

## Submission by Family Carers Ireland to the Department of Education and Skills on the Statement of Strategy 2016 - 2018

Family Carers Ireland (FCI hereafter) welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Education and Skills Statement of Strategy 2016 - 2018. This submission will focus on issues relating to young carers<sup>1</sup> and young adult carers<sup>2</sup>, and the challenges they face in achieving their fullest potential in education, training and lifelong learning. While research has found that caring can result in positive impacts, there is a strong body of evidence on the adverse impact of caring on educational participation and attainment, transition to third level and employment opportunities for young carers (e.g. Aldridge, 2008; Becker, 2007). FCI believe that the Department of Education has a critical role to play in helping identify young people with caring responsibilities and putting in place educational supports to help them reach their full potential. FCI urge the Department to recognise this and ensure young carers and young adult carers are identified as a target group in the revised Statement of Strategy 2016 – 2018.

### Summary of comments:

- FCI are disappointed that the Departments earlier Statement of Strategy 2015-2017, and the current Programme for Government, both fail to acknowledge the needs of young carers and young adult carers. We believe it is imperative that the Department recognise the very significant role they, along with schools, colleges and ETBs, must play in supporting young people with caring responsibilities and look to create a more supportive environment.
- A recent study, undertaken by NUIG and published in February 2016, shows that 11.5 percent of 10-17 year olds surveyed (n= 10,368) said they provide regular unpaid personal help for a family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability<sup>3</sup>. Extrapolation from this sample to the national population suggests that some 56,000 young people in the 10-17 year age group provide regular unpaid care.
- While for many young people modest caring responsibilities can be a positive experience and a normal part of personal and civic development, where the level of caring responsibility is excessive or age inappropriate, the dangers of leaving vulnerable young carers unsupported can cost them dearly in terms of educational disadvantage. While we cannot expect our education system to address all the causes of disadvantage affecting young carers, we can and should expect the system to make special efforts to help them reach their full educational potential.
- FCI call on the Department to develop a *Young Carer Education Strategy*, similar to previous strategies that have been prepared in support of other vulnerable groups, such as members of the travelling community and those for whom English is not their first language. The strategy

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<sup>1</sup> A young carer is defined as a young person 18 years or under whose life is in some way restricted because of the need to take responsibility for the care of a person who is ill, has a disability, is experiencing mental distress, is affected by substance use.

<sup>2</sup> A young adult carer is defined as person aged between 18-24 with caring responsibilities (towards dependent parents, siblings, or other relatives).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

would help raise awareness of young carers in school, will highlight the problems young carers face and offer practical solutions that the department, schools, and teachers can take to improve outcomes. With young carers themselves highlighting problems with attendance and punctuality, behaviour and concentration in class, tackling these issues could form a key part of the departments attempts to improve attainment and attendance for hard to reach groups . Providing more support for young carers in school could also be a key step to improving social mobility for the most vulnerable children and young people.

- Introduce a duty on schools to identify and support young carers; include guidelines on supporting young carers in Child Protection and Welfare Policies; and include young carers as an at-risk group in School Attendance Strategies.
- 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.
- Adopt policies and procedures to provide packages of support for young carers in school for example creating young carers champions, offering flexibility with homework, support to address attendance issues; support for young carer peer networks within school.
- Encourage schools to utilise the extensive resources developed by FCI (including a young carer toolkit for parents, schools, teachers, doctors, health care professionals, social workers and youth organisations; training programmes for professionals and information packs, online forums and support groups for young carers themselves) to help identify and support young carers.
- Ensure young adult carers and former carers are recognised as a vulnerable group and prioritised for additional supports within third level institutions. Many young adult carers struggle with the decision of whether to go to third level and leave behind the person they care for and many report feeling guilty for passing on the caring role to younger siblings. For some young adult carers this may be enough to prevent them from going to third level, or restrict their choice of college and course to enable them to stay at or closer to home. Research in the UK (Becker, F and Becker, S, 2008) has shown that young adult carers often struggle at college and university because of their caring role and found that some young adult carers will continue to care at a distance or return home regularly to help family members and that consequently their overall experience of university life can be very different from that of their peers.
- Getting to the point where Irish young carers will be supported as they are in other jurisdictions will only be possible through the collaborative work of key Government Department (DES, DoH, DCYA) frontline support organisations, the HSE and TUSLA. FCI strongly welcome the recognition that has been given to young carers by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the National Youth Strategy 2015-2020 and the acknowledgement of the need to *'establish a cross-sector/cross-agency working group to consider the needs of young carers and to work towards aligning supports for young carers to help ensure an integrated and coordinated response to their needs'* (action 5.6, page 33). We urge the Department of Education to engage fully with this important working group.
- 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

While some progress has been made in relation to these actions, FCI believe the Department could be much more proactive in the delivery of the National Carers Strategy in relation to young people and carers generally. The National Carers' Strategy Monitoring Group, made up of representatives from FCI, Care Alliance Ireland and most importantly family carers themselves, encourage the Department to engage with us so that together we can ensure these actions are delivered on.

#### **Issues affecting Children with a Disability**

Most children with a disability fare better when educated with their peers in mainstream school. Inclusive schools create inclusive communities, combat discriminatory attitudes and provide an effective education for the majority of children<sup>4</sup>. However, many children with a disability need additional supports to be educated in mainstream school. These supports come in the form of special needs assistants (SNAs), resource teaching hours, school transport and assistive technology. However recent years have seen drastic cuts to these essential supports, resulting in catastrophic impacts on the children and teenagers with special needs who rely on them, and denying children with a disability their right to an equal education. Parents who have acted in good faith by sending their children to mainstream schools have been let down when SNAs and resource hours are reduced, despite an increase in the number of children needing these supports. Children with a mild intellectual disability are also denied vital resource hours, and can be forced by the system to regress or 'drop down' to a moderate disability in order to qualify for extra supports.

- FCI welcome the announcement in Budget 2016 of 600 additional resource teachers to meet special education needs as well as €17m for early childhood education for children with disability. We urge the Department to expedite recruitment for these posts and immediately publish a timeline of when they are expected to be filled.
- Publish a plan to implement the Education of Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004.

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<sup>4</sup> The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Education Needs, UNESCO, 1994.

- Ensure the supports provided to children with a disability are appropriate to their ability and meet their specific needs. Eg: access to computers, visual aids, a quiet room for children with ASD, exemption from subjects that prove difficult for them.
- Make available mentoring support to assist children with a disability to make the transition from post primary to third level.