

Young Carers and COVID-19



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An insights report exploring the experiences of young carers across Cheshire East during the Coronavirus Pandemic

By Georgia Carsberg

Young Carers Overview

“A young carer is a person under 18 who provides or intends to provide care for another person”¹. In accord with the statistics highlighted by the Carers Trust there are at least 376,000 young carers across the United Kingdom². The total number of young carers in Cheshire East is based on the number of pupils that are on roll within the borough. On record there are 50,486 primary and secondary pupils. This figure does not include specialist provision such as special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs). Nationally, it is envisaged that we would expect that 1 in 5 young people could have some level of caring responsibility. Based on this assumption there could be around 10,000 young carers across Cheshire East. If we presume a third of this number have caring roles that meet criteria for some support, the figure could be anywhere around the 3,000+ mark. It is difficult to ascertain the number of young carers receiving a service, as support is fragmented across several different providers. In addition, young carers are often hidden and are not identified as a young carer³.

Children as young as five years old provide essential care for their loved ones, this is often 24 hours round the clock care³. Their caring role can have a significant impact on their health and wellbeing, whether that be physical or mental health³. Their caring responsibilities can also hinder their education and social development³. As we are aware in 2019, a global pandemic hit the world. The Coronavirus pandemic has had a considerable impact on our society, especially from a healthcare, economic and social perspective⁴. Previous research has highlighted that the Coronavirus pandemic will have significant implications for young carers³. During the lockdown their caring responsibilities significantly increased³. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a fundamental impact on young carers mental health⁵. The school closures meant that young carers were unable to concentrate and struggled to keep up with the home learning due to their caring responsibilities³. Additionally, the guidance also meant that services were running at a reduce capacity and there was a lack of support from those around them, such as friends and family³.

ICE Creates

Cheshire East Council commissioned ICE Creates to talk to Cheshire East young carers with the aim to explore their attitudes towards and experiences of being a young carer, including the current challenges such as COVID-19. In order to carry this research out, 16 young carers and 16 professionals joined a focus group, with some also joining a hackathon. All of the focus groups were facilitated by a member of ICE Creates. A member of ICE Creates provided some insights into how COVID-19 impacted young carers across Cheshire East, their findings are outlined in the summary below.

“Difficulties were mentioned by multiple carers regarding actually caring for an individual at home; being able to meet their needs, managing time, doing other activities alongside caring and managing the social restrictions/ impact of COVID-19.

Some carers alluded to being apprehensive to see others and their friends in and outside of school, as they were concerned whether others would follow COVID-19 safety guidance. Carers worried more about feeling safe when out of the home due to the health ramifications COVID-19 could have on them and their family. Multiple carers worried about the possibility of carrying COVID-19 to their loved ones.

Many carers reported that they must constantly put the needs of the person they are caring for before their own, which again leaves them with less time for friends. If a carer had to cancel plans with their friends last minute due to caring responsibilities or if they were worried about COVID-19 implications (catching COVID and not being able to care and/or passing COVID to the person they care for) friends were not always understanding which could cause problems and strain friendships, adding to carer isolation and pressures.

Loss of escape mechanisms were associated with COVID-19 for carers. Leisure activities which carers liked to do to relax and use as an escape from their day-to-day life and caring responsibilities (such as dance classes, reading, crafts or Cheshire Young Carers activities) can be moved online when COVID-19 is prevalent in the community. This was limiting for some carers as they didn't have laptops available to take part in activities. Most carers have access to a laptop but for some it was shared between multiple people in the household. Furthermore, constantly being at home meant that they had no break from caring to do something for themselves to relax and enjoy. Finally, some carers simply do not like online activities, preferring face-to-face options.

School being moved online had its own challenges too, which was mentioned by most of the carers. The carers said they might have to switch between studying and caring, constantly being in the house provided them with no break from caring.

Some carers suggested that due to spending so much time with their household over lockdowns and social restrictions, they have become attached to the person and feel even more worried about leaving them than before.

Conversely though some carers preferred doing their schoolwork from home as it felt like they had more space to themselves, and therefore helped relieve some of the pressure they felt in school.

