

PE1470/M

**PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE CONSIDERATION OF PE1470
QUESTIONS / ISSUES ARISING FROM COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

Local authorities—

- What are your views / experience on the issues raised in the petition?
- How well do the policies aimed at supporting the needs of young carers work in practice?

Midlothian Council thanks the Scottish Youth Parliament for its petition raising awareness of the financial hardship that can be experienced by many young carers and welcomes initiatives to support them.

The picture of young carers presented in the petition and supporting documents is reflected in Midlothian, with small numbers of identified young carers representing the tip of an iceberg (extrapolating the number of parents with severe mental illness and/or substance addition implies a far higher number of young carers), low household incomes and resultant poverty. For those living in the rural areas of Midlothian there is the added challenge of transport and recent reductions in bus services in some areas. The Council is currently working in partnership with Children 1st and MYPAS to:

- Raise awareness of schools staff and young people of what a young carer is (it is mentioned at various points in the documentation alongside the petition that many young carers do not see themselves as young carers).
- Establish the numbers of young carers in the area and to promote the support networks that are available.
- This will lead to a review checking that the support networks are of the type and availability that meets the needs of young carers and that they are available in such a way that they are accessible to young carers and that they do not feel stigmatised when they access them.

Based on the estimates presented in the petition there is a considerable number of young carers across Scotland and in Midlothian in need of additional support to help them fulfil their potential, academic and otherwise. Meeting this need aligns with the principles of Getting It Right For Every Child/Young Carers and the SHANARRI indicators and it is important to identify the scale of the need and take appropriate steps to address it.

Legislative and administrative arrangements for setting up a new grant or allowance can be considerable however local authorities have established

frameworks for Education Maintenance Allowance and have recently taken on responsibility for the Scottish Welfare Fund.

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is within the remit of the Scottish Parliament and there are a number of changes that could be made to broaden the allowance and assist young carers:

- Define the role of carer within EMA, in terms of the number of hours, type of care etc (It is noted that research has found that half of young carers care for 10 hours or less per week, this is significantly below the Carers' Allowance requirement of 35 hours)
- Include young carers in the definition of those who are entitled to additional flexibility in the attendance requirements in line with care leavers, rather than leaving it to the discretion of local authorities.

These changes would mean that young carers over 16 who are attending school or college and have low household income would receive this money, with little additional administration or cost. The increased flexibility from local authorities on the attendance requirement will also allow more young carers to remain in education. Here in Midlothian the discretion is applied where possible, subject to the young carer not falling substantially behind with coursework.

Clarifying/extending the carer provisions within EMA does not, however, meet the needs of those under 16 or those in higher education. EMA could be further extended to include carers under 16 and the maximum age raised to 22 for those who go on to higher education (and are therefore precluded from receiving Carers Allowance).

It should also be noted that payments of EMA are around half that of Carers Allowance.

The full impact of the recent Welfare Reform changes that will reduce household income for many has yet to be fully realised and any changes to increase support for young carers must take the reforms into account. There is a possibility that additional money for young carers may be used to meet household income shortfalls caused by Welfare Reform, such as the benefit cap and the application of size criteria to social housing claims for Housing Benefit.

Alternatively, a new grant scheme could be set up to be run alongside the Scottish Welfare Fund; however the source of the funding for this and the cost of administration would need to be defined. Incorporating additional means testing makes administration of any scheme considerably more complex.

There are underlying difficulties in extending financial support to young carers under 16, (with the average age reported as 12 in one of the studies noted in the documentation) and these also should be addressed in any scheme:

- Does a young child have the authority to claim, or would it need to be done by an adult – who might be the person being cared for?
- Assistance may be required to complete application forms – who will provide this assistance?
- If the grant scheme is means tested then the young carers may find it difficult to provide evidence of household income.
- Passing money to young carers may be difficult as many will not have bank accounts. A voucher scheme could be used instead, but this would need administered and the vouchers would need to be for goods and services that young carers need.
- What happens if money/vouchers are paid out on the basis of statements that turn out to be incorrect through misunderstanding or misrepresentation?

Midlothian Council supports the objective of increasing support to young carers through the Scottish Government and linking it with the work already undertaken by the Council and its partners, however it must be done in a way that does not impose unsustainable administrative or financial burdens on local authorities or voluntary organisations. With the wide variation in the estimates of the number of young carers we would welcome further research on the numbers and needs of young carers in order that support can be specifically targeted to meet those needs.