

Who Supports Young Carers in Oxford?

An analysis of specialist support for
young carers living in Oxford



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Introduction

This study was undertaken by Be Free Young Carers between May and October 2018, with the support of Healthwatch Oxfordshire Project Fund

Overview

The objective of this research by Be Free Young Carers was to assess the level of specialist support available to young carers living in Oxford City. By specialist support we mean, support that is specifically tailored to help identify and meet the needs of young carers in the city.

Questionnaires were distributed to young carers and their families via a sample of 8 Primary and Academy Schools, and four voluntary sector groups including Oxfordshire Youth members within Oxford City.

The questionnaire focused on:

- identifying the extent of caring responsibilities being what carried out by young people;
- to what extent young carers were identified by schools;
- what support was available to them both within the school and wider community;
- ascertaining the need for tailored social activities aimed at young carers in the city.

The findings from the sample showed that in Oxford:

- Identification of young carers by schools, and the extent of their role was not clearly known across the schools involved. Some schools were reliant on estimates to locate young carers, whereas others were unclear how many young carers attended their school;
- Young carers and families consistently said that there was no specialist support available to them in the city beyond the statutory service provided by the Oxfordshire County Council Young Carers Team;
- Responses identified a clear need for specialist support for young carers in the city, particularly for social activities and a chance to meet with other young carers;
- Whilst there was good practice for young carer support in some schools, others were struggling to resource support for young carers in school. This impacted on their ability to identify young carers but also to provide support in school;
- There were good examples of support for young carers at both primary and academy level. Sharing this good practice would be of wider benefit. There was limited evidence of clear routes for enabling this to happen.

Way forward and Recommendations

Whilst this research was limited in scope, it gives a clear indication of need for consistent and effective support to young carers in Oxford. It reveals an unclear picture of the extent of young people involved in caring roles.

With this report, we will take the following steps to highlight the issue:

- That Oxfordshire Children's Safeguarding Board and Oxfordshire Children's Trust consider this report and identify a response to the issues raised;
- Working with Healthwatch Oxfordshire we convene a 'round table' discussion in the city to bring Academy Trusts, OCC Young Carers Team and others together to explore ways forward for effective and joined up provision for young carers in the city;

- Highlight to schools ways to share examples of good practice in schools providing support to young carers;
- That local authorities and the health authority consider extending community grants schemes to encourage specialist community support for young carers.

And recommend:

1. That, accepting pockets of good practice, primary and secondary Schools need to be more effective in identifying young carers. This is especially important during pupils' transition from primary to secondary school and beyond into further education;
2. That local authority and health authority grants schemes consider expanding the criteria of grants schemes to specifically encourage specialist community support for young carers in the City;
3. That community groups delivering specialist support for young carers access appropriate training.

Purpose of this research

The Children's Society report 'Hidden' (2013) recognised the hidden nature of young people undertaking caring responsibilities in the family. It called for specialist support for young carers to give them equality of opportunity. The Children and Families Act (2014) embedded into statute the responsibility for statutory providers to identify and assess the needs of young carers.

This research, by Be Free Young Carers, is undertaken in response to this and attempts to define what specialist support is currently available to young carers in Oxford City, and what demand and need exists for this specialist support.

Background

The NHS defines a young carer as someone aged 18 or under who helps look after a relative with a disability, illness, mental health condition, drug or alcohol problem. The term young carer does not apply to everyday and occasional help around the home that may often be expected of or given by children in families. The key features of a young carer are that the caring responsibilities persist over time and are important in maintaining the health, safety or day to day well-being of the person cared for and/or the wider family.

Following a survey in 2010, the BBC estimated that there were 700,000 young carers in the UK. The Oxfordshire Community Foundation in its 2016 publication, 'Oxfordshire Uncovered', estimated that on average there are two young carers in every classroom in the County. Oxford City Council's Children and Young People Needs Analysis (2013) emphasised the high levels of social disadvantage, benefit dependency, high child density, high unemployment, educational under-achievement and low expectations amongst local families and highlighted the need for good quality facilities and support. Although the Analysis makes no mention of young carers as a specific group, there is a correlation between the number of families with unemployment, financial disadvantage and high benefit dependency and children carrying out regular caring of a family member(s) in the home.

