



# Company initiatives for workers with care responsibilities for disabled children or adults

## Executive summary

### Introduction

This report presents the results of Eurofound's work on company initiatives for workers with care responsibilities for disabled children or adults. The research focused on initiatives that employers can take to support the needs of workers who have (informal) care responsibilities, including parents caring for children with disabilities and carers of adults who need care because of disability, illness or old age.

The main part of the research involved case studies of 'companies' (which refers to public or private sector employers) that have implemented approaches to support working carers. The EU and Member State policy and social dialogue contexts were also examined, as were literature and statistical data on the theme of caring and employment.

### Policy context

From a policy perspective, the interactions between employment and caring are becoming more important in Europe, with an increasing number of older people needing care in addition to the many children and non-elderly adults with disabilities or long-term illnesses who receive informal care. Sustainability of long-term care systems requires an extensive contribution from informal carers, while labour market requirements and contemporary lifestyles and aspirations encourage increased participation of women in the labour force.

Where working carers are unsupported it is likely that something will have to give – they may be unable to contribute optimally in the workplace, they may be less able to provide the amount and quality of care that they would like to, or they may overstrain themselves in the effort to do both. Indeed, many carers of working age may find it difficult to engage in paid employment at all. This can have negative financial implications for them in the

short term and in the longer term because of enduring consequences of temporary or permanent withdrawal from the labour market.

### Key findings

Some of the key types of company-level measures to support working carers are:

- leave-related provisions;
- hours-reduction possibilities;
- work flexibility and work adjustments;
- awareness-raising and skills development among managers and the workforce;
- occupational health and wellbeing measures;
- care-related supports, such as information, counselling, and practical support with the caring role.

More than 50 case studies of company initiatives for working carers were prepared from across the 11 participating countries – Austria, Belgium, Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and the UK. Key themes emerging from the cases include the following.

#### **Awareness-raising is often needed within companies**

Levels of awareness in relation to the specific issue of working carers often seem to be a lot lower than in relation to working parents. Because of this, efforts to raise awareness of the working carer issue among managers, supervisors and staff are an important element in many of the cases.

### **Companies are providing both work-related and care-related supports**

Although approaches focusing on work-related measures (leave, hours reduction and work flexibility) are most common, many of the cases also provide examples of how employers are providing care-related support (such as information, counselling and concrete supports for costs of care or in finding care services).

### **A combination of both targeted and universal approaches seems especially effective**

Such approaches explicitly identify caring as an important work–family balance situation that may be experienced by employees. They ensure that carers are known and have access to relevant universal provisions for the workforce. They also provide specifically carer-oriented measures to cater for needs that cannot be met through more universal provisions. Many of the cases show how employers have recognised the ‘win–win’ outcome for employer and employees in addressing the work–family balance needs of working carers.

### **The pivotal role of line managers**

The day-to-day resolution of working carers’ needs typically occurs through individual negotiation with line managers. Although initial resistance from line managers seems to be prevalent, the cases show how this can be overcome through efforts to raise awareness and to support and equip line managers to take account of the needs of working carers.

### **An issue for both men and women**

In addition to linking company-level approaches on working carers to policies relating to equality for women, such as addressing the fact that women are more likely to opt for long-term leave and/or to experience negative career implications, some of the cases indicate a growing recognition of work–care balance issues for men.

### **Avoiding carer’s departure from employment/ facilitating return to work**

A number of cases show how employers have been motivated to provide measures for carers in order to help retain staff, as well as to avoid the need for staff to take long-term leave unless really necessary. Where long-term leave has been taken, companies are making efforts to maintain contact with those on

leave and to facilitate their return to work. Some of the cases show how employers in tight labour markets wish to ensure that carers are not excluded in their recruitment efforts.

## **Policy pointers**

Ultimately, Member States and/or the social partners (through collective bargaining or other relevant mechanisms) must implement effective measures if working carers are to be widely and consistently supported. However, as the research found considerable divergence in policy and practice in this field across the countries covered, the EU and its institutions have an important role to play in encouraging wider and more consistent provisions across the Member States.

The report suggests a number of key areas of action.

### **Strengthening EU-level policy provisions in this field**

Existing policy references could be made more concrete and operational. A broad policy impact assessment could be conducted to inform future policy in the area. A coordinated and cross-cutting approach needs to be developed, integrating labour market, social protection, long-term care and other relevant policy fields.

### **More attention by Member States and in social dialogue processes**

Awareness-raising initiatives and exchange of good practice experiences could be promoted and supported.

### **Initiatives directly targeting employers**

The relevant stakeholders at EU and Member State level (including the social partners and other players such as human resources professional associations) could develop measures to raise awareness among employers across the Member States.

### **Support research and strengthen the evidence base**

A stronger evidence base is needed to inform policy and action in this field. EU and Member State-level support for research, the strengthening of EU-wide statistics, and the compilation of a comprehensive account of current Member State policies and activities on this issue would all be very useful.

### **Further information**

The report *Company initiatives for workers with care responsibilities for disabled children or adults* is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1147.htm>

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