

We should care more for the carers -

It is time we recognised the contribution to society made by those who look after others, argues Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and vice-president of Carers UK.

Many of us share the experience of caring for a relative, neighbour or friend with a long-term sickness or disability, or who is incapacitated by age.

Part of what makes us human is our willingness to look out for, and look after, each other. Christian faith places this at the heart of our responsibilities – and that is still a major motivation in our society. What if that wasn't possible? Many carers have no chance to switch off. And, on top of that, they sense that they receive little public recognition for what they do and must put up with wholly inadequate resourcing for it.

Of course people don't get involved in caring because of the financial rewards, but that doesn't mean that they have no real needs. Caring for someone else can affect your health, your mental wellbeing, your access to work and education and housing. It is a burden that falls especially heavily on both the very young and the elderly.

The needs of children who have to act as carers represent a growing, and often heartbreakingly acute, problem. At the moment, the Carers' Allowance is the equivalent of £1.52 per hour, and even that disappears once someone begins to draw their pension.

Meanwhile, it is estimated that carers save our economy some £87 billion a year. Caring for another human being in serious need requires skill, devotion and substantial sacrifice. All this is inescapable. But it doesn't have to be made harder still by inadequate financial provision, often administered in ways that present a thorn-hedge of bureaucratic complexity for claimants.

There is a National Strategy for Carers, pledging an end to "carer poverty" by 2018; it is vital that this should be carried through. Everyone knows that the financial climate is tough as far as public money is concerned. But think how much harder this makes the position of the carer. Benefits need to be reviewed without delay.

In any case, should anyone think that this would be an unpopular extravagance, it is worth underlining that YouGov surveys commissioned to launch Carers Week, which starts today, found that an overwhelming majority of the public agreed that carers make a contribution to society almost as dramatic as nurses and firefighters. Yet present levels of support for carers, both financial and otherwise, are indefensibly low.

These new surveys also show that nearly three quarters of carers are at the end of their tether, many of them identifying "frustration with bureaucracy" as the worst thing they have to cope with, and even more saying that they feel their contribution is undervalued or ignored by professionals – and even by family members and friends in many cases.

The partnership of charities organising Carers Week is determined to challenge the Government to do something as a matter of urgency about the levels of carers' benefits, and also to raise everyone's awareness of this "secret service", a generally hidden but hugely effective and demanding contribution to the good of our society.

This also means helping carers themselves to recognise what they do and to identify and speak up for their own needs. I hope the Carers' Poverty Charter, which was launched earlier this summer, will take all this forward decisively.

Meanwhile, Carers Week is an opportunity for us all to learn more about the generosity and the struggles of those who devote themselves to what is, after all, one of the most basic of all human tasks: loving our neighbours, whatever the cost.