



Response to the Scottish Parliament Health, Social Care and Sport Committee call for views on Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People.

About Carers Trust Scotland

Carers Trust Scotland is part of Carers Trust, a major charity for, with and about unpaid carers. We work to improve support, services and recognition for anyone living with the challenges of caring, unpaid, for a family member or friend who is ill, frail, disabled or has mental health or addiction problems. With locally based Network Partners we support unpaid carers in the community with information, advice, emotional support, hands on practical help and access to much needed breaks. We offer specialist services for unpaid carers of people of all ages and conditions and a range of individually tailored support and group activities.

Our focus in this response is primarily around young carers in Scotland, but we recognise that these will be similar issues for children and young people who are not providing unpaid care.

What are the key issues around health and wellbeing for children and young people in Scotland?

1. Mental health and services

For young carers in Scotland a key concern for them is mental health and accessing appropriate services to help. This has been particularly true as a result of COVID-19. The pandemic has created unique and specific challenges for young people with caring responsibilities, often interacting with the pre-existing barriers that young carers were already facing. As a result of the pandemic, where many statutory services were reduced or not available, many young carers spent more time caring at home while also juggling home-study and were unable to get a break. Young carers have felt increasingly isolated and disconnected from friends and peers as a result of the pandemic and lockdowns.

Carers Trust research conducted with young carers¹ highlighted the concerns many young carers had over their mental health. Including that, 45% of young carers that took part noting that their mental health is worse than it was before the pandemic; 1 in 4 young carers were unable to take any break from their caring role; 74% of young carers were feeling less connected to others since the pandemic; and 69% of young carers reported feeling more stressed.

“Anxiety has dramatically increased and find myself crying at night and don't know why” Young carer, 15.

Accessing appropriate services for help has also been an issue for many children and young people, including young carers across Scotland. Numbers of rejected referrals, length of waiting times and lack of alternative services have all impacted onto mental health of young people.

“It's hard to care for someone when I can't even care for myself” Young carer, 17

A research article² highlights the issue of school nurses not feeling as well trained in areas of mental health as they would like. The drive for school nurses to support young people experiencing mental health problems has highlighted that unless nurses are appropriately trained and supported then they will be unable to meet the varying needs of young people in school.

2. Poor coordination between children and young people's services

Another key issue seems to be the dis-jointed and inconsistent nature of children and young peoples' health and social services. Families have reported the stress placed on them by having to navigate different services and the re-telling of the issue to various staff teams across these services. The National Care Service consultation also enquired about this, and we hope that a more coordinated approach to children's health and social services is achieved. But action needs to be taken now to ensure young carers get the support they and their rights are upheld.

3. Incorporation of United Nations Convention on Rights of Child (UNCRC)

The incorporation of UNCRC into Scot's Law is welcomed by Carers Trust Scotland as a key step in a culture change which sees children and young people have rights enshrined in law and which places duties on organisations and services to meet these rights. A challenge however is going to be the realisation of this in practice, and in educating children, young people and families about UNCRC and what it means for them. It also provides the opportunity for public

¹ 2020 Vision: Hear Me, see Me, Support Me and don't forget me. Carers Trust Scotland 2020
<https://carers.org/downloads/scotland-pdfs/2020-vision.pdf>

² [British Journal of School Nursing](#) Vol. 10, No. 1 The Challenge of Meeting Children's Mental Health, 2009

authorities to better identify young carers to ensure their rights are being fulfilled and they receive the support that they are entitled to as children and young people first and foremost.

It is clear that resources will need to follow the incorporation process and that children and young people, including young carers should play an integral part in the discussion on how services adapt going forward.

4. Poverty and inequalities

This is covered in more depth further on in this paper, but it is a key issue which needs to be tackled if we are to truly realise the rights of children and young people to attain the best health possible. The recent doubling of child payment is a move in the right direction for many families, but the deeper causes of poverty need to be addressed at the same time.

Young carers and their families are more likely to live in deprived circumstances than the average young population, and those in the most deprived areas are more likely to have substantial caring roles. This adds additional poverty and inequality barriers for children and young people with caring responsibilities.

“Has been more stressful and can't get a break as we are shielding. I also have very little access to digital equipment to be able to stay in touch with friends and keep up with school work” Young carer, 15

The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland highlights poverty as the biggest human rights issue for children and young people in Scotland. A recent joint publication³ found that food insecurity was increasing in young people and the pandemic has worsened this situation. It also found that free school meals are not consistently provided to those who need them. Lack of digital access is increasing inequalities that existed prior to the pandemic. The human rights of young carers may be at particular risk due to reduced services, for them and person they care for.