"We are concerned that there is a significant lack of support available for young carers. These young people risk becoming vulnerable adults, more prone to deprivation and even exploitation"

Oxford Community Foundation, Oxfordshire Uncovered, 2016

The recently published government Carers Action Plan 2018-2020 states that “Whilst some caring can be rewarding for young carers, they can experience poorer mental health and physical health, and miss out on opportunities in education and employment as a result of their caring responsibilities” (Dept of Health and Social Care 2018).

In schools caring responsibilities have a significant impact on a pupil’s learning. In 2004, it was estimated that 27% of young carers of secondary school age in England experience educational difficulties or miss school (Dearden and Becker, 2004). If not supported, young carers can continue to struggle with school and have significantly lower educational attainment at GCSE level - the difference between nine Bs and nine Cs (The Children’s Society, 2013). By the time young carers reach 16 they are more likely than the national average not to be in education, employment or training (‘NEET’) between 16 and 19 (The Children’s Society, 2013).

Identifying and supporting young carers in school improves the outcomes for young carers and can increase attendance and attainment levels. Schools are an important provider of support for young carers through pastoral teams; they are also an important referrer of young carers onto other specialist support services independent of school and it is this support in the community, liaising closely with schools, that has the greatest potential to improve the mental wellbeing of young carers. Identification can be difficult, not every young carer is eager to be identified and ‘labelled’ as a young carer; many undertake their caring roles as their norm, not thinking of themselves as young carers. However potential signs such as lateness and tiredness can be spotted. Young carers can consider it disloyal to their family to admit a caring role as a young person. Some carers and family members want to maintain the family’s dignity, keeping their circumstances private.

Wider community-based support, such as regular social activities specifically for young carers can contribute significantly to lessening feelings of stress and anxiety which many young carers report. It is only specialist provision that gives young carers confidence to talk openly about their concerns without judgement.

Statutory Background

Young carers are specifically provided for within the Children and Families Act 2014, which came into effect on 1 April 2015. For the first time the Act placed a responsibility on Local Authorities to identify and assess the needs of young carers. It includes provision for local authorities to undertake young carers’ needs assessments, stating that:

‘(1) A local authority in England must assess whether a young carer within their area has needs for support and, if so, what those needs are, if:

(a) it appears to the authority that the young carer may have needs for support, or

(b) the authority receive a request from the young carer or a parent of the young carer to assess the young carer’s needs for support. A young carer’s needs assessment must include an assessment of whether it is appropriate for the young carer to provide, or continue to provide, care for the person in question, in the light of the young carer’s needs for support, other needs and wishes.’

It also states that a local authority, in carrying out a young carer’s needs assessment, must have regard to:

‘(a) the extent to which the young carer is participating in or wishes to participate in education, training or recreation, and

(b) the extent to which the young carer works or wishes to work.’

In Oxford City and across Oxfordshire, the County Council has responsibility to discharge the obligations under the Act through its in-house Young Carers Team attached to its Family Solutions Service.

Young carers in Oxford

Number of young carers in Oxford

There is no definitive reporting that reveals the precise number of young carers who live in the city. General UK Census data compiled in 2011 is some years out of date and aimed responses from parents rather than young carers. It made no mention of possible range of conditions where caring could be required to help identification. Young carers are often therefore 'under the radar', reluctant to be labelled as a young carer for fear of stigmatisation and bullying by their peers.

As a result of this research it is estimated that there are at least 1,000 to 2,000 young carers living in the City (10% of the City's pupil population). This estimation is based on:

- In 2017 the Oxfordshire County Council Young Carers Team worked with 61 young carers from within the Oxford ring road (16.1% of the 377 total countywide referrals received (source: OCC));
- informal estimates by schools;
- On average 'there are two young carers in every classroom in Oxfordshire' (Oxfordshire Community Foundation, 2016).

