

Young Carers Projects

What do CCFR Evaluation Reports tell us about dedicated Projects for Young Carers?

Summary

Young Carers Projects first became established in the early 1990s as a means of addressing some of the problems identified by research into young carers' experiences. Most, although not all projects are located within the voluntary sector although funding often comes from statutory agencies, such as health, social services or education.

Three projects, Nottingham Young Carers Project, Capital Carers Young Carers Project (Southwark) and Sheffield Young Carers Project have been evaluated by CCFR researchers during the 1990s and early 2000s. The projects were evaluated against their own stated aims and objectives. The Wirral Young Carers Project received specific funding for a homework club in addition to its normal day to day activities and this homework club was evaluated over a shorter period of time and, again, according to its stated aims and objectives but also against the objectives of the funding body. Separate published reports are available on each evaluation.

- External evaluation was built into the four Projects' work from the outset. All wished to have their services evaluated by someone independent in order to prove the value (or otherwise) of their work and to adapt the work during the course of the evaluation as deemed necessary.
- All of the projects evaluated are child-centred, but work closely with families in order to ensure that families are receiving all of the benefits and services to which they are entitled. They achieve this by making links with other agencies and organisations and advocating on behalf of families. Thus, while providing a service for children, the work of projects also has a family focus.
- Although all projects provide social and leisure activities for young carers – an aspect which is greatly valued by children and parents alike – they also try to counter some of the more negative aspects of caring without adequate professional support, such as educational difficulties, lack

of confidence, difficulties with mixing with peers and social isolation. Some of these aims are achieved by doing issue-based work with children on topics such as bullying, health matters, assertiveness etc. Project staff also work closely with schools to raise awareness of the educational difficulties and other issues experienced by many young carers.

- Projects tend to have limited funds and few staff. Most, including the Nottingham, Southwark, Sheffield and Wirral projects, use volunteers to assist with their work and to ensure that a larger number of young carers are supported than might otherwise be the case.
- Funding of young carers projects is a major issue. Most receive time-limited funding initially and, although some go on to receive continuation funding, some fail to do so and have to close. The Nottingham project, for example, received funding for two years and, at the time the evaluation was completed, was in danger of closing due to lack of funds. Although additional funding was secured the project did eventually have to close. The Southwark and Sheffield projects continue to operate but again, have to secure funding on a regular basis and from a variety of sources.
- The projects which were fully evaluated (Nottingham, Southwark and Sheffield) were found to have achieved most of their aims and objectives and were highly valued by young carers, their parents and professionals from a range of organisations and agencies, such as health, social services and education welfare services, who referred children to the projects. Some aims were found to be unrealistic given the nature of caring and the limited funding of projects, but overall the projects provided a valuable and valued service which was not available elsewhere. To a large extent these projects could be seen as providing a compensatory service due to the inadequacy or unavailability of other (statutory) services for young carers and their families.

Evaluation aims

The aim of the evaluations was to provide independent assessment of the various projects and to offer service users (young carers), their parents, professionals who referred children to the projects and project staff the opportunity to speak confidentially to someone with no close ties to the project. All of the projects had their own stated aims and objectives and were measured against these and against their own policy and procedure documents. As evaluation was ongoing, this offered the research team the opportunity to identify problem areas early and ensure that project staff were made aware of any real or potential problems. In addition, profiles of the young carers using the projects could be produced and compared to the national picture of young carers projects around the UK (see CCFR Evidence Issue 3). For the projects themselves, independent evaluation gave them something concrete to use in their future funding bids. The Young Carers Research Group (YCRG, now part of the CCFR) was chosen to undertake the evaluations because of its knowledge and expertise in young carers' issues.

Methodology

The full project evaluations (Nottingham, Southwark and Sheffield) used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Data were collected from the projects at fixed periods (prior to fieldwork visits) for collation and comparison to national profiles of young carers. The team also collected information about project aims and objectives, policy and practice documents, e.g. child protection policies, confidentiality policies, procedures for staff supervision etc. and any internal evaluation documents, e.g. feedback from events, trips, conferences etc. Data were collected on a six-monthly basis.

In addition to the quantitative approach, qualitative interviews were undertaken with a range of young carers of different ages, gender, ethnicity and home circumstances; parents with a range of physical health problems or disabilities, mental health difficulties, problems of substance misuse etc.; a range of professionals who had referred children to the projects, e.g. teachers, social workers, education welfare staff, health care professionals etc.; and project staff. The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to ascertain what young carers, parents and professionals had expected from the projects and whether the projects had lived up to their own expectations. The interviews enabled people to speak to an objective and independent person with no affiliation to the project, thus making it easier for them to be critical and allowing them the opportunity to consider whether they were satisfied with what the projects were offering. These periods of fieldwork followed data collection.