For many, COVID-19 worries resulted in carers feeling more stressed or apprehensive at school and when they were out of their home. For some this even resulted in them isolating themselves, not contributing or involving themselves with others in an effort to protect their loved ones. This could have negative impacts as they are alienated at times which are designed for them, such as being in school and doing things they enjoy.

A key finding of this research, which also applies to allaying COVID-19 concerns and challenges, is to enable young carers to feel comfortable and safe in ways that resonate with them and their preferences. For some this is having space to themselves to learn at home, for others this is feeling safe when they are out, which is important to them as they want time out of their home.

These findings show how carers' anxiety and isolation is emphasised or made apparent by the onset of COVID-19, directly interfering with carers respite opportunities for some (e.g. socialising with friends at school, taking part in leisure activities).

As findings throughout this research indicate, isolation of carers is a key barrier to them being identified and receiving support. It should be kept in mind that in periods where COVID-19 is more prevalent in the community, carers are more susceptible to isolation, not being identified and may be less likely to seek or receive support. This bolsters the need to implement strategies and recommendations."

Some of the comments that were made in the focus groups by the young carers and professionals are outlined below.

"I was worried about my mum who isn't well, I need to stay safe for her but the kids in school don't seem to be bothered."

"School being moved online meant that there was no break from being at home."

"We have seen an increase of young carers in our service - we've found more young people in roles who would not usually be in carer roles. It's an implication of challenges posed by COVID. Access to service can be harder for these."

"School is the obvious place to identify young carers because most young people are going to school or college. You can recognise changes in performance, and attendance. However, this becomes more difficult when pupils have to work from home or frequently isolate due to COVID-19 guidance"

In addition to this piece of work, ICE Creates are currently working with a young carer, a working carer, an adult carer, an older carer and a parent carer to create a graphic scribe. These interviews will provide an overview of the experiences of the pandemic from the perspective of all aged carers.

Young Carers activity session consultation

A number of young carers expressed a desire to have their voices heard but didn't feel comfortable doing this online, describing themselves as "all zoomed out". As a result, alongside the work carried

out by ICE Creates, in November 2021, the lead commissioning officer for young carers spoke to individuals from a local group offering activities for young carers. This provided them the opportunity to talk about their experiences and the challenges of being a carer during the pandemic. The young carers that attended this group session were aged between 8 and 17 years old.

When asked about their experiences of COVID-19 and being in a lockdown, some of the carers explained that there was no support during this time. They found that the respite opportunities that were provided to them were very limited. Similarly, they felt that these opportunities didn't meet their needs. They wanted choice and control over the type of service offered. Once face to face support resumed, young carers found it difficult to re-join and connect with the services and other young carers who had previously helped them. They found it difficult to socialise when they returned to school and experienced increased levels of stress due to the risk of bringing the virus home to family members and cared for. Not being in school was a positive for some as it gave them more time to themselves, this is highlighted in the below comments made by the young carers.

"After lockdown I found it really difficult to talk to people. On the breaks I would just put my hood up and head down. It took weeks for me to join in again. I just felt nervous and anxious. I just didn't feel safe outdoors."

"No school, no support, no friends."

"Not being in school meant less pressure, more time and space for me."

"Found it difficult to concentrate at home, hard to find own space. Had to do everything, schoolwork, caring, no time for me."

"I didn't get a break for 14 weeks, just stuck in the house."

"It made me sad and stressed, there was no one I could talk to".

"No break at all for me, stuck at home, noise, noise, noise."

This consultation has highlighted the impact COVID-19 has had on young carers; the comments demonstrate how being stuck in the house with a caring role meant that they did not have a break and it was much more difficult to access support during this time.

References

1. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents/enacted>
2. [About young adult carers - Carers Trust.](#)
3. [UEA young carer CRCF COVID 19 full report.pdf](#)
4. [Effects of COVID-19 pandemic in daily life \(nih.gov\)](#)
5. [Young carers in the COVID-19 pandemic: risks for mental health - The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific](#)