

Somerset
Young Carers report:

6 You said, we listened

Local health
and care
shaped by you

Contents	Page
Introduction	3
Background	3
What we did	4
Who we spoke to	4
Key findings: What young carers told us	4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common issues faced day to day by young carers 	4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What the Young Carers Service provides and why it is important 	5
Conclusions	5
Considerations	6
Next steps	6
Thank you	6

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Introduction

A young carer is defined in section 96 of the Children and Families Act as a person under 18 who provides care for another person of any age. That could be a parent or sibling, grandparent or friend. Care can include help for physical or mental health issues, frailty in old age, a disability or because of substance misuse.

The Children and Families Act 2014 and the Care Act 2014 placed a legal duty on local authorities from 1 April 2015 to identify young carers and carry out both a needs assessment and a transition assessment to consider the impact on the child and whole family. Young carers should also be consulted about anything that may affect them or their family.

Background

As is the case nationally, children's services in Somerset have been affected by budget cuts and increasing demand. In Autumn 2018, in a bid to save in the region of £200k Somerset County Council announced that it was considering reducing the amount of funding given to the Young Carers Support Service which provides support, advice and respite breaks for children and young people under 18 who have substantial caring responsibilities at home. The service supports around 200 young people across the county.

In late 2018 a decision was taken at Cabinet to withdraw the savings proposal and to undertake a review of the options available around identifying opportunities for greater involvement of the community and voluntary sector. Cabinet requested that a report detailing the recommendations should be presented back to Cabinet in February 2019.

Somerset's Young Carers and their families have told Healthwatch Somerset that they are becoming increasingly concerned about the lack of clarity surrounding the future of the Young Carers Service, and do not feel that their voices are being heard by decision makers in Somerset County Council.

The Local Government Association published a report in 2018 - ***Meeting the Health and Wellbeing Needs of Young Carers***.^[1] Its foreword echoes what Healthwatch Somerset learned about young carers lives: "It is clear young carers face many disadvantages. The very fact that they spend so much time caring takes its toll on their education, on their physical health and on their emotional wellbeing."



The report highlights the importance of working with partners to build on the progress that has been made in order to ensure that young carers get the support they need and the opportunities they are entitled to.

^[1] <https://www.local.gov.uk/meeting-health-and-wellbeing-needs-young-carers>

What we did

On 30th January 2018, Emily Taylor (Manager) and Virginia Roberts (Board member) attended a Young Carers Forum meeting to hear the views of young carers on the Somerset Young Carers Service. This took place at the Young People's Centre in Street.

Who we spoke to

We spoke to approximately 17 young carers who were representing Young Carers groups from across Somerset.



Key findings: What young carers told us

Common issues faced day to day by young carers

Several common issues that affect both their wellbeing and ability to reach their potential were identified by the young carers. These include:

- Feelings of both physical and emotional isolation
- Lack of confidence and low self-esteem
- Difficulty in making friends and building relationships with peers
- Lack of support and understanding about their caring responsibilities from school and the effect that caring has on issues such as attendance, punctuality and ability to undertake homework
- A feeling of missing out on their childhood
- Constantly worrying about their parents and/or siblings when they are not at home

What the Young Carers Service provides and why it is important

1. One to One Support

The young carers spoke about the importance of the relationship they have with their key workers and the one to one support they receive. In addition, they felt that the key worker played an important role as an advocate who could liaise on their behalf with school staff and other professionals. Key workers also help to raise awareness of their caring role and attend TAC meetings.

The young carers also felt that a vital part of the service they received from the young carers service was the mentoring support. They valued having someone who was there to listen, and provide advice, guidance and support, particularly around their mental health and wellbeing. When it was identified that professional support might be appropriate, mentors and key workers are also able to make referrals to MIND and CAMHS.

2. Young Carer Groups

A strong message coming from the young carers we spoke to was around the impact that their caring role had on their emotional health and wellbeing and the importance of having the opportunity to make friends and build relationships with fellow young carers and the positive impact this had on their confidence and ability to deal with anxiety. They spoke about the groups being their 'lifeline' and the 'highlight' of their lives. Several said they did not know how they would cope without the group they attended because it gave them time to be themselves and the opportunity to take time out and relax in a safe and familiar environment experiencing new things such as yoga, karate and music. Being provided with transport is an essential element for most in being able to access the group.

3. Trips and Activities

The young carers and their families really appreciate the opportunity to go on trips and experience activities that they would never have had the opportunity to do otherwise. Many families with young carers have low income and would not be able to afford to pay for activities. Young carers told us that taking part in trips and activities gives them something to look forward to, and the opportunity to have some respite from their caring responsibilities gives them their childhood back for a little while.

Conclusions

The young people who talked to us care passionately about the service they receive from the Somerset Young Carers Service. They expressed the significant improvement that it makes to their health and wellbeing, and that of their parents, by knowing that their children have an advocate outside the home and are provided with opportunities to enjoy themselves and build relationships.



Considerations

Healthwatch Somerset are concerned about the following:

- There has not been sufficient engagement with the Young Carers Forum about the changes.
- Staffing levels within the current service are reducing due to staff being redeployed in other areas of children's services.
- No options have been presented to Somerset Council Council's Cabinet at the time of writing this report.
- The uncertainty relating to the future of the service is having a detrimental impact on the emotional health of young carers and their families.
- Pressures on the adult social care budgets could put further responsibility on young carers across Somerset. It is vital that sustainable and worthwhile support is provided to minimise the long-term impact on young carers.

Next steps

Healthwatch Somerset would like Somerset County Council to clarify in writing to us:

- The timeline and specific methods for engaging young carers and their families in the design of options for the future young carers service.
- The deadline by which a draft proposal will be ready for consultation.
- The timeline and method for consulting on the proposals.
- The council's intentions with regard maintaining the existing service given its redeployment of staff.

Thank you

Healthwatch Somerset would like to thank everyone who took the time to contribute their views and experience through the young carers forum.

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