Additional financial support was given to those unpaid carers who are in receipt of Carer's Allowance – around 90,000 of the 1.1 million unpaid carers in Scotland – but excludes most unpaid carers, including the vast majority of young carers.

Current Challenges to Improving health and wellbeing of children and young people over next 5 years

COVID-19

³ Independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment; The Observatory of Children's Human Rights Scotland and The Child & Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2021.

The challenge of improving health and wellbeing of children and young people will be, in part, the continuing impact of COVID-19. While new data is emerging about the legacy impact of the pandemic, many young carers experienced a pause or termination of mental health support during the pandemic, which may have long term, future consequences. Being locked down in the home could be difficult for young carers. One study has reported that difficulties in relationships and conflict within the family home are problematic for children and young people, particularly those with experience of the youth justice system.⁴

Several groups have been identified who have experienced, and are still experiencing, disproportionate vulnerability during the lockdowns. These groups include disadvantaged communities; people with disabilities and unpaid carers, black and ethnic minority communities; people experiencing homelessness; those affected by violence; and older people.⁵ The Mental Health Foundation has emphasised Scottish Government⁶ findings, calling for increased attention to the volumes of both calls and referrals to domestic abuse charities. The mental health impacts this has for the victim, and to the children and young people witnessing or experiencing such abuse is concerning.

Engaging children and young people with education may prove harder, especially for those who found it a challenge before the pandemic. Carers Trust Scotland found that many unpaid carers spent more time caring during the pandemic, which could result in an over-reliance on the young carer from the person they care for. This may be exacerbated by the closure of adult services, many of which have been slow to return to their pre-covid capacity. Health boards across Scotland are experiencing COVID-19 related strain and so are turning to families to take on additional caring responsibilities. However, unpaid carers then experience the burnout and stress associated with a more intense caring role.

Poverty

For children and young people, and especially those in unpaid caring roles, poverty remains a key issue. Scottish Government statistics estimate that 1 in 4 children are living in poverty. Low income and poverty impacts on all areas of life, including future determinants of health and wellbeing for young people. The seriousness of the impact of poverty on health and wellbeing cannot be underestimated. The British Medical Journal reported⁷ those children living in poverty are at an increased likelihood of suffering from diseases and diet related problems. Poverty can affect children's cognitive development, and those living in poverty are over three times more likely to suffer from mental health problems.

⁴ Nolan D, Spend time with me: Children and young people's experience of COVID 19 and the justice system, 2020.

⁵ Harkins C, Supporting community recovery and resilience in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. Glasgow, 2020

⁶ Scottish Government Domestic abuse and other women and girls (VAWG) during COVID 19 lockdown for the period 20.3.20 to 22/05/20 (internet) 2020

⁷ Health at a Price. BMJ 2017

Fragmented services

The recent consultation by Scottish Government over the proposed National Care Service has focused attention on the disjointed approach to children and young people's health and care services. As part of the ongoing Scottish Review of Mental Health Law, the executive team have heard from many children and young people who are involved; not only with mental health services, but also children's hearing system and child and family social work services. A recurring issue raised by families is the lack of joint working between the different systems involved in a child's life. Repeating the same story to different agencies can be stressful for young people; while the lack of connectedness between services, may lead to some being missed altogether.

A challenge going forward will depend on the outcome of the consultation. But whatever the outcome children and young people are still going to require health and wellbeing services and they will need to be delivered against a backdrop of perhaps changing to a new National Care Service.

Incorporation of UNCRC

Although an enforced delay is in place at present, the prediction is that this will become part of Scot's Law with regards to all services and interactions with children and young people. However, it will bring with it many challenges, not least of which will be changes in culture of services around children and young people.

There are "immediate and minimum" core obligations on the right to health, including⁸:

(a) Reviewing the national and subnational legal and policy environment and, where necessary, amending laws and policies;

(b) Ensuring universal coverage of quality primary health services, including prevention, health promotion, care and treatment services, and essential drugs;

(c) Providing an adequate response to the underlying determinants of children's health; and

(d) Developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating policies and budgeted plans of actions that constitute a human rights-based approach to fulfilling children's right to health.

This will require⁹: education and awareness raising on the right to health, along with legislative measures to realise the right to health; long term planning linked to underlying determinants; specified financial investment with rights-based analysis; and an action cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) General comment No. 15 on the right of the child to the enjoyment of of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24). UNCRC/C/GC/15. Paragraph 73

⁹ Tobin, J. (2019) Children's right to health. In: Kilkelly U., Liefwaard T. (eds) International Human Rights of Children. International Human Rights. Springer, Singapore. Section II A 3 b iii

What offers the best opportunity for improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years?

