

Being Heard: a self-advocacy guide for carers

in Northern
Ireland



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Introduction

Carers Northern Ireland is part of Carers UK, the national membership charity for unpaid carers. We are here to listen and to give carers expert information and tailored advice. We champion the rights of carers and support them in finding new ways to manage at home, at work, or in their community. We're here to make life better for carers.

This self-advocacy guide

We understand the many challenges that caring brings. This guide has been developed to help anyone with caring responsibilities gain confidence to understand their rights, communicate effectively with professionals and recognise how to be heard.

The guide stems from work carried out by Carers Scotland and the Scottish Government. It has been updated to reflect the situation for carers in Northern Ireland.

For accompanying resources, go to:
carersuk.org/ni/self-advocacy

What is self-advocacy?

Caring can be rewarding but also very isolating. You may not know what help to ask for, how to ask, or indeed who to ask. Self-advocacy is about being heard, as well as speaking up for the person you care for.

This guide provides practical guidance on how to get your voice heard when you care for someone in what may be complicated and challenging circumstances.

This guide

Communicating effectively



The first part looks at communication, assertiveness and negotiation skills.

It offers practical advice on getting the best out of interactions with others and how to make a complaint.

Understanding your rights



The second part of this guide has information on the rights that can help you get your voice heard.

How you are feeling



The third part takes a look at other factors that may affect your ability to get your voice heard: difficult emotions, stress and family relationships.

We also explore how new ways of thinking and greater self-awareness may help you to be heard more easily.



Communicating effectively

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Communicating effectively

In this section, we look at how communicating well, and adopting different approaches, can play a key part in achieving what you want with organisations and services. We also offer tips on assertiveness, negotiation skills and how to make a complaint.



Common barriers to communication

It's easy for our message to be misunderstood. It's important not to blame yourself if this happens. Here are a few examples of why this can happen:

- The person you are speaking to may not be fully listening.
- You may not have enough time to get your points across.
- Your tone of voice may make it difficult for you to be heard, eg if it's too soft or too harsh.
- The way you ask for things may be unhelpful:
"I know that you'll say no but..."
- Having distractions – you or the other person may be trying to do something else when you're talking.

TOP TIP

Avoid negative language:

"I know that you'll say no but..."



Ways to communicate well

When you're talking to someone, some things are out of your control: your environment, or how much the other person is really listening. However, there are things you can do to give yourself the best chance of getting your points across:

- **Remain polite, calm and patient** – the person you're dealing with is more likely to go out of their way to help you.
- **Try to keep the discussion objective and non-judgemental**, sticking to the facts. For example, say *"The care workers coming to care for my mother rarely speak to her"* rather than *"The care workers swan in and always ignore my mother, which is cruel."*
- **Avoid sounding too critical**. For example, say *"It makes me anxious when I'm left waiting for you to arrive"* rather than *"You really stress me out when you're late."*
- **Be firm**. Say *"I would like to speak to you about getting a break"* rather than *"I was wondering whether I could get a bit of a break?"*
- **Be specific**. Instead of saying *"I can't cope anymore"*, say *"I'm exhausted and I need a few days off as soon as possible."*
- **Stay focused**. Stick to your point and remember why you're talking to the other person. Perhaps write down your points so you have them in front of you.
- **Repeat your request**. If you feel you're being side-tracked, try to keep the conversation on what you want to discuss. Don't be afraid to repeat what you want.
- **Listen to what the other person says**. It is easy to carry on thinking about other things when someone is replying – you can miss important bits of information.
- **Ask for clarification** if you don't understand what the other person is saying.
- **Don't be afraid of silence**: it can give you both a chance to think calmly. It could be a sign that the person is thinking seriously about what you said.
- **Be sensitive to the needs of the person you are speaking to**. For example, if the receptionist at the doctor's surgery looks stressed, say *"I can see you're very busy – please can I just have a minute of your time?"*
- **Expressing gratitude and thanks goes a long way**. Everyone likes to be thanked and it might make things easier for you the next time you need to speak to them.

Syed's story*



Syed is a carer who is not getting the time off he needs. His friend tells him to call the local carers' centre for some advocacy support.

He calls the centre and says: *"Hi. Can you tell me about your services? I'm a bit stressed."*

He doesn't convey how serious the situation is in his message. The staff member thinks he just wants social interaction, rather than one-to-one advocacy support.

She replies, *"Yes of course, we have a weekly café, a massage day on a Thursday and a bridge night every month"*, which doesn't give Syed the information he's really looking for. Instead, Syed could say:

"Hi, can you tell me about your advocacy service as I really need some support to take a break."



"I'm feeling very stressed about this right now."

**The individual's name has been changed*

Body language and tone

Communication isn't just about talking. In fact, research suggests that 55% of our communication is non-verbal. Being aware of your body language and tone of voice is important.

- **Sit square**, with both feet on the ground. This helps you get attention and also helps you listen.
- **Sit with an open posture** with your arms and legs uncrossed. Crossed arms and legs can come across as defensive and unwelcoming.
- **Keep an open facial expression** (ie, look as if you're listening) and respond to what they are saying with nods of the head.
- **Establish eye contact**. Try not to stare as this can be off-putting, but meet the other person's eyes every few seconds.
- **Lean towards the person you're talking to** in a way that makes you look interested in what they're saying.
- **Relax as much as you can**. Take some deep breaths, keep your shoulders relaxed and try not to fidget.
- When emotions are running high, we can speak too quickly. **Speaking clearly and slowing down your speech** can help get your message across.



55%

of our communication is non-verbal*

**Albert Mehrabian, a pioneer researcher of body language in the 1950s, found that the total impact of a message is about 7% verbal (words only) and 38% vocal (including tone of voice, inflection and other sounds) and 55% non-verbal.*

Different ways to ask for what you want

You may be wondering how to make your request. Depending on the nature of your request, it is sometimes easier to discuss the subject face to face or over the phone. It is then good practice to follow up and confirm what was agreed by email.

If you wish to make a complaint or have a list of things to say, a letter or an email lets you specify everything and also provides a record of what you've said. Keeping a written record of communications is very important.

Email is fast and efficient and it means you have a copy of your written discussions with professionals. However, it can be easy to give the wrong impression of your tone and meaning.

It's a good idea to read your email back to yourself: how would you feel if someone wrote this to you? Take your time and reword any strongly-worded phrases to make them more neutral, however much you feel like saying what's on your mind.

TOP TIP

A letter or an email lets you specify everything and also provides a record of what you've said. Keeping a written record of communications is very important.



