



**Submission to the Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth on the next Government
Policy Framework for Children and Young People in Ireland**

Family Carers Ireland

February 2022

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Introduction

Family Carers Ireland welcomes the opportunity to submit our views to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the next policy framework for children and young people in Ireland. For many years we have lobbied for better supports and recognition for young people with caring responsibilities – young carers. We believe a critical first step to achieving this is to have the needs of young carer acknowledged in important policy documents developed by the Department. At the time of its publication in 2015, *Family Carers Ireland* welcomed the inclusion of two actions within the National Youth Strategy to support young carers, however we are deeply disappointed that neither action was implemented during the term of the strategy¹. We also note that young carers were not mentioned in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, despite experiencing disadvantage across all five outcome areas.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “Every child has the right to...”- among others- rest and leisure (Article 31), education (Articles 28 & 29), an adequate standard of living (Article 27), express their views (Article 12), enjoy the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24). Young carers, just like all children, should be able to enjoy these rights. Too often however, the challenges they face impinge these rights. Young carers are a particularly vulnerable group of children and should be recognised as such. They should not only benefit from the universal implementation of their rights but be subject to additional and tailored policy and support measures with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to their needs.

Given its specific focus on young carers, this submission does not provide a response to the specific questions presented in the consultation survey, but rather sets out why it is critical that young carers are included in Government’s new policy framework.

Young carer is the term given to young people under the age of 18 years, who provide substantial unpaid care to a family member due to illness, disability, mental health, substance misuse or problems related to old age. A young adult carer is someone aged between 18 and 24 who provides unpaid care.

Young Carers in Ireland

The reality for many families where there is chronic illness, mental health problems, disability, alcohol or substance misuse, is that children and young adults are routinely involved in caregiving. Many of these young people provide regular and significant care, either episodically or over many years and are often ‘hidden’ to health and social care professionals and subsequently absent in social policy and practice. For young carers, caring can have a profound impact on the things that are important to growing up. It can affect a young person’s health, social life and self-confidence. Caring can also negatively impact their experiences and outcomes in education and have a lasting effect on their life opportunities. In some extreme cases, the young person may also be at risk of emotional or other types of abuse from the family member they are caring for.

With regard to the prevalence of young carers, there is a significant disparity between census data on young carers and the findings of the Health Behaviour in School Aged Children survey (HBSC).² Census 2016 identified 3,800 young. By comparison the HBSC survey 2018 found that 13.3 per cent of 10-17 year olds surveyed (n= 15,557) said they provide regular, unpaid personal help for a family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability. Extrapolation to the national population would suggest therefore that some **66,956 young people in the 10-17 year age-group alone potentially provide regular unpaid care.**

¹ Actions 1.14 and 5.6.

² The HBSC survey is a WHO collaborative cross-national study that monitors the health behaviours, health outcomes and social environments of school-aged children.

While this discrepancy in data can in part be attributed to parental completion of the census versus the completion of the HBSC survey by the child themselves, the discrepancy reinforces the evidence that the majority of young carers are ‘under the radar’ and so many do not get the help they need. *Family Carers Ireland* accepts that not all children with caring responsibilities will need support, however, it is vital that those who do are properly assessed and the right help put in place. Without this support some of these children are not only losing their childhoods but are also missing out on vital school and social interactions, which will have a negative impact on the rest of their lives.³

Better Outcomes Brighter Futures Five Outcome Areas

The purpose of the new policy framework is to coordinate policy across Government to achieve better outcomes for children and young people. Better Outcomes Brighter Futures identified five national outcome areas. Research both within Ireland and internationally has consistently shown young carers to be disadvantaged across all five areas:

1. Are active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing

The HBSC data suggests links between caring and problems related to health and wellbeing. Young carers were significantly less likely to report high life satisfaction than the non-carer sample. They were more likely to report bullying behaviour, with 37.5% reporting being bullied and 15.9% saying they had bullied others. Young carers were also more likely to report drinking alcohol, smoking and using cannabis. More than half (51.3%) reported an injury that required medical attention in the last 12 months – significantly more than the non-carer sample (41.1%).

2. Are achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development

Young carers face particular barriers in relation to school and further education: they may have frequent lateness, absences and ultimately, they may be forced to drop out. Similarly, it can be challenging to combine paid employment with caring responsibilities. The Me-We project (2018-2021) was undertaken by universities, research institutes and civil society organisations from six different European countries – including Eurocarers of which Family Carers Ireland is a member, and examined adolescent young carers’ (AYCs) mental health and wellbeing across Europe. In their study they found 41% of young carers reported that they have experienced difficulties in school due to their caring responsibilities. 94 AYCs (22%) reported that they have experienced negative school performance due to caring. 92 AYCs (36.9%) reported that they have been bullied, teased, or made fun of, due to caring. This finding corresponds with previous young carers research in the UK: negative school performance and bullying are strong features of the educational experience of young carers. This finding underlines the need to engage the educational sector in identifying and supporting young carers.