The evaluation of the Wirral project differed slightly in that only one particular service – the homework club – was being evaluated. Again, the approach was twofold. Qualitative interviews with young carers, parents, learning mentors within local schools and project staff formed the main part of the evaluation, with a small amount of quantitative data

relating to usage of the service. In this particular case the expectations of project staff, young carers and their families and learning mentors were more closely associated with seeing a difference in individual children's progress, whereas the objectives of the funders were to improve the employment and training opportunities of those using the homework club. For this particular evaluation, only one piece of fieldwork was undertaken.

Young Carers Projects – an overview

The first two Young Carers Projects were established in 1992 in Merseyside. These were pilot projects, funded by the North West Regional Health Authority, and were located within two existing organisations – Crossroads, the main voluntary sector provider of respite care for carers, and PSS (Personal Services Society) a charity supporting vulnerable people within their own communities. Following this initiative, projects began to emerge across the country as people became aware of many of the issues facing children caring for ill and disabled family members. By 1995 there were 37 projects and by 1998 over 100. There are now over 120 such projects. An up to date listing of projects is available at www.ycrg.org.uk.

These projects tended to be initiated by local professionals who came together to discuss the issue of young carers in their own localities. These groups often made funding bids for support services for local young carers and in some cases, once funding was secured, later became management committees. Although some of the projects were located within existing organisations with expertise in children's work, e.g. Barnardo's, The Children's Society and NCH, or carers' work, e.g. Crossroads, many more became independent charities in their own right.

As a result of the piecemeal introduction of local projects, aims and objectives, methods of working and services offered tended to vary widely, although most aimed to raise awareness of young carers' issues and to provide support, leisure and social activities. Again, because the 'ownership' of projects varied, funding was obtained from a variety of sources. Much of the initial funding for projects came from joint finance initiatives (health and social services), but as such statutory funding was squeezed, so projects became more reliant on other, charitable sources, such as Comic Relief, Children in Need and, later, the National Lotteries Charity Board (NLCB, now known as The Community Fund). As a result projects have often had precarious funding arrangements and many have been forced to close or cut back their services. Crossroads no longer directly funds or manages young carers projects although many individual Crossroads schemes continue to support young carers. Currently projects are more likely to be located within Princess Royal Trust Carers Centres or mainstream children's organisations. Many, however, remain charities in their own right.

The Nottingham, Southwark and Sheffield Projects – similarities

Although each of these projects had their own aims and objectives, drawn up by project staff and management, there were broad similarities. All aimed to raise awareness of young carers' issues within their own localities and, by doing so, to persuade other agencies and organisations to play their part in meeting the needs of young carers and their families. They also aimed to provide services such as social and leisure activities, group meetings, one-to-one support and 'a listening ear' for young carers to discuss their fears, worries and circumstances in a confidential environment. Each of the projects eventually used volunteers to work with young people and to ease the pressure on paid staff. Furthermore, all of these projects had budgeted for independent evaluation of their services and were actively involved in providing data, meeting the research team and exchanging ideas and information.

The Nottingham, Southwark and Sheffield Projects – differences

The Nottingham project was centrally managed by National Crossroads (who, as indicated above, are no longer involved in managing any such projects), the Southwark project began life in the local Crossroads scheme, which later became Capital Carers, and remains within this organisation. The Sheffield project differs in that a steering group secured the project funding but the project manager was employed by and managed by the Education Department. The project eventually became a registered charity in its own right.

The Sheffield and Southwark projects both secured joint finance monies for their day-to-day costs and then secured additional funding from a range of other sources such as the NLCB, charitable trusts and local businesses. The Nottingham project however, was funded by a grant made to Crossroads by BT, specifically for its work with young carers.

While the Southwark and Nottingham projects were essentially run by a lone worker, albeit with support from managers and volunteers, the Sheffield project had three full-time project staff. It also secured a secondment from the local careers advisory service for one day a week and sessional workers paid by the additional funds secured. It too had volunteers who befriended young people and offered them one-to-one activities and support. The superior staffing levels of the Sheffield project meant it could offer much more in the way of educational support and assistance with applications for further and higher education and careers advice.

While all three projects offered social and leisure activities, the Nottingham project was unable to offer 'drop-in' sessions due to a lack of suitable space and staffing levels. This meant there was no issue-based work and no small group work although the worker did become involved in running a local sibling support group for children with disabled siblings.

