

Submission by Care Alliance Ireland to the Department of Education and Skills on the Statement of Strategy 2016 – 2018

Background

Care Alliance Ireland is the National Network of Voluntary Organisations supporting Family Carers. Our vision is that the role of Family Carers is fully recognised and valued by society in Ireland. We exist to enhance the quality of life of Family Carers. We achieve this by supporting our 100+ member organisations in their direct work with Family Carers through the provision of information, developing research and policy, sharing resources, and instigating opportunities for collaboration.

There are approximately 274,000 Family Carers in the Republic of Ireland¹. Family Carer support is provided by a number of organisations, including those dedicated solely to carer support and others who support carers as part of their response to individuals with specific conditions. We work with our 100+ member organisations and other agencies to support them in their work with Family Carers.

Our legitimacy derives from our membership base which includes all the carer organisations and virtually all the disease/disability-specific organisations currently providing services to Ireland's Family Carers. Our membership is comprised of both large and small, regional and national organisations.

What we do

We work with organisations in order that they can enhance the information and supports they provide to Family Carers. We provide them with opportunities to collaborate on initiatives including *National Carers Week*; a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary *Family Carer Research Group*; and joint policy submissions. We act as a distribution channel for information on Family Carer issues, with a bi-monthly *Research & Policy E-zine* which is sent to academics, family carers, non-profits organisations and other interested individuals. We actively encourage collaboration in all our projects. We provide cohesion to those organisations working to support Family Carers. We commission relevant research that supports focussed and quality interventions in the lives of Family Carers.

¹ (Department of Health, 2012)

By focussing on these discrete functions (research, policy, information, collaborative ventures) we enable more of our member's funds to go directly to coal face services.

Our Current Work in the Area of Education

We are currently delivering a 'training the trainer' project to organisations who are supporting Family Carers across the country. This initiative is funded under the Dormant Accounts Funds 2016 Carers Measure 3. In doing this, we seek to magnify the scope and quality of the training which Family Carers can access through community and voluntary organisations.

We are also involved in an Erasmus+ European project that seeks to support educational professionals to better support young and young adults with significant caring responsibilities. This project will bring together the expertise and experience of our international colleagues to tackle some of the key issues for young carers who are finding it difficult to remain in education.

Nationally we collaborate with other not-for-profit and local Youth Service agencies in developing appropriate supports for young people with significant caring responsibilities. In addition, we are keen to ensure that research and policy guide practice across all sectors- including the education sector. Many Health & Social Care professionals and others in the community & voluntary sector access training we provide, and we ensure that relevant information is available to them to contribute to their continuing professional development and education.

Education and Training for Family Carers

Family Carers are those individuals who provide care and support to a loved one with a disability or illness in their own home. This can include personal care, domestic support and any other type of care necessary.

With specific attention to education and Family Care, it is clear that the existence of caring responsibilities for young Carers and young adult Carers has wide-ranging impacts across the life course. Young carers often experience the following issues (Becker & Becker, 2008)

- a lack of understanding from peers,
- restricted friendships,
- limited opportunities for social and leisure activities,

- emotional difficulties (such as worry, stress, anxiety, depression, anger, upset, resentment),
- health problems,
- feelings of exclusion or of being 'outsiders'.

According to the same study carried out in the in the UK (Becker & Becker, 2008), more than two out of three young carers are bullied at school; 39% of the young carers questioned said there was not a single teacher at their school who knew that they were a young carer; of those whose teachers did know that they were young carers, more than half (52%) did not feel supported by them.

The National Carers' Strategy sets out Government's commitment to recognising and respecting carers, and to responding to their needs across a number of policy areas. The Strategy assigns responsibility for a number of actions relating to young carers and carers more generally, to the Department of Education and Skills. Specific actions include:

1.1.6: Promote more proactive approaches to the identification of carers and to addressing their needs among staff and organisations that are likely to encounter individuals in caring situations.

2.2.1: Raise awareness and understanding among education providers of the signs that children and young people have caring responsibilities and the impact of caring on them.

2.2.2 Encourage statutory agencies to review the way that they respond to children and young people with caring responsibilities.