Assertiveness

Assertiveness is about being direct about what you need, want or feel and standing up for yourself in a way that respects other people. To help you to be assertive, it is important to recognise that you have rights, which we cover in more detail in the next chapter. As a carer, you have a right to:

- a carer's assessment
- ask for a care needs assessment for the person(s) you look after
- ask for flexible working
- have your views and feelings taken into consideration by social services and healthcare professionals.

Everyone has rights in other areas such as in education, religion, gender, consumer issues, race or class. There is legislation that protects our human rights, and national care standards that aim to respect the dignity and independence of people receiving services.



Why might it be difficult to be assertive as a carer?

It can be difficult to stand up for your rights if you feel like you don't have much time for yourself. Here are some reasons why you may find it difficult to stand up for your rights, especially if your life tends to revolve around someone else:

- You may be too busy to ask or keep on asking for something.
- You may put others before yourself.
- You may feel that you do not deserve help.
- You may not have the energy or strength to say 'no' anymore.

How can you get better at being assertive?

Here are a few suggestions:

Your thoughts

- **Try to have a positive outlook** – it makes it more likely you will have a positive outcome.
- **Remember that you have a right to ask for help** (such as a carer's assessment or flexible working) if you need it.
- **Be aware of your feelings**, your triggers and your needs. This will give you more clarity of what you need. This is covered in more detail in the section 'How you are feeling'.

TOP TIP

Try to have a positive outlook – it makes it more likely you will have a positive outcome.



Your attitude

- **Be willing to listen to the other person** (the social worker, the GP) and hear what they have to say – and why.
- **Be willing to compromise** on the things that you can live without (see the section on ‘Influencing and negotiating’).
- **Believe in yourself** and treat yourself with the respect that you show others.
- **Know your own needs** (see the section on ‘Reflecting on how you think’) and take some time to appreciate the possible needs of others.

Know your rights

- **Make sure you’re speaking to the right person.**
- **Start slowly.** Express your assertiveness in low-anxiety situations at first so you can build up your skills – most people don’t learn new skills overnight.
- **Write down what you want** so it’s clear in your head.
- **Choose the right time** to ask, so the person gives your request their full attention.
- **Say ‘I’ not ‘we’** – *“I would like my complaint dealt with within the next seven days.”*
- **Ask for enough time** to make a big decision rather than feeling pressured to decide there and then.
- **Stand your ground on things that you really need.** Repeat your request if necessary in a firm way – this is sometimes referred to as the ‘broken record’ technique.
- **If you’re naturally softly spoken, raise your voice** when you’re speaking – even if it feels unnatural at first.
- **Ask for specific information** if the speaker is being vague or talking in jargon.



TOP TIP

Be willing to compromise on the things that you can live without.



TOP TIPS

Choose the right time to ask so the person gives your request their full attention.

Ask for enough time to make a big decision rather than feeling pressured to decide there and then.



TOP TIP

Stand your ground on things that you really need. Repeat your request if necessary in a firm way – this is sometimes referred to as the ‘broken record’ technique.



Influencing and negotiating

This part of the guide looks at how to ask for things in an effective way, including how to negotiate.

Having influence

There are ways in which we can all have influence if we understand what approach to take and are aware of our own abilities to make the right kind of impression at the right time.



Be aware of your own role and ability to affect decisions

- You're an equal partner in care. Your views and opinions should be taken into account when decisions are being made about the person(s) you care for.
- The organisation you're dealing with may have responsibilities to support carers.
- Caring saves health and social care services money. You can use this to amplify your voice.
- You may well be the one that knows the most about the person(s) being cared for.

Capture the attention of the audience with facts

- **Describe the impact on your life.** For example, tell them if:
 - *you haven't had a full night's sleep in two months*
 - *you're on the verge of giving up your job*
 - *the GP has increased your antidepressants*
 - *you often feel frustrated with the person you're caring for.*
- **Health and social care staff have a duty of care to you.** Remember they would rather you carried on caring, so **being specific about how it's affecting you** should make them sit up and listen.
- **Give a worst day scenario.** Clearly explain any difficulties you're experiencing – mentally, physically and emotionally. Don't underplay the impact it's having on you.
- **Say how the situation is making you feel.**

Know what you want to ask for

- **Do some research into what you want,** or ask someone to do it for you. For example, you may want to find out about short breaks in accessible accommodation near the Giant's Causeway.
- **Be as specific as you can.** For example, say you want a week-long break with the person you care for in an adapted cottage you have found nearby in Bushmills.

TOP TIP

Give a worst day scenario.



Clearly explain any difficulties you're experiencing – mentally, physically and emotionally. Don't underplay the impact it's having on you.

- **Explain why this will help you** or the person you are caring for. For example, say it will give you some ‘me time’ without housework, cooking and routine and allow you to spend a few days on things you used to enjoy and have missed.

Use language in an assertive way

- **Avoid getting frustrated** by saying things like, *“Other people get everything they ask for but we get nothing.”*
- **Slow down your talking speed**, lower the tone of your voice and speak as clearly as you can. You can practise this in day-to-day conversation with people.

Negotiation skills

Negotiation is a way to reach an agreement or compromise while avoiding arguments.

In a caring context, negotiating well could be useful if you want to ask for a specific service or gain extra support for the care needs of the person you’re looking after. Negotiating is a normal and everyday part of life within families, at work, at home and with professionals.

Effective negotiation skills can help you be heard. It’s a good idea to develop your skills with smaller issues first to give you the confidence to tackle the bigger issues.

If you – like many people – don’t feel ready to negotiate with professionals, contact your local carers’ organisation to see if they can help you or if they offer training in speaking up for yourself. Visit carersuk.org/local-support to find your local carers’ organisation.

You can negotiate formally at meetings or through letters and emails, or informally, such as when you’re speaking to a social worker who is doing a home visit, or during an appointment with a GP. The key thing to remember is that everyone needs to gain something in exchange for any concessions they make, so be prepared to make a compromise.

How to negotiate

- Before you start negotiating, write down what you want to achieve.
- Make your case as briefly, clearly and confidently as you can, trying to stick to the facts.
- Once you have said what you want, pause and give the other person enough time to reflect and consider what you have said.
- Listen carefully to the other person’s response.

TOP TIP

Slow down your talking speed, lower the tone of your voice and speak as clearly as you can. You can practise this in day-to-day conversation with people.



DEFINITION

Negotiation is a way to reach an agreement or compromise while avoiding arguments.