From the above, it can be conservatively concluded that there are at least 400 young carers attending academy/secondary schools and at least 300 attending primary schools in the City.

These figures do not include young carers attending further education or private schools in the City and those living in the City and attending schools beyond City boundaries, for example at Wheatley Park and Matthew Arnold Schools.

Support for young carers in Oxford

OCC Young Carers Team deliver the County Council's statutory responsibility for young carers in the city in terms of identification, assessment and for high need cases, limited emotional support. Beyond this, there is a network of schools and voluntary sector groups. These groups provide generic support to young people, through, for example, sports and arts activities but as far as could be established, no specific tailored support for young carers could be identified in the city.

Research Methodology

The study was undertaken between April and October 2018. It involved a sample of 8 schools on the East side of Oxford - four primary and four secondary schools (academies). It focused on areas identified as facing higher levels of social deprivation within the city. It also involved 4 youth groups and other community organisations across Oxford (see appendix for questionnaire distribution). The sample schools were limited to 8 due to reasons of capacity and time within the research programme.

Three distinct questionnaires were used to gain the views of:

- Young carers;
- Parents or family members;
- Schools, youth groups and social and health professionals.

The questionnaires were made available in paper form and on line through the Be Free YC website. Paper surveys were distributed to young carers and their families directly through

schools and to other youth and community groups via Oxfordshire Youth membership across the city. Completed questionnaires were either returned to schools or emailed to Be Free YC.

The young carer and parent questionnaires were intentionally anonymous to encourage responses, relying on the schools to ensure they were completed by identified young carers and their parents.

Questions sought to show the level of caring, how the young carer felt about caring, what support was available inside and outside school and their views on the current support available. Questionnaires also asked young carers and their parents to prioritise the top three issues for young carers in terms of their wellbeing. There was not the capacity in this case to carry out any qualitative element to the work, again mainly due to challenges identifying young carers, and fear of burdening over busy schools

The questionnaires were supplemented by meetings with staff in schools, community leaders and at health and community partnership meetings at Rose Hill, Barton and The Leys which explored the issues of need, identification and support of young carers in the city.

Limitations

Accessing schools to speak to staff and find dedicated staff took time, schools were often overstretched in resource and capacity. Responses to the questionnaires were low representing responses 25 young carers, 8 schools, 6 parents/ family members. However, this reflects wider research by the Children's Society which highlights young carers as 'hidden' and challenging to identify.

Questionnaires were distributed to schools for handing on to identified young carers, and therefore were reliant on the school themselves knowing which pupils were young carers. Schools in this case acted as the gatekeeper for identification of young carers. In retrospect enabling any student within the school to self-identify as a young carer via school wide, anonymised questionnaire, may have resulted in more respondents. This however was difficult with limited resources, and dependency on busy school staff to make this possible. Not every school had a dedicated staff member responsible for young carers.

However, despite low response numbers, they were consistent in their view of support available and highlighted where future focus could be placed.

Findings and discussion

The following reflects the findings both from the questionnaires returned and from conversations and meetings with schools themselves. It draws out the main themes that were identified as follows:

Identification and support of young carers within schools

It was clear from discussion with school representatives that:

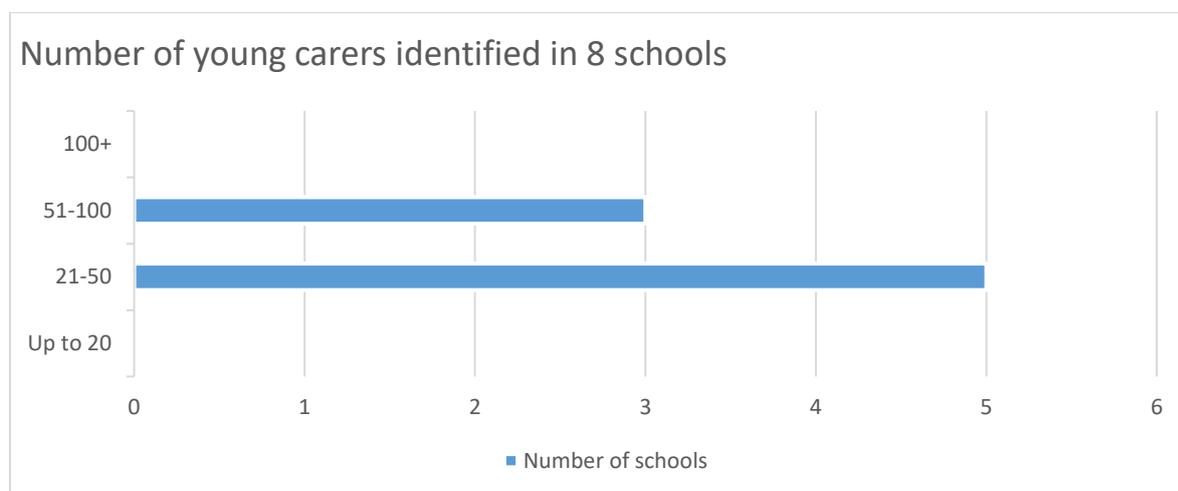
- The vital identification and in school support of young carers varied widely;
- Resources and support within schools for the more vulnerable children, specifically young carers, varied widely;
- Whilst schools linked with OCC statutory support for referrals, they all were unaware of any wider community based support for young carers in Oxford.

In its 2013 report ‘Hidden from View’ the Children’s Society stated that “Many young carers remain hidden from official sight for a host of reasons, including family loyalty, stigma, bullying, not knowing where to go for support”.

We know that schools act as the major identifiers of young carers. Whilst the Oxford schools approached were aware of young carers in school, some had difficulty in stating precise numbers.

Some schools surveyed knew the number of young carers on their rolls, others identified a number but recognised it may under represent the actual number of young carers at school. There are a number of schools (academy and primary) that are struggling with the process of identifying young carers due to a lack of resources.

“I know we have about 48 young carers in our school but I’m sure the number is nearer 200, some families just don’t want their children classified as young carers for fear of family break-up”
Young Carers Lead, Academy School, Oxford



Source: questionnaire result from 8 schools

Whilst the numbers above show the amount of young carers identified by the 8 schools that responded to the questionnaire, five schools stated that that they had to estimate or did not know the real number of young carers in their school. Those who did, stated they relied on ‘staff training’ or ‘questionnaires’ to identify the number.

It can be assumed that young carers who were not linked into school support would remain hidden, and that there are unidentified young carers in each of the schools visited. As one teacher noted, for their school, ‘the number will probably be much higher, but this is the ‘known amount’

The number of pupils receiving Pupil Premium can be a useful broad indicator of the number of young carers in school. In the surveyed schools the number of pupils receiving Pupil Premium varied widely from 18% to 58% with a significant number of schools over 30%. In 2017 there were 2,585 pupils at Oxford City schools known to be eligible for free school meals.

In school support was provided through named staff. Of the 8 schools involved, not all had a dedicated staff lead for young carers. A number of schools (primary and academy) highlighted the difficulty in resourcing and continuing to provide support for young carers in school. In primary schools it was common for a front-line teacher to be the school’s designated lead for young carers. These staff members were very committed, resourceful and aware of young carers as a vulnerable group, referring young carers to the County

“We used to have a young carers role but due to funding couldn’t keep the support going”
Safeguarding Lead, Academy School, Oxford

Council Young Carers Team when necessary. Some schools highlighted reductions in the number of pastoral staff and staff specifically designated to support young carers due to financial restrictions.

There were also excellent examples of good practice in school support, for example, one academy school offered young carers parental contact, YC buddies, an allocated member of staff, mentoring, young carer groups and counselling.

A number of schools were aware of and working to achieve the School Standard for young carers, holding bronze and silver awards.

