

John

Hello.

My name is John and I am the publisher of healthandcare.scot.

As the covid-19 crisis continues, one group at the forefront of trying to preserve and save lives are Scotland's estimated three quarters of a million adult carers.

The Scottish Government's minister for public health, Joe FitzPatrick has agreed to answer some of the core current questions from carers.

Rather than me asking the questions, I am joined by

- Claire Cairns from the Coalition of Carers in Scotland
- Fiona Collie of Carers Scotland

Our first question is from Claire

Claire

The first question we have for the Minister is about financial hardship and carers.

Many unpaid carers are facing extreme financial hardship as a consequence of Covid-19. This includes increased household costs, such as extra shopping and heating bills, as well as loss of income for carers who have had to give up work to care full time and who now face a lengthy wait before they receive social security payments.

We know the government's just announced an extra £5million to support students in crisis and we welcome that there is also a need for emergency crisis fund for carers, this can be managed through local carers centres to address financial need.

Can additional resources be found for this or can some of the funding for the Wellbeing Fund be directed specifically to unpaid carers?

This question was raised by carers through emails and social media we are also hearing carers centres are getting a lot of questions around this. Carers are often on low income and in poverty anyway. The state of caring survey of 2019 by carers UK found that over half of carers on carers allowance struggle to make ends meet and one in five carers are in debt as a result of caring.

The whole Covid 19 situation has brought additional financial pressure from many carers. A lot of people have increased heating costs because they are in-house more, shopping costs have gone up, people are trying to make sure that they have a supply of essentials but that's very difficult for people on a low income. And for carers who are combining paid work with caring, a lot of them have had to give up work. Partly this is because the services that used to support them by providing replacement care have been temporarily closed which means they can no longer carry on working.

So although support for students is welcome, we need to see a similar fund for carers. Like I say, the network of carers centres is well placed to manage this funding. They already have the time to live fund which is for short breaks and this is continuing through the Covid 19 crisis, but this is more for financial pressures which is essential for carers as well.

Fiona

I would echo everything that Claire has said about the financial impact of caring. We already know that the cost of caring to carers is high from higher fuel bills to increased cost of food. At the moment there is also increased cost for basic care supplies and people having to take unpaid leave from their employment. The guidance from the UK government was updated recently to enable people to take furlough for caring responsibilities, but it is very very tightly defined and ultimately it's up to carers employers to decide whether they can be furloughed so carers are feeling a great deal of pressure and facing a great deal of pressure.

John

Okay. So, let's ask the Minister for Public Health Joe FitzPatrick to answer that.

Minister

Hi there.

Given the carers' agenda of government cuts across so many different portfolios, I work closely with my ministerial colleagues to make sure that we take a joined-up approach and that includes Shirley-Anne Somerville the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People. Shirley-Anne's first priority is maintaining the delivery of existing benefits including Carers Allowance Supplement which will be paid in June. We have relaxed some of the rules for Carers Allowance to protect the support that carers receive if their caring role has to change due to coronavirus so, where caring can't take place due to self-isolation or an infection with coronavirus, this will not count as a break in care and Carers Allowance will continue to be paid.

Guidance has also changed so that care doesn't need to happen in the physical presence of the cared for person as it usually does so for example support provided over the phone or online can count towards the 35 hours of care required. We have also relaxed rules about the timing of applications so for example if someone applies for a Young Carer Grant after their 19th birthday as a result of delays due to coronavirus, the application will be treated as though it was on time.

I'm going to take this opportunity to encourage all young carers out there to find out if you are eligible for the grant and to apply if you are. That extra £305.10 can make a lot of difference especially during these challenging times.

And there are some other things I want to mention in relation to incomes for individuals.

£50 million has been set aside to support increased demand for our benefits and Council Tax reduction and we have committed an extra £45 million to local authorities for the Scottish Welfare Fund more than doubling its value. That will help the meet the rising demand of crisis grants and community care grants and I would urge any carer facing a financial crisis to contact the local authority to discuss support from the Welfare Fund.

We are continuing to consider and work with the DWP on options to deal with financial impact of the outbreak and will provide assistance where it's most needed and maintaining the vital support that we already provide.

I also appreciate that at present many carers will be providing more care to family and friends as many support services and groups are not running normal services and will be in need of some support and downtime. To help with this, further funding is being made available to the time to live fund which delivers micro-grants to carers in all local authority areas. This has enabled the fund to be extended to all carers and can now support parent carers too,

The Family Fund's Take a Break Fund which supports carers of disabled children and young people will open in May 2020 for applications and we are working with the Family Fund to ensure carers can access these grants as quickly as possible and create suitable break opportunities that meet their needs.