- After you've listened to the other person's response, there may be a discussion. Ask them to clarify anything that's unclear or that you don't understand.
- Look for areas where you both agree and think about what you are willing to concede.
- Ask for a break if things become confusing or overwhelming.
- Write things down if you can.
- Ensure you have enough time.
- Keep things objective and focused on a solution that meets everyone's needs as much as possible.
- Don't agree to something that is unacceptable to you.
- Ask for more time to think if faced with a difficult decision.

Be prepared for some give and take in your negotiations:

- Put a value on what you are prepared to give so that it can be matched with allowances from the other side.
- Compromise without losing face. If you have to backtrack on a point you had said was non-negotiable, you could say: *"Since you have changed your position on... I may be able to change mine on..."*
- Make sure the concession is something you can live with and that your overall position has improved.

Negotiating on the spot

Sometimes you may not get the luxury of having the time to prepare your case. You may be asked to agree to something out of the blue, where you haven't got all the information to hand and you haven't had the chance to work out your priorities, concessions and objectives.

In these cases, ask for more time. If you need support, ask for help from family or friends or your local carers' organisation. Remember, you are an equal partner in care and you should be fully involved in any decisions affecting your caring role.

David's story*



David cares for his wife, Claire. David can't leave Claire alone for too long and she now needs more help with personal care. David is starting to get tired and sometimes feels unable to cope.

A friend suggests that David contacts social services to get help so Claire can go to a day centre on weekdays and David can have a break. The friend also encourages him to contact his local carers' centre to ask them how he can access day care for Claire and find out about other support.

A social worker comes to the house a week later. David is under the impression this is to reassess Claire's needs but the social worker says it is just an initial meeting to get to know Claire and David and she has a number of clients in crisis that she has to visit that day.

David feels frustrated but stays calm, maintaining eye contact and expresses his need for a time when he can sit down with the social worker and discuss how the department can help him and Claire, particularly around day care, as he feels unable to carry on with things as they are.

*Names have been changed.

Making a complaint



Many people find making a complaint very difficult. You may feel frustrated, angry or scared, or the thought of complaining may make you feel like you are moaning.

Both you and the person you care for have a right to receive services that keep you safe and supported. Your complaints or concerns should be treated with respect and courtesy.

You may wish to make a complaint about:

- delays or cancellations to services
- poor quality or overpriced services
- poor behaviour from health or social care staff
- changes or reductions to the care given to the person(s) you look after.

Making a complaint can be a way to get an apology, find out what went wrong, and make sure it doesn't happen again to you or anyone else.

How to make a complaint

Ask the organisation or service for a copy of their complaints procedure. It should be available in different formats, such as in print or online.

You will usually be asked to try and resolve the issue informally with the staff providing the service. If you're not happy with the response, you can make a formal complaint. Read on to find out how to prepare, what to include, and who to contact if you're still not happy with the outcome.

TOP TIP

Ask the organisation or service for a copy of their complaints procedure.



Doing your preparation

Look at the policies of the organisation you're making a complaint about. For example, if you think the person you look after is being charged too much for a service by their Health and Social Care Trust, check the Trust's guidance and the national guidance about the issue. Is the organisation following its own charging policy and national guidance?

If you're buying services privately, the organisation should include their charges and terms very clearly in your contract.



Do you need help with research or with drafting the complaint?

If you don't have the time or resources to do this research, see if a friend or relative can help.

You could also try contacting the Patient and Client Council. Visit patientclientcouncil.hscni.net or call 0800 917 0222.

Writing the complaint

When you make your complaint:

- Make it as soon as possible after the event. You will usually have a set amount of time in which to make a complaint, often 12 months.
- Make it in writing if possible (or ask a friend, relative or advice worker for help). If you can't, the organisation you're complaining to will need to make reasonable adjustments to allow you to make the complaint over the phone.
- Find out where to send your complaint by checking the complaints policy or calling the organisation.
- Provide evidence if you can, but keep copies of any documents you send. See the 'Complaints letter template' for more details.
- Include your contact telephone number, address and email address (if you have one).
- Keep a copy of your letter and any response. If someone responds to you by telephone, ask them to put their response in writing. Try to make a note of what they say at the time for your own records.

TOP TIP



Keep a copy of your letter and any response.

If someone responds to you by telephone, ask them to put their response in writing.

Try to make a note of what they say at the time for your own records



Visit carersuk.org/ni/self-advocacy to download 'Complaints letter template'

If you're not happy with the outcome of your complaint

If you're not happy with the response to your complaint, you can take it further. Your next step depends on what you're complaining about.

The Patient and Client Council

The Patient and Client Council can help you complain about any part of health and social care. Its Complaints Support Service is there to:

- give you information on how to complain and who to complain to
- help you write letters of complaint
- make telephone calls for you about your complaint
- go with you to meetings about your complaint and make sure your concerns are responded to.

Work with health and social care organisations to improve services as a result of your complaint. You could share your experiences on forums like Care Opinion: careopinion.org.uk

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

If you're not happy with the way you've been treated by a provider of public services, you could consider contacting the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. You should have taken all other reasonable steps and already complained to the service provider directly. They will only be able to investigate your case if you have exhausted all other options. Here are some examples of the types of issues they would look into:

- Problems caused by avoidable delay.
- Faulty procedures or failing to follow the correct procedures.
- Not telling you about any rights of appeal you have.
- Unfairness, bias or prejudice.
- Giving advice that is misleading or inadequate.

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman deals with complaints about public bodies. Find out more at nipso.org.uk, where you can also submit a complaints form online.

CONTACT BOOK

The Patient and Client Council

E info.pcc@pcc-ni.net

T 0800 917 0222

patientclientcouncil.hscni.net

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

E nipso@nipso.org.uk

T 0800 34 34 24

nipso.org.uk

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA)

RQIA is responsible for regulating day care settings, home care agencies, nursing agencies and a range of independent health care services. It also has a role in assuring the quality of services provided by Health and Social Care (HSC) Board, HSC trusts and agencies.

Although it does not deal with individual complaints, if you believe your concerns may relate to a potential breach of regulations or minimum care standards, you can contact RQIA and ask to speak to the duty inspector who will assess the information to determine what action may be required.