The Carers Trust Young Carers in Schools Award offers schools the opportunity to gain recognition for good practice in meeting the needs of this vulnerable pupil group, specifically mentioned in Ofsted's Common Inspection Framework, introduced in September 2015. It has three levels of award, Bronze, Silver and Gold and creates a framework for schools to follow to increase identification and improve outcomes. Locally, the County Council also offers its version of the schools standard

A lack of in school support can also lead to shortcomings in joined up multi agency support necessary with the more complex families. Discussion with schools also revealed that despite Academies holding meetings with their catchment primary schools there was an apparent lack of sharing best practice, what works, in identifying and supporting young carers.

Many schools had little regular support arranged for young carers. Some however, did provide support sessions if needed, such as weekly young carer groups, school trips, help with stationary costs, and links to wider local authority support.

'she attends a weekly young carers group, she enjoys it and says it's helpful' (parent)

No school representative could identify any specialist community based support available for young carers in the city. Others noted the impact of budget cuts on young carer support:

'lack of support as many agencies have now closed or are not able to support young carers on top of their workload'

'I am not aware of any support sessions available outside of school at all in the local area'

One primary school was keen to know what support it should/could provide in school.

Comments received about OCC Young Carer support were positive, but reflected frustrations with the time taken to get support.

'Assessment time needs to be shorter'

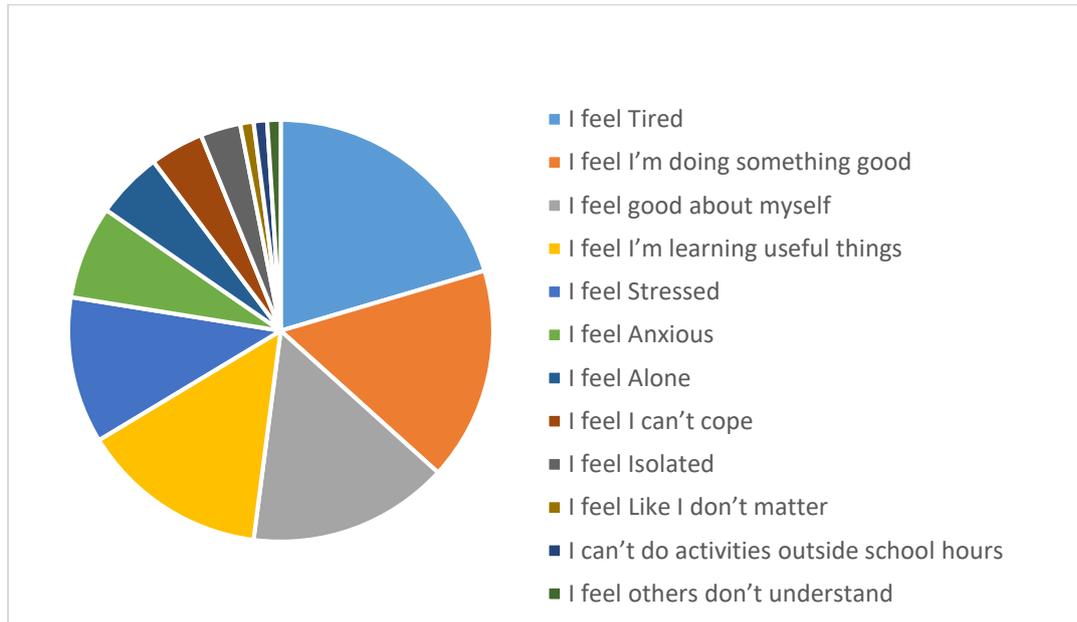
'The YC support from OCC when a referral is made is great, but slow due to demand'

Young Carers and the Cared for

Of the 25 young carers who responded to the survey, over half (52%) cared for a parent, 44% cared for a sibling and 4% cared for more than one person in the family. Of those caring for a parent, 77% cared for the Mother. The ages of the young carers responding ranged from 8 to 17.

