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## Young Carers and Covid-19

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The pandemic has had a dramatic impact on many aspects of everyday life in Scotland. It has had an effect on many households and household incomes, and as a result, on many children and young people who are dependents. The serious social problems of child mental health, child abuse, digital exclusion and food insecurity all pre-existed Covid-19 and have been exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic. For example, some young people who had received support for mental health issues through the school have experienced a reduction in the service. The restrictions and lockdowns have also created enormous difficulties for that group of children and young people who are often absent from, or receive limited attention, in the public and academic discourses on education: young carers.

The *Statutory Guidance to The Carers (Scotland) Act 2016* was published in 2018 by the Scottish Government and applies to adult carers and young carers. The Guidelines were introduced as a preventative approach to provide support. The definition of a young carer is the same definition that is used for adult carers:

*Under the Act a 'carer' is an individual who provides or intends to provide care for another individual. A carer can be caring for one or more cared-for persons. A cared-for person can have one or more carers. They don't need to live in the same house* (Scottish Government, 2018).

The Act is clear that the only distinctions are *young carers* and *adult carers* and makes no provision for *young adult carers* (16-25). A young carer refers to any young person who is under 18 and has caring responsibilities for a family member or members, or a friend. It also refers to a young person who is 18 and has remained at school and has caring responsibilities. There is, however, no lower age limit. The Scottish Government guidance acknowledges that there may be a small number of young carers who are very young at pre-school stages or early years of primary schooling. In other words, the young carer may be as young as five years old and, in some cases, even younger.

The 2011 census records 177, 918 young carers in England and Wales and a gender differential (54% girls and 46% boys) (Office for National Statistics, 2013). The Scottish government estimates that there are 44,000 young carers in Scotland. Similar to the figures in England there is a higher number of female young carers (Scottish Government, 2017). The figure of 44,000 is probably higher because this estimate is from 2015 and some children do not recognise themselves as young carers, they simply see themselves as looking after other people. The person, or persons, cared for are likely to be ill, have a disability, a mental health condition or suffer from drug or alcohol addiction or related health problems. The caring can involve:

- *medical or nursing care, such as helping someone to take medication or applying dressings;*
- *personal care, such as helping to wash, dress or eat;*
- *practical support, such as taking a person shopping or to medical appointments, cleaning or accompanying them to social events; and*
- *emotional support.*

The young carer often has a role in caring for younger siblings.

The criteria for recognition for being a young carer is to be set in each local authority. Local authorities (and health boards) are duty bound to recognise and prepare a Young Carer Statement (YCS) where appropriate. There are two possibilities: (1) The young carer may self-identify and the responsible authority must prepare a YCS, (2) The young carer is identified by practitioners and must be offered a YCS. If the young carer accepts, the responsible authority must prepare a YCS (Scottish Government, 2016). This could be prepared by a third sector body. The YCS assesses needs for support and:

*The information within the YCS will include the nature and extent of care; the impact of caring; and the extent to which the carer is able and willing to provide care.*

The YCS must be agreed with the young carer and the support agreed.

In 2019, the Scottish government started to award an annual Young Carers Grant for young people aged 16-18 who spend an average of 16 hours a week caring for somebody in receipt

of disability benefit. The grant of £305.10 can be used for any purpose (Scottish Government, 2020).

Research conducted by Robison, Egan and Inglis in 2017 surveyed 11,200 secondary school pupils in Glasgow and aimed to investigate the prevalence of young carers in the sample, any differences in their health and wellbeing and their expectations for once they have left school. The numbers of children providing care were high: around one in eight pupils were providing care for somebody and almost one third commented that nobody knew about the caring duties. There was evidence that they were more likely to be experiencing the effects of poverty. Young carers in the sample were often registered for free school meals and living in a lone parent household. Young carers in lone parent families were also overrepresented in a major research survey in England in 2016 (Clay et al., 2016). These two sets of research findings are consistent with a Scottish Government report that there is a higher percentage of young carers in deprived areas, they are affected by poverty and they provide more care (Scottish Government, 2017). There is evidence that the young carers themselves have a high level of illness or disability and are more likely to suffer from the effects of anxiety, stress and depression. There is mixed evidence on the impact of caring on school education – where it does have an impact this can result in absence from school to attend to caring duties and tiredness in the classroom. The caring duties may restrict the demographical choices in Further and Higher Education and female carers are less likely to pursue third level education.

There has been a reduction in social services during the pandemic and consequently more pressure on young carers to assume further caring responsibilities. A small-scale survey conducted by Dr Blake-Holmes from the University of East Anglia with twenty participants during the period of the pandemic between April 2020 and June 2020 demonstrated that many young carers feel a strong sense that school provides a welcome routine and respite from the caring responsibilities. This has been disrupted by lockdowns and school closures. Some young carers felt higher levels of stress as they struggled to balance the demands of home learning with caring (including caring for younger siblings) and finding a quiet space to study. Many young carers had to deal with the deteriorating mental health of the adult person(s) they care for. Some young carers are more socially isolated and disadvantaged than other young people and this has been intensified during school closures.

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