CONTACT BOOK

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA)

9th Floor Riverside Tower, 5
Lanyon Place, Belfast
BT1 3BT

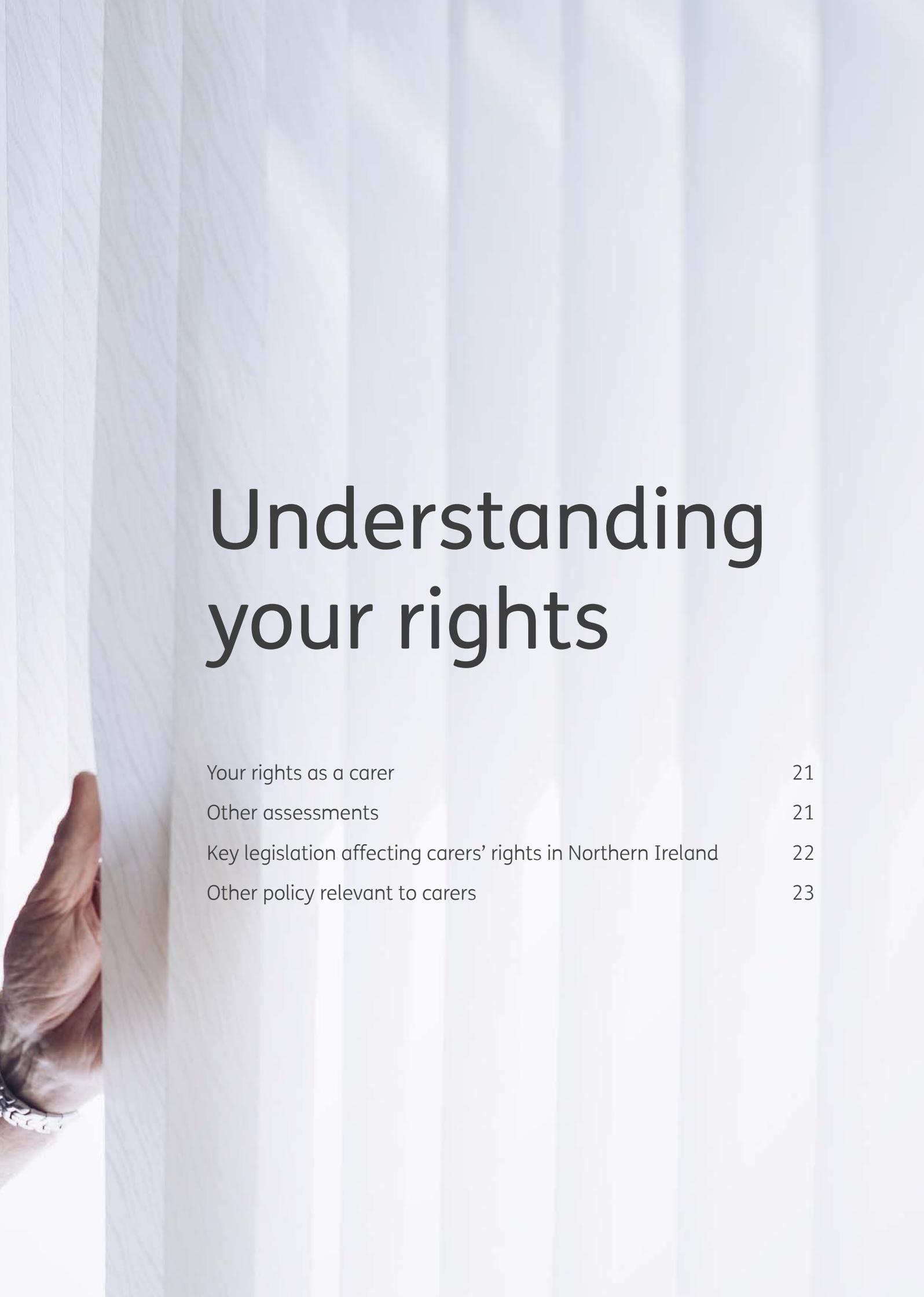
E info@rqia.org.uk

T 028 9536 1111
(Freephone)