Impact of Caring on Young Carers

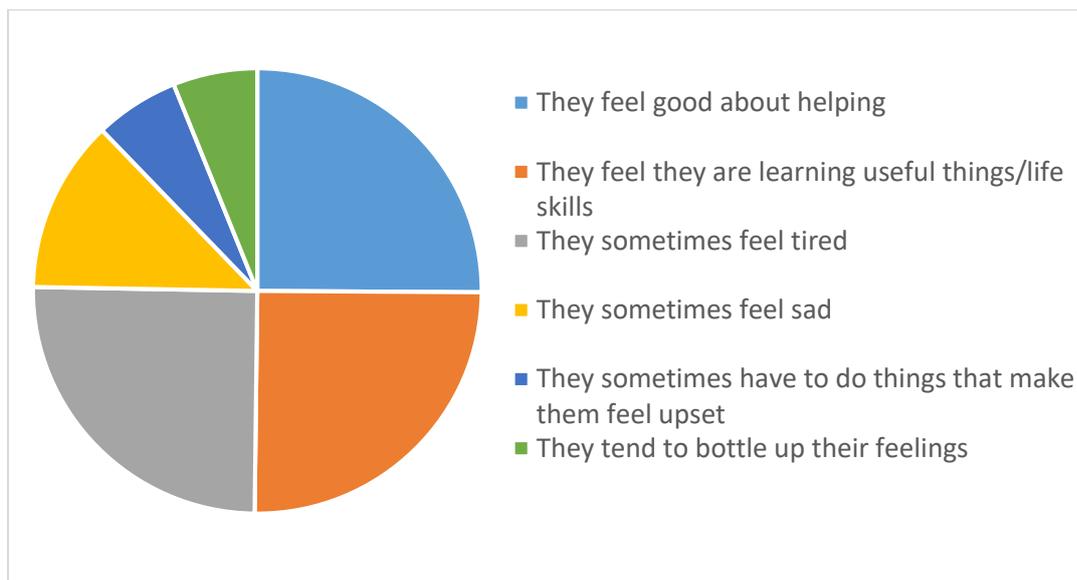
Young carers were asked how they felt about caring:



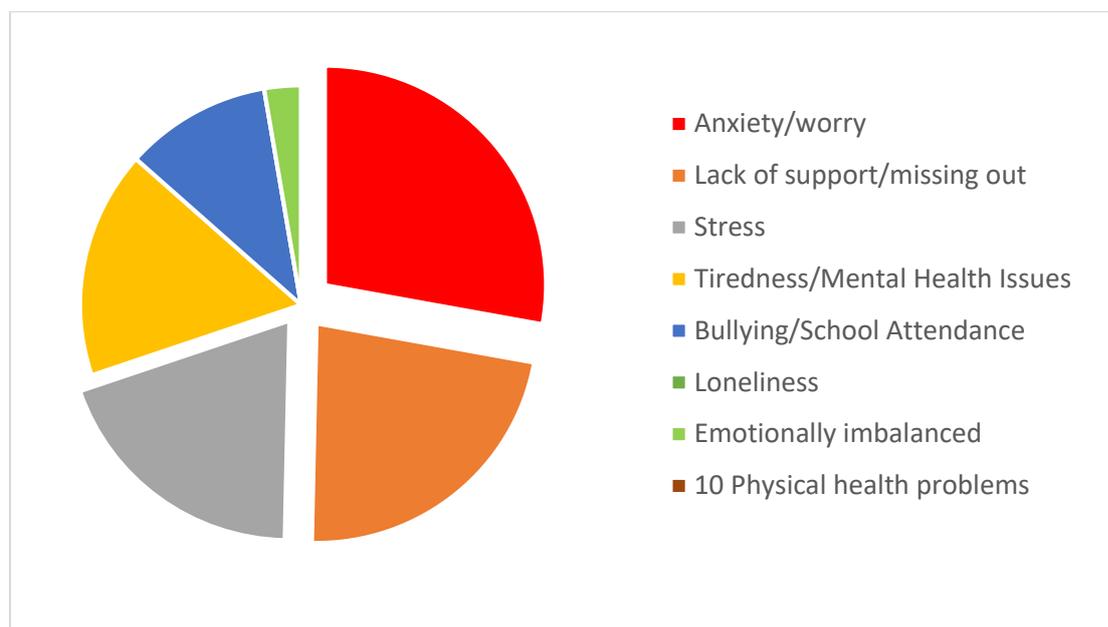
These responses were extremely heartening with a high proportion of young carers seeing their caring roles in a positive light. There are however issues around coping, stress, anxiety, isolation and overall self-confidence that are concerning and if left unaddressed could escalate into deeper issues involving the mental health of young carers such as self-harming and depression.