Incorporation of UNCRC

As discussed, the incorporation of UNCRC into Scot's Law will have challenges, however has the potential to benefit all children and young people; including young carers whose rights are often at risk of being ignored or even breached. Their rights will now be protected in law and where rights are not respected, children and young people will have a system to hold those accountable. All children and young people, including young carers in Scotland have a right to education, play and to have their voices heard in decisions that will impact them. It is crucial that this important legislation is given full priority and all professionals working with children and young people, including young carer services are full trained in rights under UNCRC and the complaints process. This will mean they can advocate for children and young people but also ensure all children and young people are aware of their rights and understand what they mean.

As highlighted in the Young Carers Voice Consultation event report¹⁰, young carer services are vital partners and must be adequately funded to provide young carers with the crucial support they need. This includes breaking down barriers young carers face in getting a break; informing young carers of their rights and supporting these rights to be upheld; liaising with schools to ensure support is maintained; and providing mental health support when formal services are at maximum capacity. The report also highlights that an online mental health service would be welcomed by young carers and should include opportunities to speak with trained professionals. It is important that all mental health resources for young people are shared with young carers and young carer services. Greater links will raise awareness and ensure that such resources are accessed by young carers.

Young Carers Awareness Training should also be undertaken by all education professionals and health and social care staff so that more young carers can be identified and given the support they are entitled to.

Dedicated funding should be provided to CAMHS; and a plan implemented to support a national service specification which sets out what children, young people and families can expect when using CAMHS.

Scottish Government's commitment for free bus travel for under 22's from January 2022 will be welcomed by many young carers. They often use public transport to travel to education, work, visiting the cared for person,

¹⁰ <https://carers.org/resources/all-resources/132-young-carer-voice-consultation-event->

accompanying them to appointments, collecting medication and shopping. We know that many young carers are affected by poverty, and free bus travel will help with the financial transport burden they often face. It should be considered that rural young carers report facing additional barriers to transport, and so more investment in this area is needed.

As detailed in the National Carers Organisation consultation response¹¹ to a National Care Service, many unpaid and young carers would welcome this new service and a change in the current social care system. However, a new service must be fully funded and requires long term commitment and support. It highlights:

“In the creation of a National Care Service, disparity of young carer support should be addressed. The needs of young carers should be at the fore of development to ensure these young people and their needs are recognised; they must get the support that they need and their rights as children and young people must be upheld. We know that an effective social care system should contribute to improving support for young carers and achieve better outcomes for them.”

As part of the consultation young carers also supported a Right to Breaks to be introduced for unpaid carers, and a hybrid approach between standardised and personalised support is their preferred option.

“For a lot of young carers – a break away is not just physical but a mental break – don’t need to worry in the back of their mind about the person they care for. Even if attending a hub (physical break) there is not necessarily a mental break. Helps for them to know the cared for person is safe and being looked after by someone.”

How does addressing poverty lead to improved health and social care outcomes?

Poverty and health and social care outcomes are inextricably linked. For young carers specifically, addressing poverty provides greater opportunity to thrive, to support their mental health and wellbeing and ultimately, to be children and young people first and foremost.

More young carers are living in the most deprived areas in Scotland on the SIMD scale than the least deprived areas¹². Families with caring responsibilities can often experience additional pressures and stressors, including disability and ill health, barriers to employment and social isolation. When asked how they would

¹¹ [https://carers.org/downloads/scotland-pdfs/national-carer-organisations-ncs-response-\(final\).pdf](https://carers.org/downloads/scotland-pdfs/national-carer-organisations-ncs-response-(final).pdf)

¹² Scotland's Carers, 2015, Scottish Government: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-carers/pages/2/>

describe their financial situation, over a third (37%) of unpaid carers say that they are struggling to make ends meet.¹³

In the Scottish Government's Review of Research and Data in 2017, the census data found that being a young carer also tends to be associated with poorer health.¹⁴ Whilst it is difficult to separate the impact of caring from the impact of poverty in relation to health and social care inequality, this evidence does suggest that addressing poverty more widely for all children and young people would offer greater support for young carers, ensuring they are supported to look after their own health and wellbeing.

Mental health

Addressing poverty will provide greater support to families and therefore improve health and social care outcomes for children and young people, including their mental health. This is particularly true in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of the Universal Credit uplift. A recent appeal launched by the charity Aberlour¹⁵ revealed that more than 60% of parents living in poverty surveyed are worried about their children's mental health. Carers Trust Scotland's own research into COVID-19 and its impact on young carers points to a steep decline in the mental health and wellbeing of thousands of young people across Scotland who provide unpaid care at home for family members or friends.