rqia.org.uk





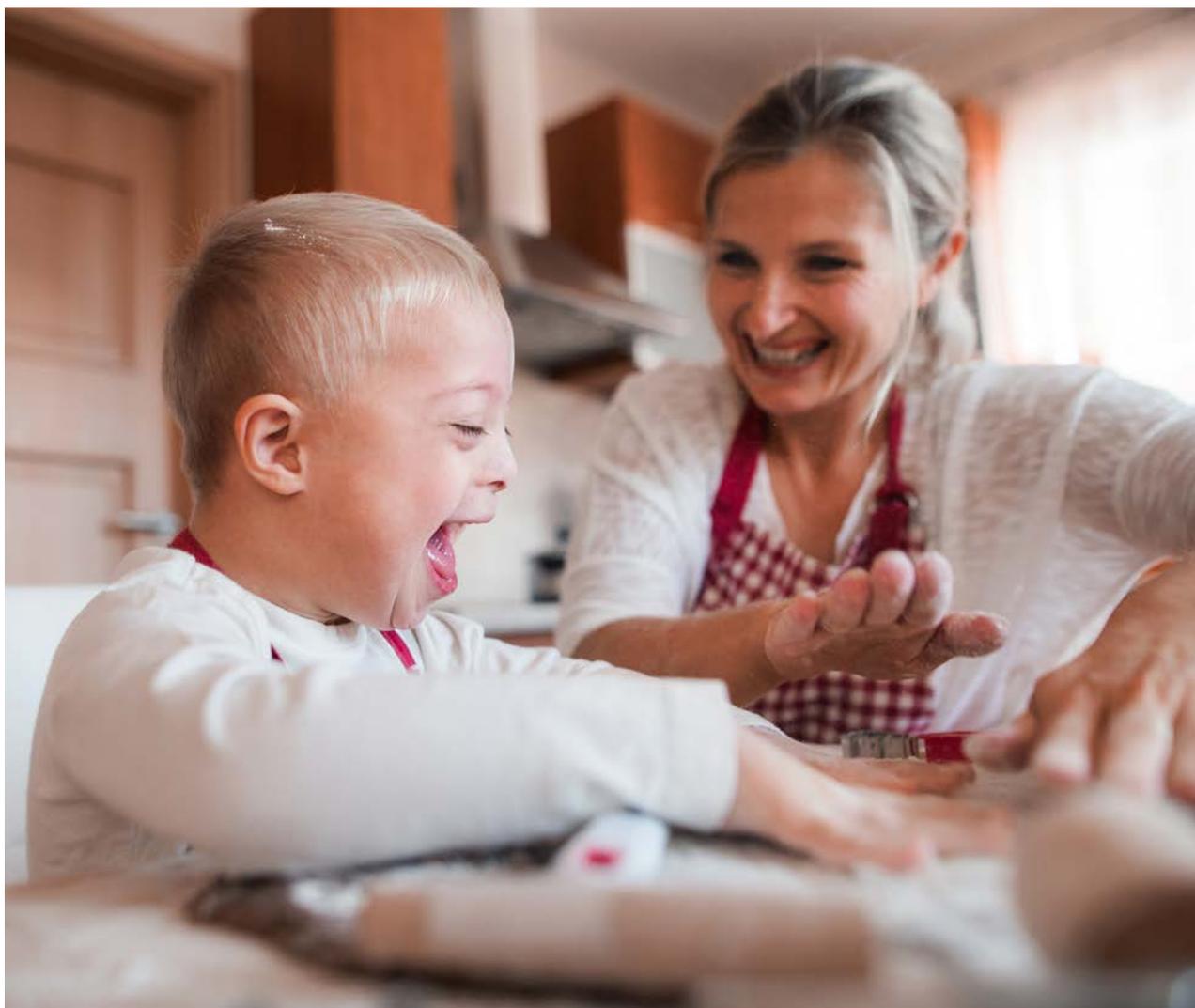


Understanding your rights

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Understanding your rights

The Northern Ireland government has a range of responsibilities to carers. Many health and social care services are provided through health and social care (HSC) trusts which are ultimately accountable to the government.



Your local health and social care trust can help provide support through a carer's assessment and/or care needs assessment. They can help you access services such as homecare, day centres, respite and residential care in the community.

The Department for Communities (DfC) manages most benefits through Jobs and Benefits offices. The Social Security Agency administers social security benefits such as Carer's Allowance.

The main government website gives you an overview of all the government services: nidirect.gov.uk

Your rights as a carer

Carers have the right to request a carer's assessment but what does this mean?

Having a carer's assessment is an opportunity for you to have your needs reviewed, but it is in no respect a test of your abilities as a carer. The assessor would look at your needs and willingness to care, and how caring affects your health, work, free time and relationships. If you meet the criteria, the trust must meet your assessed needs and provide any necessary support (subject to a financial assessment).

This will focus on your needs as the carer, not the needs of the person you are caring for. The kind of help that could be provided could be anything from help with transport costs to a gym membership. You can contact the trust of the person you care for to find out more details or request a carer's assessment.



Other assessments

For adults and older people

You can arrange for a community care assessment which looks at the help people with disabilities or illnesses need to live more independently.

For disabled children and their parents

A Children (NI) order or UNOCINI assessment looks at the needs of disabled children and their families as a whole. UNOCINI stands for Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland. They will identify the needs of the disabled child or children as well as any other children in the family and your needs as their parents.



For more information, see
carersuk.org/care-and-support

Key legislation affecting carers' rights in Northern Ireland

Below is a brief overview of some of the key legislation affecting carers' rights in Northern Ireland.

Name of Act	Details
The Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995	<p>This Act was the first piece of legislation that legally recognised carers. The Act gave carers with the right to their own separate carer's assessment as part of the assessment process for the service user (the person being cared for). However, there was no requirement to provide services to carers as a result of a carer's assessment. Although the Act did not extend to Northern Ireland, the principle of separate assessments for carers did apply from April 1996, through DHSS guidance.</p>
Northern Ireland Act 1998	<p>Section 75 of Northern Ireland Act 1998 (though schedule 9) was the first piece of legislation in the UK to recognise carers' vulnerability to social exclusion, and to promote equality of opportunity for carers. It required public authorities, when developing policies, to promote equality of opportunity between persons of: different religious beliefs, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation, men and women generally, persons with a disability and persons without, and persons with dependants and persons without. It extended equality of opportunity to persons not yet covered by other NI or UK anti-discrimination laws, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • persons of different sexual orientation, • persons of different ages – both the young and the old, and • persons with dependants (carers) and without dependants. <p>It requires identified public authorities to produce 'equality schemes' that explain how they are going to fulfil the requirements of section 75. These schemes contain detail on how a public authority is going to develop and consult effectively on its policies.</p> <p>It makes equality central to all public policy decision-making. All public authorities, when producing equality schemes and policies, must consult with persons from the groups identified within section 75 to get a clearer picture of where and in what way policies adversely impact on their lives.</p>
The Human Rights Act 1998	<p>Carers, like everyone else in the UK, are entitled to rely on the protection of the Human Rights Act 1998, which came into force in October 2000 and incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law. It should ensure that public bodies take account of carers' human rights when they provide services, and seek to uphold these. Public services play a critical role in guaranteeing carers' human rights. They can ensure that carers have the support they need to maintain a normal life, to take breaks occasionally, and to maintain their own health.</p>

Table continued...

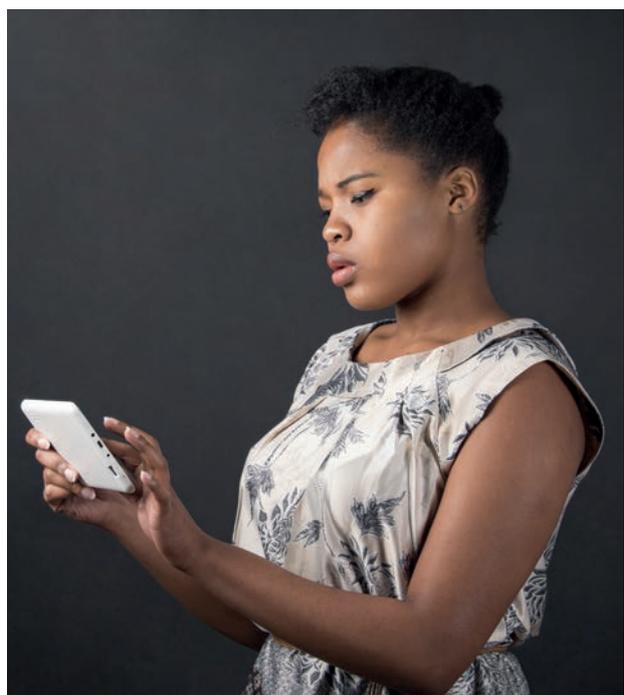
Name of Act	Details
<p>Carers and Direct Payment Act (Northern Ireland) 2002</p>	<p>The key provisions of the Carers and Direct Payments Act are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to give carers the right in law to an assessment, whether or not the person they care for is having an assessment. • to allow health and social care trusts the power to give services directly to carers. • to make Direct Payments accessible to more people, including carers aged 16 plus. Health and social care trusts will have to make direct payments available to anyone who asks, providing they meet the conditions. • to place a new duty to inform on health and social boards and trusts. • to recognise children adversely affected by caring responsibilities as ‘children in need’ under the Children Order. Within the Carers and Direct Payments Act a carer is defined as “an individual, aged 16 or over, who provides or intends to provide a substantial amount of care on a regular basis”. This care must be provided on an informal basis. The Act applies fully to parents of children with disabilities.