One school identified that isolation felt by young carers can lead to a lack of self-worth and self-confidence which in some cases can result in a desperation to find friendship. If not identified and addressed this desperation can lead in some cases to dangerous on-line grooming and exploitation.

Parents were asked about the effect of caring on their child:



Parents and schools were asked to state their ‘top 3 issues’ facing young carers in Oxford, they were:



Young carers were also asked what help, if any, they received with their caring roles. 16% received no help at all; 76% said another member of the immediate family helped (Dad, Mum, brother or sister), 8% said another wider family member helped (Nan, Uncle). Those with no family help aged from 9 to 15 year olds.

Despite 76% of young carers responding receiving help from within their immediate family, it is notable that parents have the view their child as worrying, anxious and or stressed out. The parents’ view that their young carers were ‘missing out’ or ‘lacked support’ perhaps revealed a sense of their guilt for their children as a carer.

The issue of ‘missing out’ for a young carer requires some clarification. Most parents could describe their children as ‘missing out’ on particular opportunities whether it is a school ski trip or just an activity or hobby financially beyond the family. However, in the context of caring, a young carer’s caring responsibilities take precedence over what could be described as everyday child’s experiences and opportunities, what reasonably could be expected of a young child, for example going to the cinema or playing in the park with friends. Their freedom is more limited than children who have no caring responsibility. These issues resonate further within single parent families and with teenage young carers who tend to take on more caring responsibility with age.

Young carers were asked what they did to relax when not caring. Responses showed that 16% had no break from caring, 32% sometimes had a break, with some saying only during school holidays, and 48% saying they did have time away from caring. Of those that had a break, playing sports and meeting friends were the most popular activities, however the survey did not ask how

“As my son has seen me sick throughout his life, he is supportive but I feel he has missed out, he missed school for a number of years which set him back”
 Parent of young carer, Oxford

“I do not see any support for him even when he was missing school in year 4 – 5. He wishes to do after school clubs but as I have no support after refusing carers as I was not able to afford them”
 Parent of a young carer, Oxford

frequently young carers had a break. For a number of young carers surveyed a break was remaining in the home watching TV or playing video games.

Specialist support available to young carers in Oxford City

Young carers, their parents and schools were asked if they were aware of any specialist support for young carers in Oxford available outside school.

98% said support was non-existent, one respondent mentioned the County Council and one described provision in the City as 'good' as there were services that provided help if needed, although did not mention what these were or if they were specialist for young carers.

"I don't really get support"
Young carer, Oxford

As an indicator of the availability of specialist community support the County Council Young Carers team report that of the countywide referrals received between January and July 2018, 48% had no other early help or social care involvement at the time of referral.

Young carers were asked if they would like to take part in activities with other young carers outside school side. 46% said 'yes' definitely, 49% said 'maybe' and 5% said 'no'.

'because you can see you are not alone and people know what you are going through'
Young carer, Oxford

The surveys, and informal discussions with schools, youth and community groups in the City, all show a significant demand and need for specific and effective support for young carers. The large variety of voluntary youth provision in the City, delivered by groups such as Donnington Doorstep, the Dovecote Project, groups based at Rose Hill Community Centre and Wolvercote meet a need but cannot be seen as specific specialist provision within which young carers would feel confident enough to speak openly about the issues that concern them.