Question two

John

Minister thanks very much.

Our second question is from Claire and is about guidance for carers who are also key workers.

Claire

Our question for the Minister is: Many carers juggle their caring responsibilities with employment and for those who are key workers and at higher risk of becoming ill, they are extremely concerned about infecting the people they care for, many of whom are in the shielded group or in high risk groups. The guidance for key workers says that they should self-isolate within the home, but this isn't possible if they are also caring for family members. Can the government please look at this specific group and issue guidance on how these vulnerable people can be protected. Either by providing alternative support within the home or furloughing key workers in this position.

And again, several care centres have been in touch with us about this issue in their area. Carers have been contacting them because they face a really difficult decision. They are feeling really anxious and they don't know what to do for the best. A lot of them are key workers, for example working in the NHS. We have also had an enquiry from someone who is a postal worker. These people want to continue with their jobs, they do need the income but they are extremely concerned about the people that they are looking after and the consequences for them.

The guidance at the moment is as I said for self isolation in the home but how can this be possible when they are also having caring responsibilities for those people as well. It's just not going to happen. Some people may have the option to be furloughed. The guidance says that people with caring responsibilities can be furloughed but there are a few caveats to that and an employer has to agree to it, and if they don't agree to it the alternative is that the carer can take unpaid leave but again that puts people in a difficult position with no income. We want to see the guidance changed so that any carer looking after somebody who is in the shielded group or a high-risk group has the option of being furloughed. Carers need peace of mind right now. They've got a lot of stresses already and this is one thing that they really shouldn't be worrying about particularly when they are worrying that they could pass the virus on to a loved one who is at greater risk of dying if they do.

Fiona

I think the issue around furloughing of carers is a very high priority one. This is one for the UK government in defining the guidance much more clearly to enable key workers to be furloughed where they are caring for somebody in the shielded category. At the moment as Claire has mentioned that there are caveats around it. This needs to be some that is done as a matter of urgency. What can the Scottish government do in terms of providing financial support for carers who are caring for someone in the shielded category to enable them to make a decision to take unpaid leave because I feel this is a high priority and many many carers are approaching us around the issue around employment, around furlough and around caring for somebody who is very vulnerable.

John

Minister

Minister

As Fiona said further arrangements are a matter for the UK government as employment law is not yet evolved. We do however recognise that many carers will be key workers and in roles that do not allow them to work from home. If you are required to stay home due to an individual in your household shielding in line with public health guidance and are unable to work from home, then you should speak to your employer about whether they plan to place staff on furlough. The shielding letter sent to the person you care for may be evidence for your employer to show that you cannot work outside the home.

The important point to highlight about the UK government updated guidance is that employees who have caring responsibilities resulting from coronavirus can be furloughed and while this involves an agreement to be made between the employee and the employer as is the case with any further agreement I would expect employers to be considering these requests within the context of our wider approach to fair work in Scotland.

And another important point is that employers can hire new staff including on a temporary basis to provide cover for furloughed workers that are subject to social shielding. Fair work is key to supporting people and businesses to flourish and will be critical to helping employers to step up their workforce to support their business through the recovery stage in the months ahead.

I've already spoken about some of the options to support carers and their families with income maximisation at this difficult time and I want to mention the Money Talk team from

the Citizens Advice Network in Scotland who can help to see what benefits you might be entitled to and offer you advice to help make your money go further. You can access that service by calling 0800 085 7145.

Question three

John

Our third question is from Fiona and concerns suggestions that some groups within society will not get the same support when they get ill as others might.

Fiona

Many carers have reacted with fear and alarm at reports in the media and social media that their loved ones will not be prioritised because they have a disability or are older. This includes reports of GPs asking people to agree to complete “Do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation” forms. Can the government please provide leadership and reassurance to both carers and those they care for that decisions on treatment for coronavirus will not be made simply around age or disability and that their lives are valued equally?

This is an area of huge concern for carers and those they care for. There is evidence of blanket requests from GPs to complete DN a CPR forms without proper discussion. This is something that needs individual conversations and actually should be part of an anticipatory care plan anyway but these should have been completed in advance. People who are being approached who have previously said that they do not want to complete one have been approached again so there are a great deal of reports around that. Equally there was material published over the weekend related to decisions around treatment and some of that seem to be saying that simply because of age, you could be scored lower; and simply because of needing help with everyday tasks you could be scored lower, and that is not an assessment of actual physical health. It is an assessment of having some sort of disability.