Other policy relevant to carers

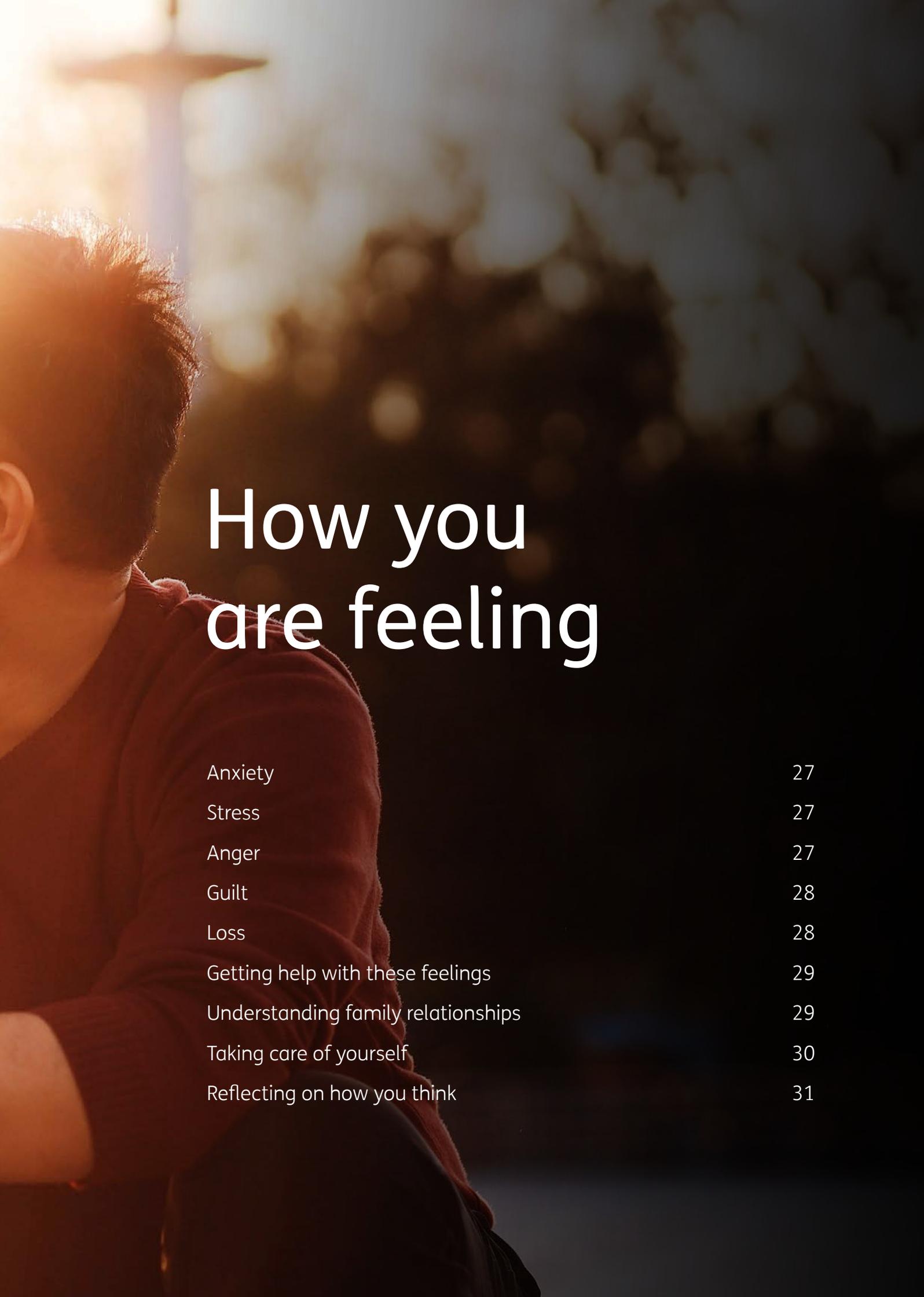
There are also health and social care (and other) policies that may be of interest depending on the condition of the person you are looking after. Of note is the ‘Power to People Report’ which proposes new legislation and a new Strategy for Carers.

It’s important to note that this is a recommendations paper rather than a policy document. There is a proposal for legislation for carers within it but it has not come to fruition yet.

To find out more, visit:
health-ni.gov.uk/articles/power-people





A person's profile is shown in silhouette on the left side of the page, looking towards the right. The background is a warm, golden sunset with a blurred street lamp and trees. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

How you are feeling

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How you are feeling

It's difficult to get your voice heard if you are weighed down with heavy and difficult emotions. Feeling anxious or angry makes it hard to keep things in perspective and stay objective. However by recognising these feelings, you can develop strategies to cope.



Have you ever noticed that it's much easier to ask for something for someone else rather than for yourself?

It's easier to be objective when you're asking for someone else. When you want something for yourself, you may feel that different rules apply or you may tell yourself "*I don't deserve this*". You may attach feelings and judgements to your own needs in a way you don't when considering the needs of others.

As a carer, it's easy to dismiss your own needs and put the person(s) you're caring for first.

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Anxiety

Anxiety is what we feel when we're worried or afraid, particularly about things that are about to happen or that we think could happen in the future.

Anxiety can stop you being able to put your views forward or ask for what you or the person(s) you're caring for want. It is often accompanied by unhelpful thoughts such as:

- *"I'm going to look stupid."*
- *"My voice will go."*
- *"I wish I was somewhere else."*
- *"People won't listen to me."*
- *"My mind will go blank."*

Stress

We all know what it's like to feel stressed. It can leave us with feelings of worry and loss of control. As a carer, it's especially important to look after your own emotional health. You may be juggling paid work or looking after children alongside caring, or you may have had to give up employment to care for a relative. You may have had to make big and unwelcome changes in your life as a result of illness and disability in the family.

You may feel resentful and/or guilty because of the changes – and these feelings can be very stressful. Having high expectations of yourself can also add to the sense of pressure.

