

UK Tories hound tens of thousands of unpaid carers for benefit repayments

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Revelations that the UK's Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is pursuing tens of thousands of unpaid carers for thousands of pounds in benefits repayments shines a light on British capitalism's dirty secret of informal care work.

Unpaid carers who provide at least 35 hours of care a week, usually to disabled, ill or elderly relatives, are eligible for government payments of £81.90 a week as long as they do not earn more than £151 in those seven days from paid employment.

This second condition is the cause of the scandal. If a carer earns just £1 more than the limit, they forfeit the entire £81.90 carer's allowance that week. Just 26 weeks earning £1 over the limit would therefore mean owing the government £2,182 in benefit repayments. The DWP system frequently fails to warn carers that they are incurring these debts.

Honest mistakes and miscalculations have left some of the poorest people in the country owing huge sums of money. In 2022/3, according to the *Guardian*, "26,700 carers were asked to repay sums relating to earnings breaches. More than 800 were repaying sums between £5,000 and £20,000, and 36 were repaying more than £20,000".

A vindictive campaign is being pursued to claw back a miniscule fraction of the welfare budget. To provide perspective, £9 billion was written off by the government after being spent on unusable personal protective equipment during the pandemic, over £1 billion of which it admits was "at risk" of corporate fraud. More telling still, £35 billion in tax is estimated to be lost to non-payment, avoidance and fraud.

The punishment being meted out is a particularly savage expression of capitalism's plundering of the energies of society and hatred of sections of the population considered surplus to requirements. It takes

place even though the ruling class is already reaping massive rewards by exploiting relatives placed under enormous personal strain by the deliberate collapsing of alternative provision.

According to a 2023 study, the economic value of work done by unpaid carers is a staggering £162 billion a year, close to the £181 billion budget of the National Health Service (NHS). An estimated 7 million people in the UK provide unpaid care—more than one in 10 people and including one in seven employees. Roughly one in 20 are providing more than 20 hours of care a week.

This is labour vital to the functioning of society, upon which all the profits, dividends and exorbitant salaries of the capitalist economy ultimately depend, but for which it pays next to nothing. And it helps facilitate the ongoing gutting of the NHS.

Carers also holding up a job are expected to put in a second shift at home. Those not able to take up paid employment alongside their caring responsibilities are given a pittance, if they are among the fewer than one million grudgingly given any support at all. According to a survey by the Carer's Trust, barely half (55 percent) of unpaid carers feel they get the support they need to fulfil their role, falling to a third in the most economically deprived groups.

The financial and mental strain is enormous. Nearly half of those providing more than 35 hours of care a week are in poverty. Two-thirds describe themselves as extremely worried about finances, with a quarter actively cutting back on essentials like food and heating.

This has a marked impact on the caregiver's mental health. Over a quarter often or always feel lonely. Burnout, according to the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, is the main reason unpaid care

arrangements break down, with less than a third of carers telling the Carer's Trust they can take a break when they need one.

Young carers are particularly severely affected. The average waiting time to be identified for support is three years, with some carers waiting 10 years, according to an inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Young and Young Adult Carers. Young carers have a higher prevalence of self-harm than their peers, and those who do self-harm are twice as likely to attempt to take their own life.

By 2020, government spending per person on adult social care in the UK was lower in real terms than it had been *a decade prior*. Meanwhile, between 2015/16 and 2022/23, the average weekly care home fee for working-age adults has increased by 10 percent, the average weekly fee paid for older people has increased by 26 percent, and the average hourly rate for home care has increased by 17 percent—all according to the King's Fund health and social care charity.

Local authorities are heavily exposed to these costs, with 78.5 percent of their adult social care spending going to outsourced, overwhelmingly private, provision—up from 74 percent in 2015/16. More than eight in 10 care home places in England are now provided by private operators.

These private companies run gross profit margins ranging up to 42 percent, paying their staff abysmally—the vacancy rate in the adult social care sector is over ten percent—and frequently providing substandard care. According to a study published in *Lancet Health Longevity* last month, of the 816 care home closures enforced by the Care Quality Commission regulator since 2011, 804 were for-profit operators.

According to the King's Fund, the net result is that while requests for care have increased, the number of people actually receiving formal long-term care is falling—down 55,000 in 2021/22 compared to 2015/16. Over two-and-a-half million people in England aged over 50 are unable to get the care they need, with hundreds of thousands stuck on waiting lists.

These numbers are set to explode. The number of people aged 65-79 in the UK is expected to increase by nearly a third in the next 40 years, and the number aged over 80 to double. A larger proportion than now will be living alone and/or ageing without children.

Meanwhile, the working-age population will grow by just 4 percent.

As a result of this ageing and of the woeful state of public health, the number of people living with a major illness is expected to increase from one in six adults in England to one in five by 2040.

The murderous policies pursued in the pandemic demonstrated the ruling class's attitude to these sections of the population, as far as their age and illness prevents them from producing profits. The super-rich consider it an insult that 600 potential labourers leave employment every day to take on caring responsibilities of those who make no contribution to the oligarchy's vast wealth. No additional funding is coming their way.

Local authorities picking up the tab are already in unprecedented financial crisis and will be driven deeper into bankruptcy by central government spending plans that will mean a 13 percent funding cut in the years to 2028/9. National adult social care spending fell again in real terms between 2021/22 and 2022/3.

The opposition Labour Party has said nothing about making changes to Carer's Allowance, only promising a "review". Leader Sir Keir Starmer mildly opined with regard to carers being pursued for crippling debts that "Something's gone very wrong here". As Director of Public Prosecutions, he pushed a "tough stance" on those attempting to "flout" the benefits system, with jail terms of up to 10 years and a minimum threshold of £20,000 for sending cases to Crown Court abolished.



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