3.2.1: Identify gaps in the content of current training programmes for carers.

3.2.2: Enhance the accessibility of education and training courses through the use of face-to face, on-line and distance learning options.

4.2.4: Explore how back-to-work and education training courses can be tailored to the needs of carers who wish to return to the workplace

Whilst we are encouraged by the progress on many of these actions, it is clear that more progress must be made to ensure that Family Carers across the life course can access training and education supports which are appropriate and speak to the vision of the new government to use the recent economic success to make peoples' lives better.

It is of course important to understand that the impact of caring responsibilities with regards to education is not restricted to children or young carers- thousands of learners across the life-course are affected by their caring responsibilities. Yet, Family Carers have not been identified as a key disadvantaged group in previous strategy documents by the Department of Education and Skills, nor indeed by the current Programme for Government.

It is vital, therefore, that the needs of Family Carers are included with the new departmental Statement of Strategy for 2016-2018. To this end, Care Alliance Ireland has identified five key points for consideration by the Department at this time.

Key Asks

1) Include Young Carers as an identified vulnerable group, by developing a Young Carers Education Strategy

It is clear that Young Carers' educational needs are heavily impacted upon by their caring responsibilities. Young Carers are often faced with the choice between completing their homework or making sure those whom they feel responsible for are safe and well, and cared for. Young Carers can face high levels of absenteeism, being unable to keep up with coursework, and the same mental health difficulties as other Family Carers (including stress, depression, anxiety and insomnia). These issues need to be addressed in a specific manner, and ensuring that a specific education strategy encompassing these issues is developed will go a long way to providing for better outcomes.

2) Introduce a classification of 'young carers' in the 'Census at School' which will report on the numbers of young people with caring responsibilities identified in the school system.

Having access to the exact number of young people who provide care at any level is crucial to ensure the correct supports are in place. Depending on the broader national Census of population is not sufficient, as many families do not wish to disclose the levels of care a young person may be providing. Recent NUI Galway research (2015) suggests that there could be upwards of 56,000 young people of

school-going age providing care to another family member². In addition, stigma is still a significant problem for those families experiencing mental health difficulties and drug and alcohol dependencies. This is likely to ensure that the real number of children and young people with caring responsibilities is much greater than currently understood.

- 3) Increased collaboration between organisations such as Family Carers Ireland (member of Care Alliance Ireland) and youth groups across the country who already work to support young carers throughout existing programmes.

A number of organisations and groups across the country work with young carers in a variety of settings, and who already have resources which they are willing to share with the Department. Collaboration is vital to ensure that resources are not wasted and that proven methods of supporting young carers already in place are duplicated where appropriate.

- 4) Creation of a designated Young Carer link teacher within every school in the country.

Having a designated Young Carer link teacher in each school who is equipped with the skills to help identify young carers (working in partnership with all staff in the school) will create a point of contact for young carers to access support and understanding within the education system. Not only will this person have the skills to work with young carers directly (most likely as an additional yet specifically named role), but also will work with teachers and parents to create an environment which is understanding and supportive to those pupils who have caring responsibilities at home. The key task is to ensure that young carers do not slip through the net at any point in their educational career.

- 5) Ensure young adult carers and former carers are recognised as a vulnerable group and prioritised for additional supports within third level institutions.

Access to third level education remains difficult for many young adult carers. Just as parents of young children are identified as having specific support needs in their roles as parents, so those third level students with caring responsibilities for other members of their families should also. Whilst the responsibility for accessing these supports will lie with the student themselves, having tutors and lecturers who understand a campus-wide policy on Family Caring responsibilities.

² The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study which was conducted by researchers in the Health Promotion Research Centre at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) is a cross-national research study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Office for Europe. The figure extrapolated is a multiple of the 2011 Census Data. Such a difference needs to be explored in more detail.

Conclusion

Family Carers often struggle with accessing education and training both during and following their assumption and cessation of caring responsibilities in the home. The drafting of a new Strategic Plan for the Dept. of Education can address these issues across the life course and ensure that Family Carers- both Young Carers and those at other stages of their lives- can continue their learning whilst also acting on their caring responsibilities.

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