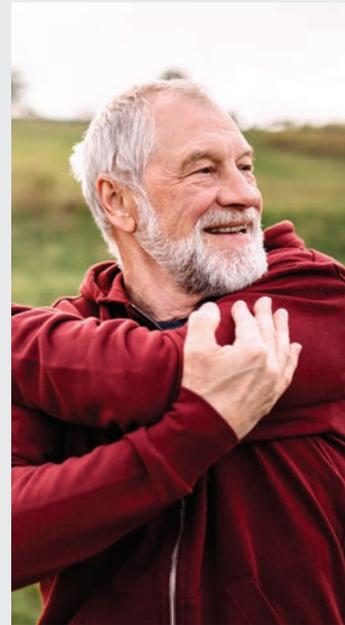
Sometimes stress can spur you on to get things done or get your message across. But if your stress levels become too high, you may feel unable to cope. When this happens, your ability to speak up for yourself – to self-advocate – can be affected.

Anger

Carers often say they feel angry or frustrated. We all express anger differently. You may push these feelings aside if there isn't a safe place to express them. But if your anger comes out as an aggressive outburst, it diminishes your opportunity to be heard.

When you're angry, it can be more difficult to see another person's point of view. It also tends to lead to more hurt and isolation. But anger isn't necessarily a 'bad' feeling. Sometimes it can help us identify things that are hurting us and motivate us to make changes. Channelling your anger in a helpful way can help you and others address your situation.

TIPS FOR COPING WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY



- Try a mindfulness or meditation exercise each day.
- Keep active – exercise like running or yoga will also help you to sleep.
- Eat well-balanced meals and try not to multi-task when eating. Allocate time to relax.
- Identify triggers, such as the news, and consciously limit how much you watch, read or dwell on them.
- Watch a comedy, read an uplifting book or do something to distract you from negative thoughts, such as cooking or art.
- Talk to a close friend or family member about how you are feeling. Sometimes it helps to open up. Also see 'Getting help with these feelings'.

Safe ways of letting out anger

- Walk away from the situation before it becomes a row. Going for a short walk or a run can release tension and give you time to think.
- If you're in a meeting, ask for a five minute break so you can go somewhere quiet to gather your thoughts.
- Try to calm down by breathing slowly, relaxing your body, or using other relaxation techniques such as mindfulness.
- Release your angry feelings in a safe way, for example by tearing up a newspaper or hitting a pillow.
- Find a way to distract yourself such as putting on your favourite music, doing a creative activity or fixing or making something.

TOP TIP

Find a way to distract yourself such as putting on your favourite music, doing a creative activity or fixing or making something.



Guilt

Guilt is a common feeling we all experience. It can be a complicated and confusing emotion.

Carers frequently speak about feeling guilty: for asking for help, not doing enough for the person they care for, or because they sometimes resent being a carer, for example. These feelings are normal and understandable. It's perfectly reasonable not to want to care all of the time, or at all. But we can use guilt to stop ourselves from doing perfectly reasonable things. We tell ourselves we're not entitled to things, or we have no right to ask for them.

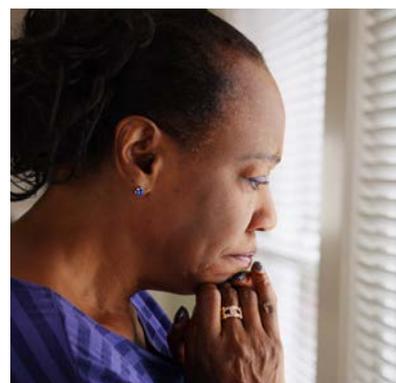
Often guilt stops us admitting our true feelings to ourselves. For example, a carer may feel guilty about their mum moving into residential care to mask the fact that they feel unable to cope. If you feel guilty, it can help to look at your underlying feelings. This can reduce the negative effects of guilt and pinpoint where you may need to get support.



Loss

You may experience loss when the person you care for dies or goes into residential care. If this happens, you may miss the person and feel sad that this part of your life is over.

However, loss can be felt in other ways. You may mourn the former identity of the person you care for before they developed dementia. Perhaps you have had to give up work to care for someone or a relative has had to move in with you for practical reasons. Losing your independence and freedom is a less recognised part of being a carer. These changes can knock your confidence and affect your ability to stand up for yourself.



Getting help with these feelings

Recognising you need help is not a sign of weakness. Far from it – it's a positive and courageous step towards feeling better. Talking to trusted friends and family members can be very helpful. Sometimes just a listening and sympathetic ear can alleviate the burden of these feelings. Alternatively, counselling – also known as 'talking therapy' – involves talking to and sharing difficult feelings with a trained person. It can be easier to talk honestly to someone outside of your family or friendship group. A counsellor won't tell you what to do but can help you come to your own decisions and cope better with how you're feeling. You can also go to family counselling to help resolve relationship problems.

You can refer yourself directly to NHS counselling services or ask your GP for a referral. You may have to wait a while before your first appointment. Sessions are generally limited to between six and twelve 50-minute sessions, usually once a week. You may decide to pay for counselling if the waiting list is too long, if you've finished a short course of NHS sessions, or if you want more choice. Your local carers' organisation may provide low-cost counselling or refer you to organisations that do.

You can also see a private counsellor. Sessions cost anywhere between £10 and £70 depending on where you live. Contact the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) to find a qualified counsellor.

Lifeline operates a free 24 hour helpline service for anyone experiencing distress or despair on 0808 808 8000. Lifeline offers a range of services including counselling, complementary therapies and befriending or mentoring. If appropriate, a face-to-face appointment can be arranged in your local area within seven days.

Understanding family relationships

Family relationships can be complicated. When it comes to caring, it's common for one relative to take on the main caring role with others contributing where and when they can. In many cases, other family members may not have any role in caring. As a carer, you often have to work with the circumstances you face.

Most people have the best intentions for the family member needing care, even though their ways of doing things may differ greatly to yours. They may feel guilty if they're unable to offer as much support as you do. Or they may worry it'll look like interfering if they try to do more. They might feel uncomfortable in a caring role, or assume you're happy to carry on providing the amount of care you currently provide.

Using technology to help communicate with other family members is one way to get them more involved in helping you. For example, you could set up a WhatsApp group to keep each other updated. For a more tailored option, Jointly is an app by carers for carers designed to help families coordinate tasks, share responsibilities and communicate more easily. Find out more at: carersuk.org/jointly

CONTACT BOOK

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

BACP House, 15 St John's
Business Park, Lutterworth,
Leicestershire LE17 4HB

T 01455 883300

bacp.co.uk

Lifeline

The Northern Ireland crisis
response helpline service
for people in distress or
despair

T 0808 808 8000

lifelinehelpline.info

TOP TIP

The more you understand other family members' needs, the more chance you'll be able to reduce any tension and win over their cooperation.