"We have lots of young carers in school, I just don't know how best to support them"
Primary School Deputy Head,
Oxford

Specialist provision for young carers, recognising them as a vulnerable group of young people, can bring many far reaching benefits, such as addressing and reducing anxiety, stress and depression, giving them opportunities to socialise, realising they are not alone and being able to talk openly with other young carers. Social interaction can also increase the self-confidence and self-worth of young carers, reducing feelings of isolation. This is an approach successfully used by Be Free Young Carers engaging with and supporting over 550 young carers across southern Oxfordshire.

The County Council's recent Cabinet report, 'Performance Scrutiny Deep Dive on Young Carers', 16 October 2018, states that:

"Outside of the statutory assessment and support offered by the Young Carers Service there is a lack of specific support for young carers in the Community. As far as known, the only organisation working with this cohort is the charity Be Free Young Carers, operating in the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse areas."

Conclusions

1. There is an estimated 2,000 young carers living in Oxford City;
2. There is no specialist community support for young carers provided outside school in the City, no informal groups or support networks specifically for young carers;
3. There is a clear demand from young carers and their parents for out of school activities specifically for young carers to socialise;

4. With the statutory authority focussing on identification and assessment, specialist support responding to the social and developmental needs of young carers is being overlooked;
5. School identification of young carers varies considerably, with no apparent effective sharing of good practice between schools;
6. Schools would benefit from knowing more about how other Schools support young carers, sharing good practice, this could improve identification and support in-school and better link young carers into statutory and specialist community support, if/when available.

“... legislation has led to a focus on delivering assessments, rather than providing support to young carers”

Children’s Commissioner for England 2016

Recommendations

1. That Oxfordshire Children’s Safeguarding Board and Oxfordshire Children’s Trust consider this report and identify a response to the issues raised;
2. Working with Healthwatch Oxfordshire a ‘round table’ discussion be convened in the city to bring Academy Trusts, OCC Young Carers Team and others together to explore ways forward for effective and joined up provision for young carers in the city;
3. Schools be encouraged to share examples of good practice in schools providing support to young carers;
4. That local authorities and the health authority consider extending community grants schemes to encourage specialist community support for young carers.
5. That, accepting pockets of good practice, primary and secondary Schools need to be more effective in identifying young carers. This is especially important during pupils’ transition from primary to secondary school and beyond into further education;
6. That community groups delivering specialist support for young carers access appropriate training.

‘It’s too late for me now. My dad died and I’m no longer a ‘young carer’, but for all those other kids out there who are in the same situation I was, then something should be done to help them. Not take them away from their mum or dad, but to help them care without worrying, without being frightened’

Young carer aged 16

Appendix

Schools and local groups survey distribution

Primary Schools

New Marston Primary
Orchard Meadow Primary
Pegasus Primary
Windmill Primary

Academy Schools

Cheney School
Cherwell School
Oxford Academy
Oxford Spires

Local Groups

Oxfordshire Youth Forum
Donnington Doorstep
Rose Hill Community Centre
Wolvercote Young People's Club

About Be Free Young Carers

Be Free Young Carers is an independent charity, which provides support to young carers and their families. Currently working with over 550 young carers across the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire Districts, its dedicated staff team build strong relationships with young carers, their families, schools and statutory authorities. Be Free Young Carers is well practised in giving social and emotional support to young carers. Be Free Young Carers offers young carers:

- emotional support and befriending - meeting with young carers to talk through their concerns, working with schools and families;
- social activities - trips and workshops offering time for themselves away from their caring roles, to make friends, socialise and have fun;
- training - in key skills such as first aid, cookery/nutrition and relaxation to improve their self-confidence and ability to cope in their caring roles;
- young carers leisure card - discounted pay and play activities and gym use at local leisure centres in partnership with BETTER Leisure

Demand for its social activities, training and emotional support is increasing as the Charity becomes more widely known. It is the only specialist organisation supporting young carers in Oxfordshire.

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