Furthermore, in August 2021, Carers Trust Scotland hosted an online 'Young Carer Voice: Consultation Event' in the absence of the Scottish Young Carers Festival. 50 young carers attended, participating in five different consultation workshops including mental health. Many attendees raised education, transitions and financial strain as key factors negatively impacting their mental health.¹⁶ Greater financial support to families with caring responsibilities could therefore reduce stress and improve the mental health and wellbeing of young carers.

Digital inclusion

Addressing poverty, specifically supporting digitally excluded families, will ensure that children and young people can access online health and social care support. Digital exclusion remains a key challenge for young carers, most notably during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In June 2020, Carers Trust Scotland engaged with 24 young carer services to understand if digital devices and connectivity were barriers for young carers and consequently impacting their ability for home learning and social engagement. This consultation found that 100% of young carer services reported that digital exclusion in education had

¹³ State of Caring: A snapshot of unpaid care in Scotland, 2019, Carers Scotland: [cscotstate-of-caring-2019v5.pdf](#)

¹⁴ Young carers: Review of Research and Data, 2017, Scottish Government: [Young carers: review of research and data - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

¹⁵ Poverty to Hope Fundraising Appeal, 2021, Aberlour: ['Poverty to Hope' Fundraising Appeal - Aberlour](#)

¹⁶ Young Carer Voice: Consultation Event report, 2021, Carers Trust Scotland: [Young Carer Voice: Consultation Event - Resources - Carers Trust](#)

been a challenge for some of the young carers they support. This included them reporting that some young carers had no access to a digital resource such as a tablet/laptop or access to digital connectivity. As we move beyond the pandemic, many services are seeking to adopt a blended approach in their project delivery including local young carer services and projects. Access to digital technology ensures that young people can access health and social care support in a post COVID-19 world.

During Carer Trust Scotland's 'Young Carer Voice: Consultation Event', young carers discussed an online mental health service and welcomed this approach, emphasising that opportunities to speak with trained professionals on this platform would be vital. Supporting digital inclusion will therefore further support young people's access to these resources.

Rewards and incentives

Addressing poverty such as providing rewards and incentives for young people contributes to improved health and social care outcomes. The Young Scot Young Carers Package is an important example as it provides young carers with a range of incentives and benefits that are always evolving to suit the needs and wants of young people. This includes subscriptions to the Headspace Mindfulness App. This incentive scheme supports young carers to take a break from their caring role and thus helps to uphold their right to rest and leisure (Article 31 of the UNCRC). It is promising to see a similar package piloted in 2019 with three local authorities to address poverty more widely with young people in Scotland.¹⁷

Addressing poverty ensures that young carers are supported to look after their own health and wellbeing in several ways, including improved mental health and wellbeing and access to online support and respite.

Conclusion

For young carers in Scotland, there are four key issues around improved health and wellbeing:

1. Mental health
2. Poor coordination of young people's services
3. Incorporation of UNCRC
4. Poverty and inequalities

There are challenges in realising improved mental health and wellbeing for young carers in Scotland. The disruption to life during the COVID-19 pandemic, including increased caring responsibilities for young carers, is still being experienced with the legacy impacts yet to be fully understood. Poverty is a feature of many young carers' lives, acting as a barrier to optimal health and wellbeing. These issues are exacerbated by a lack of streamlining in services

¹⁷ Every Child, Every Chance: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2018 – 2022, 2018, Scottish Government: [Every Child, Every Chance: The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-22 \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

involved in young people's lives, which can result in the repetition of difficult experiences. While the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scot's Law should be positive, there will be additional challenges in ensuring that children and young people have the education and access necessary to realise these rights.

However, new and existing structures, can support the improved mental health and wellbeing for Scotland's young carers. As mentioned, the UNCRC incorporation will protect children's rights in law, and will give young people recourse to challenge when their rights are not respected. Already, young carer services provide an invaluable system of support to young carers, which can be continued through adequate and further funding. Free transport and the creation of the National Care Service, including a right to breaks from caring, also offer interesting and innovate pathways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young carers.

Since poverty is both an experience and a driver of young caring, broadly addressing poverty in Scotland is highly likely to benefit young carers. Alleviating financial strain for young carers would improve their mental health, often harmed by the stress of financial insecurity. Tackling digital exclusion would allow young people to access support online and remain connected to young carer services as they move to hybrid models of delivery.

Young carers make immense contributions to their families and communities by taking on responsibilities for the people they care for. The challenges that they face must be mitigated to ensure that they realise their full potential and achieve good health and wellbeing. Adequate funding of measures already working for young carers, and poverty alleviation measures more generally, provide avenues to improved health and wellbeing for young carers in Scotland.