Taking care of yourself

If you have a hostile or unhelpful relative – including the person you care for – it's important you have a support network around you. Spending time with supportive people will help, along with the stress management and mindfulness techniques offered below.

Try and limit the time spent with those who get you down and make sure you get breaks when you really need them, however short. If the person you care for is creating the bad feeling, explain – if you're able to – that you're doing your best in difficult circumstances and let them know what your needs are.



Visit carersuk.org/ni/self-advocacy to download 'Mindfulness'

TOP TIP



Knowing you have a plan if you are unable to care for someone can provide great peace of mind.

We can help you create one using our Carers UK contingency planning tool, MyBackUp: carersdigital.org/mybackup

Other sources of help

Relate NI

If you need more support, you could contact Relate NI. They provide local services that look not just at relationships between couples, but other family relationships too. Find out more at relateni.org

Carers UK Forum

The Carers UK Forum is a warm and welcoming online community where you can talk to other carers about what's on your mind and get support from people who understand: carersuk.org/forum

Mediation Northern Ireland

Mediation Northern Ireland aims to support parties dealing with change, contention, conflict and difference to find acceptable and non-violent agreement. Visit: mediationnorthernireland.org

The Resolution Centre

The Resolution Centre provides advice and information about mediation. The website has a searchable database of mediators. Find out more at theresolutioncentre.co.uk



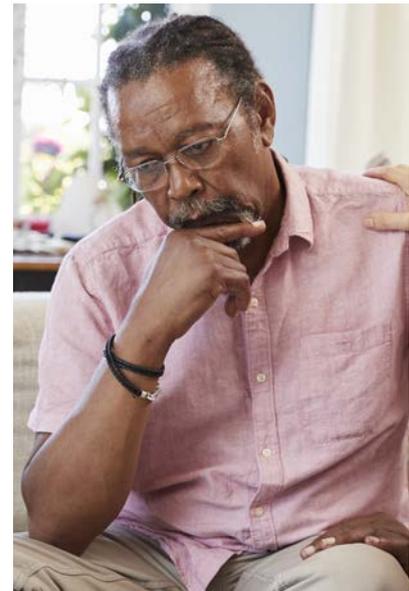
Reflecting on how you think

In this part of the guide, we consider how greater self-awareness and new ways of thinking could enable you to get your points across more effectively.

Self-awareness

The way we think, our attitudes and our beliefs are influenced by our culture, genes, upbringing and experience. It can be difficult to shift negative mindsets you've had for many years. Sometimes we're not aware of our unhelpful attitudes and beliefs because they've been part of our lives for so long.

When you're trying to convey your views, you'll be more effective if you know yourself including your own strengths and weaknesses. People with higher self-awareness tend to cope better with stress and anxiety and are better at using practical coping strategies.



Taking to time to reflect

When life is busy, it is easy to avoid asking ourselves too many questions about how we feel, our thoughts or our behaviours. But being more self-aware can help you to address your underlying needs and understand how you come across to others.

Our 'Reflecting on events' exercise encourages you to observe the reasons behind your actions and helps you understand your thoughts, feelings and behaviour when something negative has happened. You can use this tool with any difficult situation and work out how to communicate differently next time.



Visit carersuk.org/ni/self-advocacy to download 'Reflecting on events'.

Disputing negative thoughts

Sometimes negative thoughts are a defence mechanism to protect ourselves from disappointment. After all, if we're expecting the worst and it happens, we can tell ourselves it's ok because we didn't expect anything better.

However, thinking in this way can stop us from seeing things objectively, and means we don't see positive outcomes when they take place. Someone may say "*no one listens to me*" after attending a meeting where they have been asked to discuss their concerns at length. Sometimes it can be helpful to see events from a fresh perspective with more positive alternatives.

Tackling unhelpful thoughts

A useful way to challenge unhelpful thoughts is to untangle them and develop a more balanced point of view. One of the simplest ways to do this is to 'take the thought to court': write down the evidence for and against the thought, and then come to a more realistic or balanced way of thinking. See the example in the table below.

What's the evidence?

Think of it like a jury in a court case. To know the truth, we need hard facts about what actually happened, not just what we think happened.

For example, a carer who is anxious in a meeting thinks "*There's no way I'll be able to speak.*" Looking at the evidence for and against can help them decide whether the thought is actually true.

Evidence for

Refers to the information that you feel backs up your thought. It may be how you feel, or previous experiences.

Evidence against

Is all the information that doesn't back up the thought – remembering that the carer has been able to speak at a meeting before, so there's no reason why they won't be able to speak up this time.

New thinking

This is the thought based on the 'judgement' of the evidence. It encourages you to be more realistic in anxious situations.

Original thought	Evidence for	Evidence against	New thinking
I'm going to pass out in this meeting with my mum's social worker.	I feel dizzy and I nearly passed out when I last felt like this.	I have never passed out before. I'll feel better if I sit near the door.	I've not passed out before so chances are I'll be ok. I have an escape if I need one.
There is no way I'll be able to speak at this meeting, it's too scary.	I'm the only one not to have spoken, my mouth is so dry.	I've spoken before at a meeting. I know exactly what I want to say.	I have the proven ability to speak at meetings to get my point across – I could take notes as prompts.

Further information

You can find out about our other resources via our website carersuk.org/help-and-advice

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About Carers NI

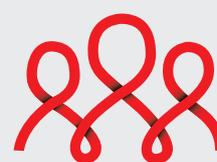
Carers NI is here for everyone who cares, unpaid, for family and friends who are older, disabled or seriously ill.

Caring is part of life, but without the right support, the personal costs of caring can be high. We work as part of Carers UK to make life better for carers.

We give information, advice and support



We connect carers so no one has to care alone



We innovate to find new ways to reach and support carers



We campaign together for lasting change



Visit carersuk.org/northernireland to join us, support us or access our online resources.

With your help we can make life better for carers.



Keep in touch

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@carersni



/carersni

Carers NI Advice Line

T 028 9043 9843 | E advice@carersni.org

Opening hours may vary. Please check: carersuk.org/northernireland/about-us-ni/contact-us for the current days and times the Helpline is open.



carersni.org

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This guide is designed to provide helpful information and advice. While we work to ensure that our information is accurate and up to date, we would recommend contacting the Carers UK Helpline or visiting our website for more information.

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