The Wirral Homework Club

The research team's brief for Wirral was to evaluate only the homework club, rather than the entire project. However, inevitably feedback on the project itself was provided by respondents. The homework club was funded by a grant from the European Social Fund with matched funding from the Metropolitan Borough Council. Although the funding was specifically for children aged 14 and over, it became apparent that the project would not have sufficient numbers in this age group and so it was widened to include younger carers. The club was run by a qualified teacher and two dedicated volunteers and meetings took place three evenings a week for the different age ranges.

How successful are projects at meeting need?

The Nottingham, Southwark and Sheffield projects all met or were working towards meeting their own aims and objectives. Their initial awareness-raising was successful in raising the profile of the projects, securing referrals and increasing the knowledge base of local professionals and organisations and agencies. Indeed, so successful was the awareness-raising that it quickly diminished as direct work with young carers took precedent. It is a testament to this ground work that all of the professionals interviewed for evaluations were satisfied with the support offered to children by projects and felt their own objectives in referring the children had been met.

Although the projects are child-centred, being specifically funded to provide support and services to vulnerable children, all worked with families to ensure that they had the support to which they were entitled, including welfare benefits. The close liaison with parents meant that none of the parents interviewed for the evaluations felt undermined by the work of the project and all felt they had been fully included in discussions, arrangements etc. They were all happy to have their children use the projects and felt that they had benefited from the support offered. For many parents the young carers project became their own first port of call when they had a problem relating to their care needs.

The young carers who used the projects were unanimous in their approval of the support they had been offered. For the majority of them the social and leisure activities were what they valued most. This is not surprising given that many of them lived in lone parent families, often experiencing poverty and social exclusion, and had previously had little opportunity (or money) for such activities. Projects on the whole provided these free of charge, a fact which both children and parents appreciated. Other young carers were able to reflect on the other support they had been offered, for example the one-to-one support, counselling, assistance with school work and liaison within schools, issue-based group work and help for their parents in accessing other avenues of support. These aspects too were appreciated by the young people. However, one of the most important achievements of the projects was the way in which they validated young carers' experiences – introducing them to

others in similar situations and allowing them to openly discuss something that many had kept hidden from peers.

The young people who attended the Wirral homework club had a range of problems from having nowhere quiet to work, having little time or motivation for schoolwork, to having learning difficulties and attending special schools. This, coupled with the fact that participation was widened to incorporate other age groups made it impossible to meet the criteria of the ESF funders. In this respect, the Wirral homework club would have to be judged as unsuccessful. However, the children who used the club did benefit from it. They were provided with a quiet place to do school work with support at hand should they require it. They could ask for help and get individual support as needed – something not always possible in large classes during school lessons. They learned to work together with others at a similar stage and to help and support one another. This exchange of ideas, information and expertise was new to many of them and helped to build confidence. The learning mentors were positive about the club. They had formed good working relationships with the staff and were invaluable in accessing materials from teachers etc. Thus, although the club may not have met the funders' criteria, from the perspective of the young carers, homework club staff, parents and learning mentors, it had achieved many successes and met many of their objectives.

The future of projects

Young carers projects have been criticised from a disability rights perspective for deflecting scarce resources from disabled parents and towards children, and for labelling the children of disabled parents 'young carers', thus potentially undermining parents. In the light of this critique, young carers projects are becoming increasingly 'family focused' (as encouraged by the Department of Health and Social Services Inspectorate guidance etc.). It is important that projects now move towards this family model and rather than, for example, taking children out and giving them a 'good time', assist disabled parents to take their own children out instead. They also need to be much more proactive in assisting disabled parents to identify their own needs and to try to support them and help them to meet their own goals. In so doing, they will also be improving the circumstances of children within the family.

Principal researchers

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Funders

- Crossroads (Nottingham)
- Capital Carers (Southwark)

- Sheffield Young Carers Project
- PSS Wirral Young Carers Project

Where to find more evidence

Dearden, C. and Becker, S. (1996) *Young Carers at the Crossroads: An Evaluation of the Nottingham Young Carers Project*, Loughborough: Young Carers Research Group, Loughborough University.

Newton, B. and Becker, S. (1999) *The Capital Carers: An Evaluation of Capital Carers Young Carers Project*, Loughborough: Young Carers Research Group, Loughborough University.

Dearden, C. and Becker, S. (2000) *Meeting Young Carers' Needs: An Evaluation of Sheffield Young Carers Project*, Loughborough: Young Carers Research Group, Loughborough University.

Dobson, B., Nicholson, D., Becker, S. and Dearden, C. (2002) *Caring and Learning: An Evaluation of the Wirral Young Carers Homework Club*, Loughborough: Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University.

Dearden, C. and Becker, S. (1998) *Young Carers in the United Kingdom: A Profile*, London: Carers National Association.

Full details of other outputs can be found in the CCFR brochure or on the website: www.ccf.org.uk

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