3. Are safe and protected from harm

The HBSC survey asked children to report how often they go to school or bed hungry because there was not enough food at home. 24.6% of young carers said they experienced hunger, significantly higher than the non-carer population (17.9%). It is important to note that the origins of food poverty are not only socioeconomic. A study of Canadian HBSC data, for example, found that going to bed hungry was also strongly related to the organisation and functioning of family environments. For example, adolescents from single parent and ‘other’ family structures reported the most frequent levels of hunger compared with families when both parents were present. Regardless of its cause, hunger is linked with a range of negative outcomes for a child’s health, behaviour, emotional wellbeing and academic experiences so deserves attention from policymakers and relevant professionals.

³ The Children’s Society (2019) Young carers, <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-children/young-carers> (accessed 23 Sep 2019).

4. Have economic security and opportunity

For many families, taking on caring responsibilities results in long-term financial hardship, with the loss of income from employment exacerbated by higher household costs. Research undertaken in the UK in 2019 suggest that child poverty was higher amongst young carers than other children. Moreover, the research found marked differences in trends amongst young carers and other children with young carers having fared substantially worse in terms of trends in child poverty outcomes in the wake of the financial crisis, recession and onset of austerity, failing to share the continued improvements experienced by other children. The findings provide a powerful confirmation of the differential nature of trends amongst young carers, as well as confirming that the association between child poverty and young caring status.

5. Are connected, respected and contributing to their world.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs publication of a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015–2020 marked an important step towards ensuring *'that children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives'* (p.v). The Strategy was to be implemented in parallel with Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, which acknowledges that 'seldom-heard' children (e.g. children with disabilities) are harder to reach and hear, but their voices are no less important and certain accommodations and supports are required to ensure that they are heard (p.31). Unfortunately, this aspiration contrasts with the experience of many young carers who feel unrecognised and ignored in the shaping of policies that could ultimately affect them.

Why young carers should be included in the new policy framework:

- Young people with significant caring responsibilities are adversely affected across all five outcome areas identified in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures.
- Many young people with caring responsibilities aren't known to their schools or colleges and don't see themselves as being young carers or feel too worried or embarrassed to ask for help.
- Early identification is vital. Often young carers don't get identified until a crisis. The sooner we can find out someone is a young carer, the more support can be put in place to help keep them safe, well and able to attend and achieve their best.
- Many people will have had an increase to their caring role due to the Covid-19 pandemic too, because they won't have had their usual support or breaks at school/college or with friends.
- Some young people may also have become carers as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, due to increases in ill health and substance misuse, and lack of access to services and support.

Priorities the new policy framework should focus on for young carers:

Inter-agency-departmental Collaboration and Action

- The success of initiatives aiming to address the needs and preferences of young carers largely depends on the interplay between a broad set of health and social policies - integrated actions involving educational, social and health services are essential to overcome siloed actions and to effectively address the challenges faced by young carers.
- Establish a cross-sector, multi-departmental and multi-agency working group to jointly address the needs of young carers and support the alignment of young carer supports with

other Departments and agencies to help ensure an integrated and coordinated response (NYS action 5.6).

- Young Carers are placed firmly within the agenda and work-plans of TUSLA, the HSE, DCEDIY, DoE, DFHERIS and DoH.

Awareness raising and identification

- CSO to review the wording of Census of Population question on unpaid care to better capture the number of young carers.
- DCEDIY raise awareness and understanding among education, health and youth service providers of the signs that young people have caring responsibilities, and how this caring role may impact on their education, health and recreation pursuits (NYS action 1.14).

Support for young carers

- Ensure young carers' needs are captured in existing funding streams such as UBU, this should include work with young carers within schools.
- Promote the development of Young Carer Groups across the country.
- Develop a free travel scheme for young carers to allow them access transport to groups and other face-to-face supports.
- Establish a respite scheme for young carers allowing them a minimum number of home care /residential respite hours per year.

Supporting Young Carers in Education

- Develop policy guidelines on young carers for schools.
- Young people with caring responsibilities identified through Tusla's Educational Welfare Service should be recorded in a national database, offered appropriate supports and signposted to services best placed to support them.
- Tusla's Educational Welfare Service, schools and School Completion Programmes should address secondary barriers to learning that may stem from a pupil's caring role, such as anxiety or bullying which can then impact on attendance.
- Introduce an Education Maintenance Allowance, similar to that piloted in the UK, designed to help young people or carers from less well-off families stay on at school or college.
- Incorporate a module on Young Carers Awareness into existing Social, Personal and Health Education syllabus in post-primary schools.

Protect young carers from inappropriate caring

- Government should be more responsive in improving the lives of the person needing care and, in turn, in improving the lives of young carers. Health and social care needs to be adequately funded so that children and young people do not take on inappropriate caring roles.

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