attitudes (i.e. more people living alone without close family) as well as the enshrinement of rights for people with disabilities in the UNCRPD to live independently with the supports they need (UNCRPD Article 19). While this surge in demand creates opportunities, it also brings challenges, not least of which is the need for a skilled workforce to provide these services at an agreed quality standard.

- The number of people over the age of 65 is expected to reach 1.4 million by 2040, or about 23% of the total population while the number of people living with a disability recorded in Census 2022 has reached 22% of the population (approximately 1,109,557 people).
- The ESRI predict that following the introduction of the Statutory Home Support Scheme, demand for home support hours from older people alone could increase from 18.56 million in 2019 to almost 42 million hours - a 126% increase. It is important to note that the ESRI's report excludes demand that will arise from adults with a disability, who will also be eligible for the scheme when it is introduced.
- Even before the introduction of a Statutory Home Support Scheme the HSE and service providers are unable to meet the existing level of demand due to the chronic shortage of Home Care Workers, with almost 5,000 people on a waiting list for home support hours in 2024.
- A 2019 ERSI study showed that among adults who need professional home care, 83% have an unmet need.
- The Department of Health's Disability Capacity Review to 2023 found that, compared to 2018 levels, the number of adults requiring specialist disability services is expected to be 17% higher by 2032. The fastest growth will be for young adults (up a third by 2032) and over-55s (up a quarter by 2032). This will significantly impact demand for residential care and adult day services.

Strategic Workforce Advisory Group on Home Carers and Nursing Home Healthcare Assistants

Such is the extent of the challenges facing the sector Government established the cross-departmental Strategic Workforce Advisory Group (SWAG) in March 2022 to examine strategic workforce challenges in frontline carer roles in home care and long-term residential care for older people. The Group's report published in October 2022 report contained 16 recommendations spanning areas of recruitment, pay and conditions, barriers to employment, training and professional development and sectoral reform, and included a recommendation to establish a quota of 1,000 employment permits for home carers. Family Carers Ireland wishes to highlight 2 of the 16 recommendations that relate specifically to Solas and the Department of Further and Higher Education, namely:

- **RECOMMENDATION 1:** There should be a national campaign to raise the profile and promote the training opportunities available for a career as a healthcare assistant and home-support worker.
- **RECOMMENDATION 10:** A competency framework for home-support workers and healthcare assistants should be developed to enable the recognition of prior learning and qualifications, to support career development, and to align grades of employment with qualifications in line with relevant regulations. For example, providing recognition of those with specialist qualifications in reablement, dementia, and end-of-life care.

Priority actions needed to deliver Ireland skills needs in home support and disability services

In addition to the recommendations made by the Strategic Workforce Advisory Group, Family Carers Ireland recommend that the following actions be taken by Solas and the Department of Further and Higher Education:

1. Recognise home support and disability services as priority skills areas and invest in further and higher education initiatives to address staff shortage in these areas.
2. The development of a competency framework (linked to training, qualifications, grades of employment and pay rates) that would support career development and address some of the challenges around recruitment and retention of Home Support Workers (as recommended by SWAG).
3. As acknowledged in recommendation 10 of the SWAG there is a need for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a means through which previous experiences as a family carer or care worker can be identified, assessed and recognised by an educational institution as part of its programmes, courses, and/or modules on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Making it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and to be rewarded for it.
4. Under the current homecare regime progression opportunities for Home Support Workers are limited. Family Carers Ireland support the proposal being explored in the context of the Statutory Home Support Scheme to assess and deliver homecare under a new system of 'Care Bands' based on the extent of the care needs of each applicant. Applicants assessed as Band 1 may require basic home support, like traditional Home Help; those at Band 2 may require a higher level of personal support and assistance with the activities of daily living while those at Band 3 may require complex, high level nursing care. This system would facilitate greater progression opportunities for Home Support Workers across care bands, commensurate with their level of training and experience.
5. Education and Training Boards (ETBs) play a critical role in delivering localised education and training across the country and are an important mechanism in delivering free/affordable training to increase the supply of skilled workers to the home care and disability sectors. Family Carers Ireland would like to see a dedicated funding stream across ETBs towards comprehensive and affordable training for care workers.

Supporting Students with Caring Responsibilities in FET

Family Carers Ireland deliver Ireland's only dedicated Young Carer Project and advocate for better recognition and educational supports for young people with caring responsibilities across primary, secondary and higher-level education. Best practice points to the importance of providing information to school leaders, teachers and lecturers to help promote awareness of the needs of young carers, help them to make the transition to higher level education or training and to provide a supportive environment for them while there.

A 2024 study by the ESRI found that the strongest effect of caregiving on young adults relates to poorer educational outcomes, with lower Leaving Certificate grades and less progression to higher education among those involved in caregiving.² Caregiving is therefore likely to have a long-term effect on adult life chances. To better support young adult carers, Family Carers Ireland recommends:

- **Identify young adult carers as a specific target group in equality, diversity and inclusion policies:** The *National Access Plan 2022-2028* identified being a carer as one of the life situations contributing

² ESRI: Caregiving Among Young Adults in Ireland (2024). <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS168.pdf>

to disadvantage and underrepresentation of students in higher education, and, importantly, identified young adult carers as a priority group (HEA, 2022). Notwithstanding this, the inclusion of student carers in equality, diversity and inclusion policies is still underdeveloped and should be significantly expanded and mainstreamed across all FET institutions and bodies.

- **Increase part-time and flexible study options:** The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* published in 2011 highlighted the limitations that the low level of part-time study opportunities places on adults with caring responsibilities seeking to access higher education. While there has been considerable expansion of higher education opportunities in recent years, this expansion has mainly been in the provision of full-time opportunities focused primarily on entrants from second level education. More must be done to develop part-time, flexible study opportunities for adult learners including those with caring responsibilities.
- **Expand Access Programmes:** Higher education access programmes are of critical importance for young carers. The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) programme is a college admission scheme for school-leavers from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and uses eligibility criteria including low income and receipt of a welfare payment by a parent. While the scheme may benefit some young adult carers, Family Carers Ireland recommends extending access programmes beyond socio-economic factors to include students whose progression to FET is affected by caring responsibilities within the home.
- **Practical Supports:** Education providers should introduce and promote practical support and adjustments for young adult carers. Practical support such as deadline extensions, allowance for mobile phones and flexibility with absence quotas can have a positive impact on young adult carers' experience in learning and allow them to continue engaging in further education. Establishing this support and ensuring that young adult carers are aware of it can enable these young people to better balance caring with studying and to pursue their career aspirations.
- **School Completion Programme:** The School Completion Programme (SCP) targets students at risk of school disengagement. One of the criteria for targeting refers to 'family circumstances', but it is not clear if this is taken to include young carers. Family Carers Ireland recommends specifically naming young carers in the criteria to help them access the necessary learning and socio-emotional supports through the programme.