This is really an area where carers are quite frankly terrified for the life of the person they care for and we really need some strong leadership, some strong guidance from government and the medical profession to say that all lives are valued equally and that assessment around treatment will be on the best clinical decision and no other basis for the decision.

Claire

similarly we have had reports coming in from carer centres about this and as Fiona was saying people have been asked to sign DNR's at a time when I think there being put under a

certain amount of guilt around whether they should as older people received treatment. It's not the right time to be asking people to sign these forms and make these decisions. Also we've heard reports from parent carers who are extremely worried about their disabled children and whether or not they will receive treatment if they have to go into hospital with the virus.

So a lot of anxiety around this and a lot of moral decisions and is certainly our belief, as Fiona said, decisions need to be made on a clinical basis. This shouldn't be based on any other factors like age or disability. There's also a lot of concern from colleagues in the disability movement who are affected by this and I believe there is a petition on the go as well. I think it is something that the Scottish government has to come out and be honest about, be transparent about and hopefully reassure people that decisions won't be made, as we were saying, on anything other than clinical decisions.

John

Okay. Minister?

Minister

I completely understand people's anxiety about this issue and I want to echo the very clear line that the first Minister has made on this that no one in our society should be pushed or coerced into signing one of these forms. Under any circumstances. We expect clinicians should use their judgement in situations where it is necessary to have anticipatory care planning conversations. However, we are clear that we expect everyone especially those who are elderly or vulnerable to always be treated with dignity by health and social care professionals.

On the wider point about carers being concerned that care and treatment might not be prioritised for certain people I want to be clear that decisions on care should always be made on an individual basis depending on clinical circumstances and should not be any different to normal non-pandemic times.

We want everyone regardless of their age or disability to feel assured that they will receive treatment and care that is intended to benefit them.

Question four

So, our final question is from Fiona and it is about PPE.

Fiona

we have seen and heard much about PPE in the news. Many carers are concerned about PPE for themselves particularly when they are caring for someone who is in a shielded category or is in very vulnerable health. They are also concerned about the provision of PPE for the staff that they employ through direct payments. We were very pleased to hear from the Cabinet Sec that PPE was to be provided to unpaid carers and to PAs. However, despite knowing that some work is going on in the background, that does not seem to be a public answer for carers about how they will access PPE, nor a firm deadline for its provision. When will the Scottish government announced a system for the provision to carers publicly said that all carers across Scotland know where and in what circumstances they can access PPE.

I have to say this is our number one query from carers is about PPE, it's about getting PPE for themselves when they are caring for somebody with vulnerable health and for PPE for anybody who is working with the person that they care for. We know of carers who have withdrawn the person they care for from care services because they don't want people coming in to their house but equally that applies to someone they are employing as a PA because there PAs do not have access to PPE.

There is a wide range of issues around PPE but the most important thing is for there to be an answer now of when PPE is going to be provided for carers and how it is going to be provided.

Claire

as Fiona was saying, it's also the biggest enquiry reported from carer centres across Scotland. It is causing a lot of anxiety for carers. We know as Fiona was saying at some point, they are looking into this and we are going to hear how they are going to deliver it and in what circumstances are going to deliver PPE for carers. But for most carers who are not plugged into networks, there's just been total silence. They don't even know that in the pipeline. So I think at the minute they are feeling like they are at the bottom of the list and people aren't thinking about what their needs are in this, and what their concerns are.

We hope that information will come out from government soon and we will hear how this is going to be managed and that PPE will be available to carers when they needed very soon.

John

Minister?

Minister

I absolutely recognise the important role of everyone providing social care support and the need to do this safely, including unpaid carers and personal assistance.

I want to reassure you that we are working with NHS National services Scotland to deliver PPE to all social care providers and are working out how we can extend this service to the wider unregulated social care sector including personal assistance and unpaid carers. My officials have had regular engagement with the national carer organisations on this and will continue to do so. It is my understanding that some local authorities have already set up routes for carers in their area to access PPE where required so it might be worth finding out whether this is already the case where you live.

Now, I think this is our final question so if I can take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to all of our carers for the amazing work that you do all year round. I know it can be challenging at the best of times without the added pressures of a pandemic, shielding and social distancing.

So, on behalf of the Scottish government, thank you and stay safe.

John

So, many thanks Minister and thank you to Fiona Collie of Carers Scotland and Claire Cairns from the Coalition of Carers in Scotland for posing the questions.

As well as posting this as a video, we're also publishing a transcript as articles based around this question and answer session.

Keep visiting healthandcare.scot for news and information about Scotland's care community.

And thanks to you for watching and very best wishes to you.