

Briefing: Young Carers and Covid-19

6 April 2020

Carers Trust supports the governments across the UK in their efforts respond to the Coronavirus pandemic. With our network of local carer services, we are working hard to support unpaid carers, in partnership with our colleagues across the voluntary and statutory sectors.

However, we are concerned about what the Coronavirus Act means for carers, and the local services that help them. The Act temporarily removes the statutory duties of local authorities to assess and support carers, as well as the people they care for. If local authorities choose to do this, many carers will not get the support they desperately need at a time when they need it most. This will put unpaid carers and their families under even more financial, practical and emotional pressure. Without adequate support to manage this additional pressure more carers will reach crisis increasing unplanned demand on our health and social care services.

It is important that local authorities recognise the specific needs of young carers, in their work with the local voluntary sector, schools and colleges. Many young carers rely on the direct support they receive at school and from young carers services to cope with their caring role. Without the break from caring provided by attending school and support groups young carers are more likely to be lonely, isolated and to feel over-burdened. It is important that alternative and innovative ways to support young carers are invested in.

This briefing sets out the initial areas of concern for the wellbeing of young carers as described by young carers themselves and the professionals that work with them. This briefing will be updated as the situation develops.

Key recommendations

- **Access to food supplies**
Local authorities must ensure young carers and their families can access the Foodbank parcels and Free School Meals that they are entitled to
- **Access to medicines**
Pharmacies should prioritise delivery for households where young carers collect medicines for family members
- **Equitable access to learning**
Welsh Government should consider how best to ensure that young carers learning needs are addressed in the national continuity of learning plan
- **Sufficient funding for carers services**
Welsh Government should work with local authorities to ensure carers services are sufficiently resourced to fulfil an expected surge in need from newly identified carers, and to support well-being amongst existing carers

Supporting information

Safety

Local authorities must ensure young carers who are not safe at home are safeguarded by Children's Services or relevant bodies. Some young people care for family members who may be volatile or are presenting challenging behaviour. We believe the pressures created by isolation may be increasing risk for some young carers. We have been made aware of households with young carers who have had to call the police to have the person they care for removed. Young carers should have access to meaningful breaks from caring roles and appropriate support services to protect their mental health and well-being.

Pressure on services

Support workers of young carers from across Wales have reported that whilst communities are pulling together it is difficult for them to support young carers as effectively as they would ordinarily.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, carers services have received requests of support from individuals in crisis who were previously unknown to services. These newly identified carers, whose numbers are likely to increase in tandem with the growing pressure on families, will need support and services in the short, medium and long-term.

Carers services are working intensively to support their most vulnerable families with services across Wales already describing a growth in carers near breaking point. As an example, Bridgend Carers Centre report many families are in the 'red' category - at crisis point and needing the highest-level of support and contact. Supporting families remotely and individually presents a huge logistical and capacity challenge for already over-stretched services.

Finances and accessing food

Young carers play an important role in collecting items for their family. Carer service staff in South Wales have told us that young carers have been denied entry to stores, on account of being under the age of 18. Staff, including security staff, would benefit from training to ensure that they understand that some young people need visit stores without an adult. It would also be helpful if stores that are opening early for healthcare and social care workers also extend the invitation to young carers.

Carers services are playing a key role in helping to ensure young carers can access food banks and working at pace with local partners. It is important that local authorities ensure that young carers are able to access food parcels and free school meals that they are entitled to and that families are not missing out if they're unable to collect provisions. As they are rolled out, food vouchers must reach young carers who are entitled to receive them, which is not always the case currently. We do, however, welcome Welsh Government's commitment to providing free school meals over the Easter break; this will reduce the pressure on many young carers and their families.

Accessing medicines

Pharmacies should prioritise free delivery for households where young carers who usually collect medicines, are now unable to as a result of restrictions on movement.

Changes to collection and delivery services, as well as staff changes, mean some young carers are now finding it difficult to access medicines.

There are positive examples of local pharmacies setting up delivery services for families with young carers, but some young carers are still struggling to access medications. Examples have been given of families who remain unable to collect food and medicine because they can't drive or stand in queues for extended periods.

Pharmacy staff should remind themselves of the guidance on '**Children collecting medicines from a pharmacy**' and recognise that, for some families, young carers are the only carers in the household.

Physical health and mental health

Caring can affect a young person's physical and mental health. Young carers are especially concerned family members with underlying health issues may contract the coronavirus. Young-person friendly information would be reassuring for young carers and other vulnerable young people.

Already over-stretched carers services must be sufficiently funded to enable them to provide essential support for young carers. This may include developing new, innovative approaches to connect with young carers remotely. Increased wellbeing support is time consuming and can increase emotional pressure on staff as well as impacting more broadly on capacity.

Long periods of social isolation are having a significant impact on young carers. Like many others, Swansea Carers Centre is using digital platforms and a telephone service to provide advice and assistance to carers, but this can be time and resource intensive. Tackling misinformation about the coronavirus and helping young carers to manage their worries has been key. Carers with anxiety and other mental health illnesses are particularly struggling with a lack of regular breaks from caring to help maintain their own health and well-being.

Schools and concerned adults can contact local carers services for help and advice. Some offer counselling, tailored support and further signposting. These important information hubs should be promoted by local authorities.

Additionally, the **Coronavirus Information hub** created by the office of the Childrens Commissioner for Wales ,especially for young people, should be promoted.

Learning

It is important that young carers learning needs are addressed in the national continuity of learning plan so they too can continue to learn effectively. As a vulnerable group with specific challenges, their learning needs must be considered.

Currently, local authorities are providing opportunities for distance learning for pupils but varying approaches between schools means there is not equity in provision. We welcome Welsh Government's commitment to providing provision for vulnerable children in schools and settings during the Easter break this will assist a great number of young carers and their families.

Juggling responsibilities as well as constant stress and tiredness can impact on some young carers' learning and concentration. Preoccupation and concern for family members means the additional pressure of schoolwork is overwhelming. It is important that teachers to balance recognition for a young carer's circumstance by providing lenient deadlines, for example, with appropriate support to maximise the young carers' learning.

Notes

1. **Carers Trust Wales** exists to improve support, services and recognition for carers in Wales. With our Network Partners – local services that deliver support to carers – we work to ensure that information, advice and practical support is available to carers across the country.
2. Researchers from Cardiff University found that 16% percent of secondary school pupils in Wales have caring responsibilities. Significantly, the proportion rises to 21% for students from the least affluent backgrounds. More details are available from www.shrn.org.uk.
3. Young carers services are increasingly reporting a growth in the need to support very young carers (those between the ages of five and eight).
4. Carers Trust defines a young carer as someone under 18 who helps look after someone in their family, or a friend, who is ill, disabled or misuses drugs or alcohol.

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